

Great Ming 1441

Chapter 1441 Zhu Cunji Arc

In the first year of the New Ming era, the First People's Congress had just concluded its final session, and the atmosphere in the hall had not yet cooled from the heat of debate and celebration.

Zhu Cunji suddenly sprang up from his chair as if someone had lit a firecracker under it and shouted at the top of his lungs, "I am off!"

The sudden explosion of energy startled Zhu Youjian, Zhu Youzhong, and the rest of the gathered nobles so badly that they nearly spilled their tea.

"Hey, what are you doing, why are you making such a commotion out of nowhere," Zhu Youzhong complained while pressing his chest. "You are going to scare people to death."

Zhu Cunji threw his head back and laughed as if the whole world had just become his personal stage.

"Hahahahaha, a new era has begun. No one is going to chain me to my fief anymore. No one can tell me where I can or cannot go. Hahahahaha, I am finally free."

Zhu Youjian sighed and shook his head. "Even if the old restrictions are gone, you are still of royal blood. You should at least maintain some dignity. Referring to yourself as 'I' or even worse, 'me' in such a crude way is not appropriate."

Zhu Cunji waved his hand dismissively. "Dignity, nonsense. I have had enough of dignity. Dignity was the rope they used to tie me down. The court threw etiquette at me like bricks. A prince must do this, a prince must not do that, a prince must stay in his fief, a prince must shut up, a prince must breathe in a regulated manner. I am sick of it."

He took a deep breath as if expelling years of frustration from his lungs.

"Now I can do whatever I want. I can say whatever I want. If I want to call myself 'I' or 'me' or even something worse, I will. No one gets to tell me what a prince is supposed to be anymore."

Bai Yuan, standing nearby, frowned slightly and tried to sound reasonable. "Even without royal status, one should still observe proper etiquette. Rituals are one of the Six Arts of a gentleman after all. It is still important to respect tradition."

Zhu Cunji looked at him as if he had just heard the funniest joke in the world.

"To hell with royal status, and to hell with gentlemen too. I never wanted to be a gentleman. I was born into it without a choice. If I could choose my parents again, I would have been born in Gao Village Family. I would even let Gao Sanwa be my mother."

The entire room fell silent.

Everyone slowly came to the same conclusion at the same time. This man had completely snapped free from all restraints.

Zhu Cunji continued without caring about their reaction. "I once stepped forward to lead the people of Shaanxi in rebellion. That matter is now settled. I am no longer interested in being their representative either. I am done. I am out."

With that, he ran straight out of the hall.

The people of Gao Village Family watching from the side could only shake their heads as they watched him leave.

Zhu Cunji ran out of the palace gates in three big strides and leapt into the streets of the capital like a child released from school on the last day of term.

"Time to play," he shouted, waving his arms dramatically. "Someone bring me my plan."

A shadow silently appeared behind him. One of his loyal death warriors handed him a worn sheet of paper.

The paper was covered in dense handwriting, layered over years like sediment.

His lifetime goals.

Visit the Great Wall

Visit the Sahara Desert

Visit the Dead Sea

Watch the tidal bore at Qiantang River

I want to go to Guilin, I really want to go to Guilin

The list continued endlessly, as if the man who wrote it had never stopped dreaming.

The ink density and handwriting style changed repeatedly, showing it had been written across many years, page by page, mood by mood. The edges of the paper were yellowed, slightly decayed, and even faintly moldy in places.

Zhu Cunji gently touched the first line with his fingers.

"Go see the Great Wall," he murmured softly. "I wrote this when I was eighteen."

The death warrior beside him lowered his voice. "My lord, the Great Wall at Badaling is very close to the capital. Shall we go now?"

Zhu Cunji immediately nodded. "Go. Of course we are going. Right now. Immediately. Do not waste another breath."

"Understood. I will arrange a carriage at once."

Just as he turned to leave, a sharp voice suddenly exploded from behind him.

"Hey, are you seriously planning to leave without me?"

Zhu Cunji turned around and froze.

It was the princess consort.

He blinked in confusion. "When did you arrive in the capital?"

The princess consort crossed her arms, looking both angry and slightly amused. "I arrived just now. I heard about the Congress ending, and I knew you would run the moment it finished. You did not even think about taking me with you, did you?"

Zhu Cunji scratched his head awkwardly. "Well, this is... I mean... it is not that..."

The princess consort suddenly burst into loud, theatrical crying right in front of the People's Congress building entrance.

"Everyone come and judge this man," she wailed. "When he was miserable, he stayed at home like a good obedient husband. Now that he is free, now that he is happy, he wants to abandon me and go travel alone. Is there any justice in this world?"

The crowd immediately turned their heads.

Officials, soldiers, journalists, and curious citizens all focused their attention on them like magnets snapping into place.

Zhu Cunji panicked instantly. "What are you doing? Are you trying to ruin me? If this gets reported in the news I am finished."

But the princess consort was already crying dramatically while quietly whispering through her sobs, "Take me with you."

Zhu Cunji immediately surrendered. "Fine fine fine, I agree, I agree to everything."

She stopped crying instantly, like a switch had been flipped.

Then she turned to the crowd and glared. "What are you looking at? Never seen a wife disciplining her husband before? Mind your own business."

The journalists looked at each other, disappointed that there was no scandal to report, and quickly lost interest, dispersing like water spilled on hot stone.

She then turned back to Zhu Cunji, instantly transforming into a gentle and affectionate expression.

"So husband," she asked sweetly, "where are we going first?"

"The Great Wall," Zhu Cunji said proudly. "We are going to Badaling."

Her eyes lit up. "I have always wanted to see it too."

"Then what are we waiting for? Let us go."

As they walked, Zhu Cunji flipped through his lifelong travel list again.

"After the Great Wall... hmm... where is closest..."

The death warrior raised a hand confidently. "My lord, Changbai Mountain is nearby. Very close."

The princess consort blinked. "Is that not the land of the Jurchen?"

Zhu Cunji waved his hand casually. "No problem. They are called Manchu now. Everything is fine."

"Then after that?"

"Then we go to the Mongolian Steppe."

The princess consort smiled excitedly. "I have always wanted to go there."

Zhu Cunji grinned. "Then we go. We will travel everywhere in the world."

And so, in the first year of New Ming, Zhu Cunji began his journey across the world.

In the tenth year of New Ming, his travel guide book *Beautiful Mountains and Rivers* was published nationwide. It sold out immediately and sparked a nationwide travel craze. Entire regions once considered remote suddenly became destinations filled with visitors, bringing prosperity to many forgotten places.

In the fifteenth year, Zhu Cunji was no longer satisfied with domestic travel. His footsteps crossed borders into Joseon, Japan, and the southern seas. The railways he promoted also began expanding outward like veins of a living empire.

In the eighteenth year, the railway from the capital to the Joseon capital Hanyang was completed.

In the twentieth year, the railway from Yunnan to Annam was completed.

In the twenty-second year, Zhu Cunji passed away during a journey in Europe.

The princess consort did not bring his ashes back.

Instead, she scattered them into the ocean, letting the wind and waves carry him into the endless world he had always dreamed of seeing.

Chapter 1442 The Shi Lang Arc

In the second year of the New Ming calendar, on Hainan Island, Lin'gao County, at the New Ming naval supply port, the harbor was filled with ships.

Shi Lang's flagship, Wanli Sunshine, was anchored alongside a large number of medium and small vessels. The fleet had stopped here to replenish coal, food, and fresh water.

Workers moved back and forth without rest, carrying supplies onto the ships. Crates, barrels, and sacks were passed along in an endless stream, and the entire port felt alive with motion.

Yet inside the meeting room, the atmosphere was much more focused.

Shi Lang sat together with a group of mid and high ranking naval officers. At the front of the room stood a young man full of energy.

His name was Shi Xian, Shi Lang's younger brother.

Several years ago, under the orders of Dao Xuan Tianzun, he had boarded a Dutch merchant ship and traveled to the Western seas, completing a voyage that crossed nearly the entire world. In the years that followed, he risked his life making several more journeys back and forth.

Now, there was no doubt that he was the most knowledgeable person in New Ming when it came to Western affairs.

Shi Xian spread out a massive sea chart and hung it on the wall. Then he picked up a wooden pointer and began indicating key locations.

"This place is called Saigon. It will be our first foothold. After that comes the Strait of Malacca. This is an extremely important strategic location. If we want to reach the Western seas, we must control this strait. And here... and here..."

He marked each critical point along the route, circling them in red.

"Every one of these places must have a supply port. Not small ones. Large scale ports."

Shi Lang frowned as he looked at the map.

"There are too many. The areas we need to control are simply too many. If we station troops at every supply point, the navy alone will be stretched thin. Unless we request reinforcements from the Ministry of War, this cannot be sustained."

Shi Xian nodded.

"That's right. There are too many. The Westerners spent an entire Age of Exploration opening this route. It took generations of effort. We are trying to catch up as latecomers. Without several years of work, it is impossible. And this is not just a naval matter. Without the army, we cannot do it."

Just then, a guard stepped into the room.

"Report. A representative from the army has arrived, saying he was sent to coordinate with the navy."

Everyone was slightly surprised.

"We were just talking about the army, and now they're here? Could it be that Dao Xuan Tianzun passed along a message?"

Shi Lang let out a small sigh.

"That is very possible. Even if Dao Xuan Tianzun has stepped back from land affairs, matters of the sea... he might still be keeping an eye on them. After all, he did say that maritime affairs are a century long undertaking that requires generations of effort."

"Let him in."

Soon, the representative entered. He was a spirited young man who immediately gave a crisp salute.

"Li Dingguo, New Ming Army, Eighth Division, commander of the Western Affairs Front."

"Western Affairs Front?" The officers exchanged glances.

Shi Lang quickly understood. "The army has already formed a dedicated force for western operations?"

"Yes," Li Dingguo replied. "From now on, all western campaigns will be led by me. Principal Sun instructed me to coordinate closely with all of you. Wherever your navy can take us, we will fight."

Shi Lang was delighted.

"With the army handling land operations, the navy can finally act freely."

One naval officer could not help asking, "How many troops did you bring?"

"Twenty thousand."

Shi Lang nodded. "That will require quite a number of ships to transport. We should start preparing immediately. Where is your main force now?"

Li Dingguo grinned. "Out at sea."

Everyone in the room froze.

"Out at sea? Where did you get the ships? Our navy hasn't deployed yet."

Li Dingguo raised his hand and pointed upward.

"A new ship granted by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

That answer left everyone stunned.

Had he not already stepped back from direct involvement?

Apparently, not entirely.

The group hurried outside.

When they looked toward the sea, they all sucked in a sharp breath.

A massive ship was anchored offshore.

It was more than three hundred meters long and over forty meters wide. The sheer size of it made it look like a moving island.

Even with twenty thousand soldiers standing on it, the deck did not seem crowded.

"This... this..."

Several junior officers were so shocked they could not even finish their sentences.

Shi Lang swallowed.

"A ship this large... and it is being used as a transport vessel. What a waste. If we mounted cannons across it..."

Li Dingguo laughed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun said there is no need for cannons. It can simply ram."

There was a brief pause.

Then the naval officers burst into laughter.

"That works too."

In the third year of the New Ming calendar, battle broke out at sea.

"Hard to port!"

"Fire!"

Shi Lang's command rang out as the cannons on the side of Wanli Sunshine fired in succession. Shells slammed into a nearby British warship, blasting holes through its hull.

The British refused to back down.

"Close in! Surround them!"

A large number of British ships, along with Indian vessels, surged forward, surrounding the New Ming fleet like a swarm of ants.

Just as they believed they would overwhelm their enemy with numbers, something appeared on the eastern horizon.

A massive ship.

Over three hundred meters long, more than forty meters wide, like a moving island, like a fortress upon the sea.

The British were terrified.

"What is that ship?"

"That is not a ship!"

"That is an island moving!"

"This cannot be fought! This cannot be fought!"

"Retreat! Retreat now!"

On Shi Lang's ship, the sailors burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! This is our New Ming flagship, the Kunkun. Prepare yourselves!"

In the third year of the New Ming calendar, the Kunkun appeared in the seas of Nanyang, and at the moment it appeared, it shattered the will of all Western colonial forces.

They fled in panic, abandoning equipment, abandoning their colonies, and no longer dared to contest New Ming for dominance in the region.

By the sixth year, supply ports of New Ming were spread throughout Nanyang.

By the tenth year, the Kunkun arrived at Lisbon. The moment it anchored, all of Europe was shaken.

By the eleventh year, free trade began between New Ming and Western Europe.

By the fifteenth year, diplomat Gao Zhengjing arrived in Europe aboard the Kunkun and established consulates.

By the seventeenth year, unable to endure the trade imbalance, European nations expelled Gao Zhengjing and banned trade with New Ming.

By the nineteenth year, the New Ming fleet, led by the Kunkun, bombarded ports across Western Europe, leaving them with no ability to resist. Nobles fled inland with their families in panic.

By the twentieth year, under Gao Zhengjing's leadership, New Ming and the European nations signed the famous "Thirty Two Articles," which ensured that trade restrictions could no longer be imposed.

By the twenty-first year, humiliated Europeans began movements to resist New Ming. One radical group called "Big Cosmos Flower" was formed, dedicated to attacking New Ming interests.

By the twenty-third year, they launched an attack on a New Ming embassy with a battalion of troops, believing victory was certain. Instead, Gao Zhengjing drove them back alone.

By the twenty-fourth year, Shi Lang returned with the fleet under the pretext of suppressing this group, striking coastal ports once again and forcing another agreement to be signed, reaffirming that trade could not be obstructed.

By the thirtieth year, New Ming goods dominated the high end markets of Europe. People took pride in using imported goods, while local brands were looked down upon. Many local brands were even forced to adopt Chinese names to elevate their status.

By the thirty-fifth year, the luxury brand "Green" sold bags in Europe for astonishing prices.

By the thirty-eighth year, the luxury brand "Lux" sold watches for even higher prices.

Chapter 1443 Zheng Chenggong Arc

New Ming Calendar, Year 15.

Taipei.

This city was once called San Salvador, a colonial foothold of the Westerners. Later, it was taken by the Gao Family Navy and jointly governed with the Dadu Kingdom, eventually being renamed Taipei City.

"Father!"

Ganza Xia Malu threw himself beside the sickbed, his voice filled with anguish.

Ganza Xia Alami lay on the bed, his body withered, his eye sockets sunken deep, looking at his son with weak and fading eyes.

Ever since Malu went to Dinghai Port in Zhoushan to "study," he had rarely seen his father. He spent his time either learning or traveling, using his own eyes to absorb knowledge from cities across New Ming.

Every so often, he would return to Yizhou Island, teaching what he had learned to the people of the Dadu Kingdom.

Under his leadership, the kingdom had developed decent agriculture and even some basic light industry. The people were growing richer by the day.

Meanwhile, Alami became more and more idle.

After all, this "old king" did not understand any of the new things. He could not grasp them, and he could not contribute even if he wanted to.

But that was fine.

His people followed his son. There was no need for jealousy. The son's achievements were the father's achievements.

So he let go of power, handed everything to his son, and spent more than a decade living happily as a carefree king, eating, drinking, and enjoying life.

But life always comes to an end.

Now, that end had arrived.

Alami raised his thin hand, grasped Malu's, and spoke with great difficulty.

"The Dadu Kingdom... in your hands... I am at ease..."

Malu's voice trembled. "Father, you will recover."

Alami shook his head slowly. "The sun is calling me... This is not something medicine can cure... From now on... you must govern the kingdom well..."

Then, as if remembering something, he let out a heavy sigh.

"I know... you have always wanted... to merge the Dadu Kingdom... into New Ming... I was the one... who opposed it... Now that I am going to the sun... you may... follow your will..."

His hand went limp.

All around the room, the tribal chiefs burst into loud wails.

"Sun King! Sun King! Our most benevolent, most kind, most wise Sun King!"

Malu was overwhelmed with grief.

At that moment, the door to the room swung open.

Zheng Chenggong strode in, rushed to the bedside, and checked Alami's pulse.

"He's not dead. Just unconscious. Good, we're still in time."

Everyone froze.

Zheng Chenggong pulled out a small bottle. "This is a new medicine developed in New Ming, based on chemical principles. Let's try it."

He opened the bottle, forced the medicine into Alami's mouth, and then tucked him back in.

The room fell silent.

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Three days later, Alami, who had been unconscious, slowly opened his eyes.

He thought he had already reached the heavens. Instead, the first thing he saw was his son, a group of his people, and Zheng Chenggong standing beside his bed.

"He's awake! The Sun King is awake!"

"The medicine Zheng brought is incredible!"

"New Ming is amazing at everything, even medicine!"

Alami looked utterly confused. "What... is going on? Wasn't I dead?"

Malu quickly said, "Father, although you've awakened, your body is still weak. You must rest and recover. Don't speak nonsense and curse yourself again."

Alami stiffened.

That was terrifying.

Having already brushed against death once, he suddenly found himself very afraid of it. He no longer dared to mention dying again.

With great effort, he raised one hand, picked up the rattan staff beside his bed, and handed it to Malu.

Then he spoke to everyone present.

"Although I have awakened... I no longer have the strength to be your king... From today onward... my son, Ganza Xia Malu... will be your king."

The tribal leaders responded in unison.

"Yes!"

New Ming Calendar, Year 15.

Ganza Xia Malu formally ascended the throne of the Dadu Kingdom, becoming the new Sun King.

After leaving the room, Malu grasped Zheng Chenggong's hand, too moved to speak. It took him a long time before he calmed down.

"Brother Zheng... I have a request."

"Oh?" Zheng Chenggong replied. "Let's hear it."

"I want to merge the Dadu Kingdom into New Ming and make it one of its provinces."

Zheng Chenggong's eyes flickered. "Are you certain? This throne was not easily obtained. If the two nations merge, you will no longer be a king."

Malu sighed softly. "What is the meaning of being a king of a primitive tribe?"

"My father spent so many years as king and felt quite satisfied with himself. But after going to New Ming, I realized something."

He pointed back toward the room.

"Before you came to the Dadu Kingdom, even as king, my father lived in caves or thatched huts. He ate wild fruits, gathered food, and vegetables. Occasionally, if he had a bit of sugar, he would be so happy he could jump."

"What he wore were rough cloth or animal hides. He never even had a proper set of clothes."

Then he raised the rattan staff in his hand.

"This is the royal staff, the symbol of authority. But I know it is just a cheap object woven from vines. In New Ming, something like this would be sold on the street and might not even fetch five copper coins."

"Yet in the Dadu Kingdom, it is the finest work of our craftsmen, worthy of being the king's staff."

He lowered it slowly.

"To stand before New Ming as such a king... I feel like a child playing house."

Zheng Chenggong did not know what to say, so he simply patted Malu's shoulder.

Malu continued, "I do not want simple trade. Relying on trade alone to enrich the Dadu Kingdom is too slow and too difficult."

"I want to turn the Dadu Kingdom into a province of New Ming. Only then will New Ming fully commit to helping us. Isn't that right?"

Zheng Chenggong nodded. "It is harsh, but yes."

"There is nothing harsh about it," Malu said. "Just a few decades ago, our tribes were still cutting off heads for rituals. For people like that, merging into another country does not feel humiliating. They might even welcome it."

"And New Ming has already treated us well. If it were the Dutch or the Spanish, they would not have been so gentle."

"The Dadu Kingdom is a piece of fat meat. Everyone wants a bite. Sooner or later, we would be destroyed by a more advanced nation."

"If that is the case, it is better to choose voluntarily and join the one that treats us best. That way, there will be no war, and no innocent people will die."

Zheng Chenggong understood.

During his time studying, Malu had truly learned a great deal.

This decision was not made lightly.

"I understand," Zheng Chenggong said. "I will convey your request."

New Ming Calendar, Year 16.

King Ganzaxia Malu of the Dadu Kingdom announced that the entire kingdom would join New Ming.

That same year, New Ming incorporated Yizhou Island into its territory, naming it the Dadu Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture, with Malu appointed as its governor.

Year 17.

A small tribe within the prefecture rebelled.

At the time, Liu Maopao was serving as Chief Minister, known for his hardline approach. Upon hearing the news, he immediately ordered troops to be dispatched.

Fortunately, this was the era of collective governance.

Zheng Chenggong submitted a formal objection. After hearing his petition, a large number of officials cast their votes and overturned Liu Maopao's order.

By the end of Year 17, Zheng Chenggong successfully pacified the rebellion through a policy of leniency.

Year 18.

Zheng Chenggong traveled to Nanyang and used the same approach to deal with backward tribes across the islands. One after another, they joined New Ming.

The twin pillars of New Ming's navy.

Shi Lang led relentless offensives.

Zheng Chenggong focused on stabilizing and integrating new territories.

Together, they established New Ming's dominance over the seas.

Chapter 1444 Tie Niaofei Arc

New Ming Year 11.

Europe, London, England.

"Name your price."

Tie Niaofei pointed at the plot of land in front of him, his gesture carrying a faint trace of arrogance. His translator froze for a few seconds before finally rendering the sentence into English.

Unfortunately, once translated, the line lost its original flavor and sounded far less imposing.

An English noble stood before Tie Niaofei, bowing slightly with a flattering smile.

"Mr. Tie, this land is in an excellent location. It is close to the center of London, has convenient transportation, and the terrain is wide and flat. As for the price..."

From here on, the translator continued working nonstop.

Tie Niaofei snorted.

"All that talk is just you trying to jack the price up."

The noble looked a bit embarrassed.

Tie Niaofei continued, "If you want to haggle with me, then you clearly do not want this deal. Let me tell you something. If this place will not have me, another place will. Countless nobles are begging me to set up my new-style factories in their cities. Lisbon, Serbia, Oslo, Amsterdam. The fact that I even came to London is already me giving you Englishmen face."

The noble hurriedly nodded.

"You are absolutely right, Mr. Tie. In that case, we will offer this land to you at the lowest possible price."

And just like that, the first factory in Europe was established in London.

The factory itself was not technologically advanced. Goods manufactured in New Ming were shipped over in parts, and workers in London were responsible for assembling them. Their work was simple and repetitive. Assemble, assemble, assemble.

To cut costs, Tie Niaofei went into the poorest rural areas of England to recruit child laborers. He paid their parents a small fee called a "contract fee" to bind the children to his factory.

During the contract period, these workers had no personal freedom. They obeyed the overseers in everything, could not return home, and could not work for other factories. All wages belonged to Tie Niaofei. In return, he only provided the most basic food and shelter.

Tie Niaofei made a fortune.

All the money he earned was converted into gold, silver, and jewels, then shipped back to New Ming by sea.

And once back in New Ming, he wore an entirely different face.

He engaged in charity, funded relief for the poor, donated to national infrastructure projects, supplied frontier troops with food and clothing for free, participated in disaster relief, and financed road and bridge construction.

When the Imperial Palace museum underwent restoration, he donated fifty thousand taels of silver.

When the great earthquake struck western Sichuan, he donated two hundred thousand taels.

New Ming Year 29.

Tie Niaofei was now old, his body showing clear signs of age, yet his drive to make money had not diminished in the slightest.

"Take this banner and go promote it in Europe."

He handed a large banner to his son, Tie Baoshan.

"I am too old to sail across the oceans now. From here on, the European business will be yours to manage."

Tie Baoshan nodded and took the banner. He glanced at it and saw a line written across it:

"Petite Bourgeois Lifestyle, Made in New Ming."

He blinked in confusion.

"Father, what does this mean?"

Tie Niaofei smiled.

"This is a business strategy I found in the Heavenly Book left behind by Dao Xuan Tianzun thirty years ago. It is called the 'consumerism trap.' Take this banner to Europe and promote the idea of the 'petite bourgeois lifestyle.' Define it for them. To be refined, one must drink New Ming tea, wear New Ming clothes, eat New Ming cuisine, and wear New Ming jewelry. That is what it means to have taste."

Tie Baoshan scratched his head.

"I do not really understand."

Tie Niaofei waved it off.

"It is fine. I do not fully understand either. It is the Heavenly Book after all. If mortals could understand everything in it, would we not all become immortals? Not understanding is normal. Understanding would be strange. You do not need to understand. Just do as it says."

Tie Baoshan nodded.

"Understood, Father. I will give it a try in Europe."

New Ming Year 30.

Tie Baoshan arrived in Lisbon and used it as his starting point, launching a massive advertising campaign.

Overnight, posters, illustrated booklets, and stage plays were flooded with a new term:

"Petite bourgeois."

Europe's middle class was instantly captivated.

There was, apparently, such a refined way of living. And the best part was that it was not limited to the nobility. Even ordinary middle-class people, with just a bit of extra money and effort, could reach it.

In no time, a wave of "petite bourgeois culture" swept across Europe.

Everyone began to fall in love with imported goods from New Ming.

Simply wearing New Ming clothing or eating New Ming food made people feel superior, as if they had risen to a completely different level of life.

And thus, a hierarchy of disdain was born.

Those who used New Ming goods looked down on those who used domestic products.

European nobles began to boast about having traveled to New Ming as a badge of honor.

Upon returning home, they would sigh with an air of superiority, convinced that their knowledge had surpassed that of the local bumpkins by ten thousand years.

One student who had studied in New Ming even made the famous remark:

"The air in New Ming smells sweeter than Europe's."

Zhu Cunji's travel guide, *Good Mountains, Good Waters*, was brought to Europe by Tie Baoshan and became an instant bestseller. Since copyright laws were not enforced here, he simply had his contract workers produce pirated copies in bulk.

Soon, a new hierarchy emerged.

Those holding genuine copies of *Good Mountains, Good Waters* looked down heavily upon those holding pirated versions, mocking them as:

"Even pretending, you cannot get it right."

New Ming Year 35.

The Prime Minister of England, dressed in a sharp suit and carrying himself with pride, boarded Tie Baoshan's merchant ship and traveled to New Ming for an official visit.

He already knew that England lagged behind New Ming, but he refused to admit defeat. He resolved to visit with dignity intact and show the people of New Ming the pride of England.

But the moment he arrived at Shanghai Port and saw its prosperity, the towering buildings, and automobiles filling the streets, it felt like taking a devastating blow.

He looked up at the skyscrapers around him and could not help but sigh.

"I see buildings over twenty stories high. I have never seen such structures anywhere else. In England, even if we could build them this tall, they would not be stable."

After returning home, he immediately proposed launching a modernization movement and shouted the slogan:

"Learn from Ming techniques to counter Ming."

However, the vast technological gap left England with no way to catch up.

New Ming Year 34.

Tie Baoshan established schools in major ports such as Lisbon, London, and Antwerp. The schools were called "New Western Language Schools," specializing in teaching Chinese to Europeans.

People flocked to enroll.

Mastering Chinese made it easier to work in New Ming. Even within Europe, there were countless situations where Chinese was now useful.

After all, Chinese had become the global lingua franca. Learn it well, and you could travel the world without barriers.

New Ming Year 35.

Tie Baoshan founded the luxury brand "Green," specializing in handbags, which quickly became a sensation among European women.

New Ming Year 38.

He launched another luxury brand, "Lishi," focusing on watches.

Interestingly, "Green" originally had an English abbreviation, "LV," but Europeans disliked seeing English letters. They felt it looked cheap. The bags had to bear the Chinese character "綠" to appear elegant and prestigious.

The same happened with "Lishi" watches. Though they had an English abbreviation, "LEX," Europeans rejected it. Only the Chinese characters "力士" could convey the status of a true luxury item.

And so, the strange irony of the age took full shape.

Chapter 1445 Chen Qianhu Arc

New Ming Year 3.

As evening settled over Jinan in Shandong, the execution ground at the marketplace underwent a transformation so complete that anyone arriving late might have wondered whether they had come to the wrong place, because the grim square that once dealt in death had been dressed up into a spectacle of light, silk, and calculated extravagance.

At the center stood a grand stage, towering and wide, layered with draped fabrics that shimmered under rows of carefully arranged lamps, each one tested and adjusted until not a single shadow dared linger where brilliance was intended. Workers moved continuously, calling out to one another, adjusting props, checking mechanisms, and fine-tuning every detail with the kind of intensity usually reserved for military logistics rather than entertainment.

Colored confetti had been packed into launch tubes, ready to explode at the right moment, while cages of white doves lined the sides of the stage, their restless fluttering adding a strange sense of anticipation, as if even the birds understood that tonight was meant to be unforgettable.

Near the stage, a group of dancers stood together, breathing slowly, trying to steady their nerves. Though they now carried themselves as professionals, there was still something fragile in their composure, because not long ago many of them had lived very different lives before being rescued and brought into this new world of performance and applause.

A passerby stopped to watch, his curiosity quickly turning into confusion at the scale of what he was seeing.

"What is all this supposed to be?" he asked. "Are they crowning an emperor here or something?"

One of the dancers glanced at him and lowered her voice slightly.

"You really don't know? This is a concert. A big one. A top star is performing tonight."

"Who?"

She leaned a little closer.

"Chen Qianhu."

The man froze as if struck by lightning.

"Chen Qianhu?" His voice jumped an octave without permission. "You mean Chen Qianhu's concert? Are there tickets left? Tell me there are tickets left."

The dancer simply shook her head.

"Sold out. A long time ago."

The man collapsed on the spot, dropping to his knees with the despair of someone who had just missed the last lifeboat, yet within moments he sprang back up again, his eyes burning with desperate determination.

"Scalpers," he muttered. "There have to be scalpers. I don't care how much it costs."

And with that, he ran off into the crowd, already shouting his offers to anyone who might be listening.

Back near the stage, the dancers tried to regain their composure, though their whispered conversation betrayed their growing tension. They had performed with famous figures before, and some had even shared the stage with Chen Yuanyuan, yet tonight felt different in a way that was difficult to explain.

"Chen Qianhu is coming soon," one of them said, her voice barely steady.

"What if he notices me?"

Another clasped her hands together.

"If I could become his wife, I would die happy."

"I heard he is the most gentle man in the world."

"No one can compare to how considerate he is."

There was a brief pause before someone added quietly, "But I also heard he is... very ugly."

The group hesitated for only a moment before another girl shook her head with surprising firmness.

"That doesn't matter. If he is truly gentle, then appearance means nothing."

There was a murmur of agreement, though it sounded slightly less confident than before.

Their conversation came to an abrupt halt when a luxurious carriage rolled into view, its polished exterior catching the light as it came to a smooth stop near the stage. The door opened from within, and Chen Qianhu stepped out by himself, without waiting for any attendant to assist him.

That small detail alone sent a ripple through the crowd.

How humble.

How gentle.

The dancers froze, and the gathered fans erupted into excited cries.

"Chen Qianhu!"

"I don't care what you look like, I will marry you!"

"I love you!"

The energy surged upward in a wave of adoration.

Then Chen Qianhu fully stepped out of the carriage, and his face became clearly visible.

The shift was immediate.

Silence fell, sudden and complete, stretching for several long seconds as reality asserted itself with brutal clarity. People had seen his face many times through broadcast devices, but the difference between knowing and witnessing turned out to be far greater than expected.

Several women instinctively stepped back.

Chen Qianhu, however, showed no trace of discomfort. He had experienced this countless times before and had long since learned to accept it. He raised his hand and offered a smile, though the result was not quite what he intended, because the natural structure of his features lent even his gentlest expression a certain ferocity.

It was simply the face he had been born with.

No amount of effort could change that.

Without hesitation, he stepped onto the stage and lifted both hands, and the crowd, still caught between shock and anticipation, gradually fell silent.

When he began to sing, the song that flowed from him was not the one people expected. Instead of his famous declaration of being ugly yet gentle, he chose something unfamiliar, something softer and more vulnerable.

As the lyrics unfolded, speaking of struggle, of longing, and of the simple desire for warmth, the tension in the crowd began to melt away. The same people who had recoiled moments earlier found themselves drawn in, their earlier reactions now feeling shallow and unfair.

Tears began to appear.

"I was wrong," someone whispered.

"He is a good man."

"He never chose how he looks. He only wants someone to hold him."

"That is not too much to ask."

Voices grew louder as emotion spread.

"Chen Qianhu, I love you!"

"I want to marry you!"

The atmosphere shifted completely, transforming from hesitation into overwhelming affection.

When the first song ended, he did not pause for long. His voice turned, carrying into another melody, one that spoke of the difficulty of expressing love and the pain of keeping it hidden.

That was the final push.

The crowd surged forward.

Guards tried to hold the line, but they were quickly overwhelmed as a wave of fans rushed the stage, their emotions spilling over into chaos. Chen Qianhu was knocked to the ground, yet even as hands reached toward him from all directions, he did not stop singing.

He continued, voice steady, as though the performance itself mattered more than his own safety.

Only after considerable effort did the guards manage to pull the crowd back. By then, Chen Qianhu's clothing had been torn apart, buttons missing, ornaments gone, fabric hanging in disarray, yet his expression remained unchanged.

He smiled.

"Thank you," he said, his voice sincere and unguarded. "Thank you for loving me. I am truly moved. If I can have your love, then even if I die, I will have no regrets."

The crowd erupted again, some fans overwhelmed to the point of collapse.

The host stepped forward, eager to regain control of the event.

"Chen Qianhu, many of your fans are curious about your past. May I ask a few questions on their behalf?"

"Of course."

"I heard that you once served as a general under Nan Feng, and that your stage name comes from your military rank. Did you truly fight on the battlefield?"

Chen Qianhu nodded.

"Yes. I fought in many battles. For example, the well-known confrontation of Zu Dashou against Zu Dashou. That was also me."

The audience responded with another wave of excitement.

"And now?"

"After the founding of New Ming, I retired from the military. I am no longer a soldier. From now on, I will devote myself to music and bring the most moving songs to those who support me."

The cheers grew even louder.

The host leaned in slightly.

"One final question. Many fans want to know whether your gentleness is real, or simply part of your public image."

Chen Qianhu looked up and laughed, a full and open sound that carried across the stage.

Instead of answering directly, he began to sing again.

"I am ugly, but I am gentle."

The crowd responded as one.

"Cold on the outside, burning on the inside!"

Chen Qianhu smiled.

"That is me."

In New Ming Year 1, Chen Qianhu retired from the army and dedicated himself entirely to his career in entertainment.

By New Ming Year 3, he had begun touring the country with large-scale concerts.

By New Ming Year 5, he had become the most popular performer in the land, surpassing even Chen Yuanyuan and securing his place as the number one star.

In New Ming Year 8, he married an ordinary woman with no wealth and no remarkable beauty, yet he treated her with unwavering devotion and kindness, creating a story that many would come to admire.

That same year, he joined the production of *Founding of the Nation* as a special guest, playing multiple roles, including himself as well as several notable antagonists such as Zu Dashou, Huang Taiji, Wu Sangui, and the pirate Liu Xiang.

His portrayal of villains left a deep impression.

His portrayal of himself was barely remembered.

Years later, in New Ming Year 37, his son discovered an old diary among his belongings.

Inside, written in uneven handwriting, was a single line.

"I want everyone to like me."

"Please do not be afraid of me."

Chapter 1446 Liu Maopao Arc

New Ming Calendar, Year 2.

Inside the Prime Minister's office, Flat Rabbit sat stiffly in his chair as if the cushion were stuffed with needles instead of cotton. His eyes drifted helplessly over the mountain of documents piled on the desk in front of him, each stack thicker than the last, each page more incomprehensible than the one before.

This, quite frankly, was a disaster.

It was not entirely accurate to say he was illiterate. He could recognize a few essential characters like "one," "two," "big," "small," and "king," which was just enough for him to determine whether a document was upside down. Beyond that, however, the vast ocean of bureaucratic text might as well have been ancient runes carved by ghosts.

Flat Rabbit clutched his head with both hands and groaned, "I'm finished. Completely finished. Why in the world did they elect me as Prime Minister? I am a man whose sword light once chilled forty provinces and whose qi stretched thirty thousand li. I am not someone meant to sit in an office and read paperwork all day."

The clerks in the room exchanged awkward glances but said nothing. There was, after all, no polite response to that.

At that moment, a young man stepped in from outside and greeted cheerfully, "Uncle Rabbit."

The extra "uncle" made everyone turn their heads. It sounded wrong in a way that was hard to explain, yet oddly natural once you knew who was speaking.

Liu Maopao.

Flat Rabbit made a face. "How many times do I have to tell you, stop calling me uncle. I am not your uncle."

Liu Maopao grinned as if the correction meant nothing. "Uncle Rabbit, you look troubled by state affairs."

Flat Rabbit slumped deeper into his chair. "Of course I am troubled. I don't even know why everyone voted for me. I cannot read, and now I am supposed to run a country."

Liu Maopao clasped his hands behind his back and spoke with calm confidence. "That is because what people know about you is not what you think they know. Your illiteracy is something only the old villagers from Gao Village Family are aware of. To the rest of the world, you are something else entirely."

Flat Rabbit blinked. "What am I, then? A great swordsman?"

The clerks nearly choked at that answer.

Liu Maopao continued smoothly, "A founding hero. A great philanthropist. A man who fears no power, who lives cleanly, who stands for justice, who is unmoved by beauty and untouched by greed."

Each title landed like a polished brick, building an image far grander than the man sitting in the chair. The clerks, after recovering from their initial shock, found themselves nodding along. From an outsider's perspective, that image was not wrong at all.

Of course, those who had known him longer were also aware of his less admirable qualities, such as his inability to read, his tendency to brag, and his occasional flair for dramatic nonsense, but those details did not travel far beyond close circles.

Flat Rabbit scratched his head, looking slightly embarrassed. "Even if that is true, it does not solve my problem. These documents are my responsibility. I cannot just ignore them because I cannot read them."

Liu Maopao stepped forward and placed a hand lightly on the desk. "Then the solution is simple. Ask for help. Invite Shan Shier to assist you, and bring in Tan Liwen as well."

Flat Rabbit hesitated. "That feels wrong. I took the position from them, and now I go crawling back to ask for help. That sounds like an insult."

Liu Maopao shook his head. "If anyone else did it, perhaps it would be. But you are different. No one believes you have ill intentions. Besides, this is collective governance. The country was never meant to be run by one man alone. Asking others to participate is not weakness. It is the system working as intended."

He paused, then added with a hint of personal ambition, "And if you allow them to come, I would also like to learn from them."

Flat Rabbit thought about it for a long moment before finally nodding. "Fine. I will go."

And so he did.

When Flat Rabbit personally visited to extend the invitation, there was no sense of humiliation on the receiving end. Shan Shier agreed without hesitation, and Tan Liwen joined soon after. Liu Maopao naturally followed along, securing himself a junior position within the Prime Minister's office.

From that point on, the structure became clear. Flat Rabbit remained the face of authority, while the actual governance was handled by Shan Shier, Tan Liwen, and a growing group of secretaries.

Among them, Liu Maopao stood out.

Where others occasionally slowed down or took breaks, he worked relentlessly. When there was a task to be done, he was always the first to step forward. While others rested on weekends, he continued working as if time itself were chasing him.

Even Shan Shier could not help but remark one day, "Some people use connections to secure a position where they can idle away their days. Liu Maopao uses connections to gain a stage where he can prove himself. These two types of people cannot be compared."

Years passed.

By New Ming Calendar Year 13, Shan Shier had served two terms as Prime Minister. Age had begun to weigh on him. His hair showed streaks of gray, and his posture was no longer as straight as before.

Everyone understood what that meant.

The next election would bring change.

The question was not whether Shan Shier would step down, but who would replace him.

One year before the election, something unusual began to appear on the streets of the capital.

A massive steam-powered vehicle rolled slowly through the city, drawing curious stares from every direction. Standing atop the vehicle was Liu Maopao, holding a metal megaphone, his voice ringing loudly across the streets.

"Listen, everyone, listen. My name is Liu Maopao. I was born in Heyang County, Shaanxi. Years ago, I traveled to Gao Village Family. I later joined the village council and participated in administrative governance."

The novelty of the scene alone drew a crowd. People gathered quickly, curious about this man who dared to introduce himself so openly in public.

Seeing the growing audience, Liu Maopao's energy only intensified.

"I have experience in administration, in diplomacy, and during the founding war I contributed significantly to the movement of collective governance."

The crowd listened, some nodding, others whispering among themselves. His credentials, laid out so directly, began to reshape how people viewed him.

Then he shifted tone.

"Next year, I will participate in the Prime Minister election. If elected, I will address the following issues for the people."

He launched into a detailed list of policies and reforms, each one aimed squarely at real problems the common people faced. He did not speak in vague ideals. He spoke in practical solutions.

His voice carried conviction, and his words struck their mark.

"I promise that if I become Prime Minister, I will bring a better life to all of you."

Applause erupted.

Days later, the same scene played out in Luoyang. Then in Xi'an. Then in Chengdu.

Liu Maopao traveled from city to city, using trains and steam vehicles, repeating his speeches, refining them, amplifying them, until his name began to spread across the land like a rising tide.

For the first time, the people saw something new.

Not a hero chosen by fate.

Not a ruler born into power.

But a man standing in the street, speaking directly to them, asking for their support.

And whether they realized it or not, the rules of the game had already begun to change.

Chapter 1447 Liu Maopao Part 2 Arc

Over the span of several months, Liu Maopao's footsteps spread across the entire land.

Every major city with even a hint of influence saw his arrival. From morning until night, he stood on the busiest streets, speaking tirelessly about what he intended to do for the people. His voice became a constant presence in marketplaces, crossroads, and public squares, weaving itself into the daily rhythm of life.

Applause followed him wherever he went.

The voices of the people, their complaints, their hopes, and their expectations, began to flow upward through the system, reaching the representatives of the People's Congress across the nation.

By New Ming Calendar Year 14, Shan Shier stepped down due to age, and the Prime Minister election began.

Liu Maopao won by an overwhelming margin.

The gap between him and the other young politicians was so vast that they could not even see his shadow, let alone compete with him. While many were still marveling at how calculated and strategic he had been in building his reputation, Liu Maopao had already moved on.

He went straight to work.

Twelve years of experience as an apprentice in the Prime Minister's office had given him an unusually sharp understanding of the country's weaknesses. Every policy he introduced targeted a critical issue. Every reform struck directly at areas that demanded change.

Under his leadership, New Ming surged forward with unstoppable momentum, its national strength rising at a breathtaking pace.

In Year 15, under Liu Maopao's direction, the Dadu Kingdom on Yizhou Island was formally incorporated into New Ming. The expansion of territory greatly boosted his prestige, and his name began to carry even more weight.

By Year 16, having tasted the benefits of expansion, Liu Maopao turned his gaze outward. His ambition grew bolder. He sought to secure even greater territories for the nation.

The fleets of New Ming swept across Asia and Europe and reached the shores of the Americas.

Colonial ports sprang up across the world, each one built rapidly under his command. Construction never stopped. Troops were dispatched in large numbers, spreading across distant lands.

The world began to call him the Iron-Willed Prime Minister.

Yet reality was less forgiving than ambition.

At a time when transportation was still limited and the population of New Ming had only just surpassed one hundred million, manpower was already stretched thin. The homeland itself, vast and demanding, required enormous effort to develop. Even with all available resources, it was barely enough.

To expand overseas on such a scale was to stretch the nation beyond its limits.

The colonial ports scattered across the globe became a heavy burden. Logistics strained under constant pressure, and transport fleets were forced into relentless motion, barely able to keep up.

Resistance movements broke out one after another.

Everywhere required troops.

Zheng Chenggong, Shi Lang, and Li Dingguo became like firefighters rushing from one crisis to another. They were either suppressing unrest in one colony or on their way to the next.

By Year 22, Liu Maopao stared at the financial report submitted by the Ministry of Revenue and slowly closed his eyes.

"I was wrong."

His voice was low, almost hollow.

"The rapid expansion brought back gold and silver at the beginning. It looked like wealth, like victory. But everything we gained has been spent maintaining those same colonies."

He tightened his grip on the report, his expression breaking.

"This was not profit. This was a complete loss."

Tears streamed down his face as he spoke.

"I have harmed the nation. I have caused its strength to decline instead of grow. There is no way to make up for this except to take responsibility."

"I resign."

In Year 22, Liu Maopao stepped down.

Shan Shier, though already ill, returned to office to stabilize the economy and prevent further decline.

Liu Maopao returned to his former role as an apprentice.

By day, he assisted with administrative work. By night, he sat quietly in the library, studying the Heavenly Books left behind by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

One day, a few young men in the library noticed him.

"Look over there. That is Liu Maopao, the former Prime Minister."

"So he is the one who made those mistakes. No wonder he got removed. Now he can only hide here and spend the rest of his life reading."

"What a waste. He will never rise again."

"My brother answered his call and went to conquer the Americas. He died from a poisoned arrow. I hate him."

Their voices were not loud, yet not soft either. They were pitched just right to reach his ears.

Liu Maopao stood up immediately and walked over. Without hesitation, he bowed deeply, his body bent at a full ninety degrees.

"I am sorry. Your brother's death was caused by my immaturity. If you are angry, you may strike me as you wish, as long as you do not kill me. If you kill me, it will bring you trouble with the law. But if you only injure me, I will not report it."

The man froze, clearly not expecting such a response. After a moment, he sighed, turned away, and left with his companions.

Liu Maopao watched them go without saying another word. After a long silence, he returned to his seat and picked up another book.

There were countless Heavenly Books, covering politics, military strategy, and economics.

He used to favor political theory.

Now, he read economics.

Four years passed in the blink of an eye.

Shan Shier, having spent those years restoring the economy, could no longer continue. His health forced him to step down once more, and a new election began.

In Year 26, Liu Maopao stood again before the people.

"This time, I have no grand promises to make," he said calmly. "I only wish to speak honestly. I love my country. I once led it in the wrong direction, but this time, I will reclaim everything it has lost. If you are willing, please choose me again."

He won.

Once more, by an overwhelming margin.

But this time, he was different.

He no longer sought glory through expansion. He no longer chased the fame of conquest. Instead, he turned his full attention to the economy.

A strong economy meant a better life for the people.

If the people could live in peace and prosperity, then it did not matter whether his name was remembered in history.

Under his leadership, the nation stabilized. Growth became steady and sustainable. The people lived more comfortably, and the country regained its strength.

Those who had once followed him across the world could not help but feel that Liu Maopao had become someone else entirely.

He was no longer the Iron-Willed Prime Minister.

He became known as the Gentle Prime Minister.

In Year 30, he was re-elected unanimously.

In Year 34, he was re-elected again.

In Year 38, once more.

By Year 42, when everyone expected yet another term, Liu Maopao refused.

He understood something deeply.

To remain in power for too long would damage the very foundation of collective governance.

Under his insistence, new faces stepped onto the political stage.

Before leaving, he spoke one final time.

"I love my country just as you do. That love does not differ because you are ordinary and I once held power."

"But I also understand that my words and actions carry greater weight. When an ordinary person makes a mistake, it harms a family. When I make a mistake, it harms a nation."

"So I have always walked carefully, as if on thin ice."

"I hope those who come after me will remember this."

And with that, Liu Maopao stepped away, leaving behind not just policies and achievements, but a lesson carved deeply into the heart of New Ming.

Chapter 1448 Binsheng Arc

New Ming Calendar, Year 23.

In the capital, Xi'an, inside the headquarters of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Sky Bureau, the Director's Office carried an air of quiet authority. Behind a heavy wooden desk sat a middle-aged woman in a crisp military uniform, her posture upright and her expression composed. A small nameplate rested neatly before her, engraved with the title: Director Hongniangzi.

She was reviewing intelligence reports with steady focus when a knock came at the door.

"Enter," she said without looking up.

The door opened. Bingsheng stepped in.

With a casual flick of his foot, the door shut smoothly behind him. His hand moved just as fluidly, tossing his hat through the air, where it landed perfectly on a rack. He strolled forward, smiling as if this were a friendly visit rather than an urgent summons.

"I'm here," he said, leaning forward with both hands on the desk. "What's so urgent that you had to call me in like this?"

In an instant, Hongniangzi rose and gave a formal salute. "Director!"

Bingsheng frowned slightly. "How many times have I told you not to do that? If someone sees you, my cover's blown. You are the director here. I'm the one who follows orders."

She quickly sat back down. "My apologies. I was careless."

Her face returned to its usual calm, almost expressionless state. "Agent 007, the Bureau has a mission for you. It is both honorable and demanding."

"I'm listening."

"Several months ago, our embassy in Lisbon was attacked by an anti-New Ming extremist group calling itself 'Dabo Siju.' Fortunately, Diplomat Gao Zhengjing single-handedly defeated an entire battalion and protected our personnel. However, we are not clay statues meant to endure blows without response. We will retaliate."

Bingsheng nodded. "Understood."

She handed him a sealed envelope. "This contains all intelligence we currently have on Dabo Siju. Your mission is to capture their leader and bring him back."

Bingsheng took the envelope with a grin. "Got it. I'll be off then. As for the factory and my wife, make up something believable."

"It will be handled."

Soon after, Chang'an Factory received official notice. A new facility might be established in Europe, and Vice Director Bingsheng was required to conduct an on-site evaluation.

His wife, Lady Yan, was reluctant but had no choice. She packed his luggage herself and saw him off at the train station, her expression tinged with quiet worry.

Bingsheng boarded a transoceanic vessel dressed in a long scholar's robe, every bit the dignified industrial official. Upon arrival in Lisbon, he was warmly received by local authorities and lodged in the finest hotel available.

But when night fell, the scholar vanished.

In his place emerged a shadow.

Bingsheng slipped into black attire and climbed out the window with practiced ease. A few turns through narrow alleys brought him to a dim underground tavern thick with the smell of alcohol and unrest.

Inside, drunkards swayed and shouted. At the bar, two men were grumbling loudly.

"Those damned New Ming people," one spat. "Coming here and throwing their weight around. One day we'll wipe them out."

The other snorted. "The embassy attack failed, but no matter. Next time, we hit their transport ships."

Their voices had barely faded when a chair scraped beside them.

Bingsheng sat down.

"Hello," he said in rough Spanish, smiling casually.

The two men froze. "New Ming..."

Their hands moved for weapons.

Too slow.

In a flash, a dagger pierced one man's throat. The other found a blade resting against his neck before he could even react.

"Try moving," Bingsheng whispered, "and you'll move straight into the afterlife."

The man went rigid.

"Where is your leader?"

He hesitated.

The blade shifted. A sharp stab drove into the back of his hand. Before he could scream, a cloth was stuffed into his mouth.

"I'll remove that," Bingsheng said calmly. "You tell me where he is, and you live."

The man nodded frantically.

The cloth came out. The answer followed immediately.

Bingsheng withdrew his blade and left.

The man collapsed in relief, clutching his wounded hand. Then his expression changed. He bolted toward the back door.

"If I cut through the alleys, I can warn them first..."

He flung the door open.

And froze.

Bingsheng stood there waiting.

The smile on his face was almost gentle.

"If you had stayed inside," he said, "I might have spared you."

The man turned to flee.

A mechanism clicked. A hidden weapon fired. Needles struck his back.

"Poison..."

He fell instantly.

Bingsheng retrieved the needles, packed them away, and walked into the night.

Shadows followed him through the alleys.

One hour later, the Lisbon underground headquarters of Dabo Siju was attacked. Their local leader was found dead, his throat cleanly cut.

The Spanish authorities did not need evidence to guess who was responsible. They stormed the New Ming embassy and demanded an explanation.

Gao Zhengjing listened with a look of innocent confusion. "We know nothing about this."

"I don't believe you."

"Accusations require proof," Gao replied calmly. "Otherwise, I might just as well accuse your government of staging the embassy attack."

"That was not us."

"Then neither was this," Gao said with a polite smile.

Days later, the same fate befell Dabo Siju's London branch.

Then Hamburg.

Then others.

Five months passed.

The Chang'an Factory delegation returned home.

A few days later, a classified report was placed on the desk of Shan Shier. It contained evidence that multiple European governments had secretly funded Dabo Siju.

He sighed softly.

Then he signed the order for military action.

Months later, Shi Lang led the fleet westward under the banner of suppressing Dabo Siju, striking across Western Europe.

Meanwhile, far from the battlefield, Bingsheng sat in his garden, holding his wife close with a relaxed smile.

"That trip to Europe was exhausting," he said. "The factory gave me a long vacation afterward. Let's travel somewhere together."

Lady Yan's eyes lit up. She pulled out a book written by Zhu Cunji, titled Beautiful Lands and Waters, and pointed to a page.

"I want to go here."

Bingsheng laughed. "Then we go."

Chapter 1449 Ma Tianzheng Arc

New Ming Calendar, Year 2. Macau.

Inside the Portuguese Governor's residence, voices were raised in open argument.

Bai Yuan, Minister of Rites of the New Ming, had personally arrived and now stood before the governor with calm composure, delivering words that carried the weight of an entire nation.

"The lease of Macau was signed with the Old Ming," he said evenly. "Our New Ming has overturned nearly everything that came before. Naturally, that agreement no longer holds."

The governor's face flushed with anger. "This is unreasonable."

Bai Yuan remained dressed in spotless white, his expression tranquil as still water. "Be mature."

The words sounded light, almost casual, yet something in their tone made the governor pause. His gaze drifted toward the window. From there, the harbor lay in full view, where a massive fleet sat anchored in silent formation, while on the shore below, Li Dingguo's army stood in ranks that stretched like an iron wall.

The governor exhaled slowly.

Very well. Be mature.

He straightened himself. "Then let us sign a new lease. The rent can be negotiated."

Bai Yuan smiled. "Apologies. We do not lease."

The governor's expression stiffened.

Bai Yuan continued, as if discussing something entirely ordinary. "However, we will still allow trade. Pay the appropriate tariffs, and your merchants will be protected. Their business will proceed without interference."

The governor rolled his eyes. If insults were permitted, he would have delivered several already. Since they were not, there was nothing more to say.

...

While the negotiation dragged on, another figure walked leisurely through the streets of Macau.

Ma Tianzheng.

Clad in a green Daoist robe, a three-foot sword resting across his back, he moved at an unhurried pace that prioritized elegance over speed. Each step carried a deliberate grace. If one must spread the teachings of Dao Xuan Tianzun, then one must at least look the part.

Macau had been under Portuguese influence for years. Catholicism had taken root deeply, and Dao Xuan Tianzun had rarely displayed miracles in the southern coastal regions. The foundation here was weak.

Which meant he had work to do.

Up ahead, two men hurried past carrying a stretcher. Upon it lay a pale-faced man, breathing shallowly.

Ma Tianzheng's eyes lit up. He stepped forward and blocked their path.

"Hold a moment," he said. "What troubles this man?"

One of the carriers answered anxiously, "Daozhang, our brother fell ill. Dizziness, vomiting..."

Ma Tianzheng nodded and reached out, fingers resting on the patient's wrist. After a brief examination, along with a few questions, understanding dawned.

Nothing serious. A simple illness worsened by poverty and delay.

He smiled calmly. "A minor invasion of wind evil. Nothing grave. I have here a divine medicine granted by Dao Xuan Tianzun. Mix it with water, and within three days, he will recover."

The two men were overjoyed, but that joy quickly turned awkward.

"How much... does the medicine cost?"

Ma Tianzheng waved it off. "What nonsense. When has Tianzun ever charged money? What use would worldly wealth be in the heavens?"

He produced a small paper packet and placed it in their hands.

The two men dropped to their knees in gratitude before rushing off.

Ma Tianzheng turned, satisfied.

Only to find a priest standing behind him, watching with an unreadable expression.

A Catholic priest.

Ma Tianzheng raised a brow. "Ah. Greetings. This humble Daoist is Ma Tianzheng. And you, foreign monk, what guidance do you seek?"

The priest performed a surprisingly proper Chinese salute. When he spoke, it was in fluent Chinese.

"My name is Fan Bulian. I am Dutch. Our faiths are... old acquaintances. I know your naval commander, Shi Lang."

Ma Tianzheng gave a faint nod.

Fan Bulian continued, his tone growing warm. "Dear Daoist Ma, in truth, we are fellow believers."

Ma Tianzheng glanced sideways at him. "I do not recall joining your church."

Fan Bulian coughed lightly. "What I mean is that Dao Xuan Tianzun and our God are, in essence, the same. Only the names differ across East and West, much like how your people call Spain 'Franks'."

Ma Tianzheng chuckled. "Interesting. Go on."

Encouraged, Fan Bulian pointed at the embroidered image on Ma Tianzheng's chest. "Your Tianzun is our God. They are one and the same, just as a potato and..."

He never finished the comparison.

With a sharp motion, Ma Tianzheng struck his scabbard. The sword leapt free with a flash.

"You dare compare Tianzun to a potato?" His voice turned cold. "Shall I cut you down where you stand?"

Fan Bulian paled and immediately shut his mouth, silently thanking fate that he had not completed that sentence.

"I meant no offense," he said quickly, raising his hands. "I hold my God in the highest reverence."

Ma Tianzheng snorted. "To equate your deity with another is itself a form of disrespect."

Fan Bulian said nothing, though inwardly he disagreed. At his level, belief had long since become something more... complicated.

Ma Tianzheng studied his eyes and saw something familiar.

He had once looked like that himself, back when he wandered the world searching for divine signs.

Fan Bulian pressed on. "You wish to spread your faith in Macau. I wish to spread mine in your land. If we merge certain doctrines, cooperate... both sides would benefit. With our influence, your teachings could spread across the world."

Ma Tianzheng shook his head with a faint smile. "Only falsehood requires tricks. Dao Xuan Tianzun is real. There is no need for schemes. Following Tianzun is enough."

Fan Bulian sighed. "Be mature."

He said it in the exact same tone Bai Yuan had used earlier.

This time, however, the result was entirely different.

Ma Tianzheng suddenly looked up, eyes blazing with excitement.

"Tianzun has arrived! Tianzun has personally come to Macau!"

Fan Bulian blinked in confusion.

Then the sky split.

Clouds parted, and a colossal golden hand descended, carrying an enormous ship as if it weighed nothing. Slowly, gently, it lowered the vessel into the harbor.

At the bow stood Gao Yiye, smiling down upon the stunned world below.

The New Ming soldiers erupted in cheers. The people of Macau stood frozen, their minds unable to process what they were witnessing.

Gao Yiye's voice rang out.

"This ship is named Kun Kun, the final gift from Tianzun. From this day forward, you must rely on your own efforts to build ships."

The harbor exploded into celebration.

Fan Bulian stared upward, his thoughts collapsing into silence. Then, without warning, he dropped to his knees.

"I will not return to Europe," he said hoarsely. "I will stay here. I will join the Dao Xuan Tianzun faith."

At that moment, the embroidered Tianzun on Ma Tianzheng's chest spoke.

"Excellent. My foreign languages academy requires a capable headmaster. Fan Bulian is suitable. Ma Tianzheng, take him to the capital."

Ma Tianzheng bowed deeply. "This disciple obeys."

...

In the years that followed, Ma Tianzheng completed his work within the homeland and set sail for the southern seas.

By Year 10, he had reached Europe and established the first Dao Xuan Tianzun temple in Lisbon.

By Year 20, such temples appeared across major European ports.

By Year 35, the faith flourished throughout the Americas.

By Year 46, Ma Tianzheng ascended at the peak of Mount Hua, departing this world at the age of one hundred and ten.

Chapter 1450 Zhao Sheng Arc

New Ming Calendar, Year 8.

The capital library.

Night had long since fallen, yet the building remained lit.

Zhu Youjian, now serving as the librarian, walked quietly through the dim corridor until he reached the last pool of light still burning. He sighed when he saw the familiar figure seated beneath it.

"Mr. Zhao," he said, "the entire capital is asleep. Why are you still here? What are you reading so late?"

Zhao Sheng looked up and smiled, his eyes carrying a trace of distant memory.

"You know, this reminds me of something," he said. "More than ten years ago, I studied by lamplight in Shiyou Temple, hoping to pass the imperial exams. In the end, I was accused of reading military texts at night like Huang Chao preparing a rebellion. That accusation pushed me into rebellion for real. Back then, I even earned a nickname. 'Lamp-Lighter.'"

Zhu Youjian gave an awkward chuckle. "The conditions of that time... I bear a great deal of responsibility. I wronged you."

Zhao Sheng waved it off lightly. "That's all in the past. No point dwelling on it. Come, take a look at this. One of the Heavenly Books granted by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

"A Heavenly Book?" Zhu Youjian's interest was immediately piqued. He sat down beside Zhao Sheng.

The book in Zhao Sheng's hands had an unusual author's name, a foreign one: Henry Beachell.

Zhu Youjian blinked. "A foreigner?"

Zhao Sheng nodded. "Minister Wang Hui once said that these Heavenly Books come from Tianzun's celestial library, where writings from all realms are gathered. It is only natural that even Western immortals might have contributed."

Zhu Youjian nodded slowly. "I see."

Zhao Sheng tapped the page. "This man, Henry Beachell, studied rice. In this book, he describes a method for cultivating a kind of 'immortal grain.' Unfortunately, it is not suitable for large-scale use."

Zhu Youjian looked confused.

With a grin, Zhao Sheng pulled out another book. "Now this one is different. Written by one of our own."

Zhu Youjian leaned closer. The author's surname was Yuan.

Zhao Sheng's tone grew lively. "This great figure is known as the Father of Hybrid Rice. When it comes to rice, no one surpasses our own people."

Zhu Youjian still looked puzzled. "What exactly do these Heavenly Books do?"

Zhao Sheng leaned back, his voice turning serious. "You do not need the technical details. Just understand this. If we can replicate the hybrid rice method described here, our yields could double, triple, even increase fivefold. The more we dare, the more the land can produce."

Zhu Youjian sucked in a breath.

As a former emperor, no one understood better than he did the weight of grain.

The great drought at the beginning of his reign had not turned into a nationwide rebellion for no reason. It was hunger that broke the empire. If such rice had existed back then, history might have taken a different path.

His voice trembled slightly. "Mr. Zhao... how far have you progressed?"

Zhao Sheng smiled. "By day, I experiment in the fields. By night, I study here, reading and rereading these books. Give me five years. I will recreate this hybrid rice."

Zhu Youjian straightened. "Then it must succeed. It has to succeed."

Zhao Sheng chuckled. "Leave it to me."

Zhu Youjian lifted a lamp. "Then I shall hold the light for you."

...

Three years later. New Ming Calendar, Year 11. Autumn.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, people gradually left the library. Zhu Youjian cleaned as usual, glancing toward the corner where Zhao Sheng always sat.

But today, he was not there.

A flicker of worry crossed his face. "Could he be ill?"

Suddenly, a figure came running from afar.

"Librarian! Librarian!"

Zhu Youjian looked up and immediately recognized him. Relief spread across his face. "Mr. Zhao, you are late today. I thought you would not come."

Zhao Sheng was practically shouting as he ran. "It's done! It's done! Come with me. To the fields."

Zhu Youjian froze for a moment, then his expression lit up. "You mean... it worked?"

Without another word, he followed.

They had not even run two hundred meters before Zhao Sheng began gasping for breath.

"Careful," Zhu Youjian said quickly. "Your asthma is not fully healed. Do not overexert yourself. Ah... this is bad. It is getting dark. The buses have stopped running."

Just then, a dazzling golden vehicle rolled past the road outside the library. A five-clawed golden dragon ornament stood proudly at its front.

Zhu Cunji leaned out from the driver's seat and laughed. "Well, if it is not Youjian and Mr. Zhao. Long time no see. How have you been?"

Zhu Youjian beamed. "Perfect timing. We need a ride."

Zhu Cunji grinned. "Then you have found the right man. Hop in."

The shining vehicle carried them out of the city toward the experimental fields.

The land they reached had once been Zhu Youjian's imperial estate. He remembered when He Fengsheng and Liang Shixian had experimented with fertilizers there, turning it into a sea of gold.

Now, as the vehicle moved through the fields, the sight before them was even more astonishing.

Golden rice stretched endlessly, heavy with grain, each stalk bending under its own abundance.

Zhu Youjian's mouth fell open. "Incredible... truly incredible."

He stared in awe. "The Heavenly Books deserve their name. This Master Yuan... truly lives up to his title."

Zhao Sheng laughed. "Did I not say so? When it comes to rice, our own masters are unmatched."

After a long while, Zhao Sheng exhaled. "Well then. We have seen it. Let us return."

Zhu Cunji glanced at the sky. "It is already fully dark."

Zhu Youjian blinked. "So?"

Zhu Cunji pointed ahead.

The problem became obvious immediately.

These early steam-powered cars had no headlights.

In complete darkness, the road vanished. One wrong turn, and they would end up in the fields.

Zhu Youjian and Zhao Sheng exchanged a look.

In the end, the two of them held up lanterns, lighting the way while Zhu Cunji drove at an agonizingly slow pace. By the time they returned to the city, all three were drenched in sweat.

...

That year, Zhao Sheng successfully cultivated hybrid rice. The people revered him, yet he refused all credit, urging them instead to thank the great Master Yuan.

By Year 12, hybrid rice began spreading across the nation.

By Year 15, grain production surged.

By Year 20, improvements continued without pause.

By Year 25, yields rose again, wave after wave.

By Year 30, Zhao Sheng had grown old. His asthma made long walks difficult, and he wished to obtain a driver's license so he could travel between fields more easily. However, he had exceeded the official age limit.

In recognition of his immense contributions, the authorities granted him a special license.

Chang'an Automobile Factory gifted him their latest model, the "Deep Blue."

From that day forward, Zhao Sheng finally drove himself to the fields, continuing to watch over the rice that would feed a nation.