

## Great Ming 961

### Chapter 961: Oh, a Sentimental Fool!

At once, the atmosphere in the courtyard turned tense and uncomfortable.

Zhu Piaoling froze, cursing inwardly. Damn it. I came here on Dao Xuan Tianzun's orders to do good, but somehow I've ended up playing the villain, tearing apart a pair of lovers.

Li Daoxuan also stiffened for a brief moment. However, as a modern man, he was broad-minded and highly adaptable. After a moment's thought, he concluded that the girl genuinely cared for the prefect. If that was the case, forcing her away would be inappropriate. Letting her choose for herself would be better.

Li Daoxuan lowered his voice, speaking in a tone only Zhu Piaoling could hear. "Give her the choice. Let her decide whether to stay or leave."

Upon receiving this "highest directive," Zhu Piaoling's spirits immediately lifted. He cleared his throat and announced loudly, "Ah, so that's how it is. You two have feelings for each other. Our Prince of Qin's Mansion is very reasonable. His Highness the Heir Apparent is especially fair-minded. Xue'er, the decision is entirely yours. If you wish to stay, the Prince of Qin's Mansion will not buy you."

The Suzhou prefect's face instantly lit up with joy.

Zhu Piaoling then turned to the madam and said, "This girl is quite beautiful. You owe me eighty taels back."

The madam hurriedly began fumbling for the silver.

However, just as everyone expected Xue'er to choose to stay, the sorrowful expression on her face suddenly vanished. Her eyes became empty and emotionless, as if a mask had been removed.

"This humble concubine is willing to enter the Prince of Qin's Mansion," she said calmly.

"What?" The Suzhou prefect was stunned. "Why?"

Zhu Piaoling was equally bewildered. "Why?"

Even Li Daoxuan was taken aback. What is going on?

Xue'er's expression remained perfectly composed. The grief and affection she had shown moments earlier now seemed completely fabricated. She turned toward the Suzhou prefect, her face devoid of emotion.

"Prefect," she said evenly, "you just said we have been together for many years. Yet you have never once thought of buying my freedom."

The Suzhou prefect stammered, unable to form a response.

A collective gasp rippled through the courtyard.

Xue'er continued, "Every day in the Pear Garden, this humble concubine must entertain several groups of guests. I sing for them, drink with them, write poetry, and paint. I spend my days forcing smiles onto my face, living like a dog. Prefect, do you truly believe you are any different from those other guests?"

Her voice remained calm, but each word struck like a blade.

"If you truly were different, why did you not buy my freedom? Why did you not take me as your concubine? My demands were never high. I never dared to aspire to the position of primary wife. All I wanted was to stop entertaining guests, to leave the Pear Garden, and to live quietly as a concubine in your prefectural residence. Yet even that simple wish was denied."

No one spoke.

Xue'er spread her hands slightly. "I originally planned to leave you with a beautiful memory, Prefect. I wanted you to believe that even after we parted, there was a woman in this world who truly adored you. But what kind of farce are you trying to stage now?"

She continued, still expressionless, "At last, I have the chance to leave the Pear Garden and live peacefully in the back garden of the Prince's Mansion. As long as I do not compete for favor or make enemies in the inner court, I can spend the rest of my life enjoying music, chess, calligraphy, and painting. Would that not be wonderful?"

Her gaze hardened slightly.

"Yet you still wish to keep me in the Pear Garden, visiting only when you remember me. When you forget me, should I continue flattering other men here?"

The Suzhou prefect stood frozen, his lips trembling. For a long time, he could not utter a single word.

The thirty-four courtesans nearby wore expressions that were difficult to describe.

Zhu Piaoling stood there in silence for several breaths. Then he suddenly burst into loud laughter.

"Hahahaha! Hahahaha! Amusing! Truly fascinating! I have learned something new today. This is genuinely interesting!"

He was genuinely delighted. Coming out to see the world had been the right decision.

If he had not come, how would he ever have understood what a courtesan truly thought? Hearing Xue'er's words felt like a new world opening before his eyes.

No wonder Dao Xuan Tianzun wanted him to save these women.

They truly needed saving.

No matter how glamorous their lives in the brothel appeared, it was all superficial.

Those high officials and noble lords who claimed to love them, how many truly cared?

As Xue'er said, if you truly loved her, why did you not buy her freedom? Fine words meant nothing. If you truly loved someone, how could you endure seeing her smile and entertain other guests every day? Would you not feel jealous? Would you not feel humiliated?

You could accept it only because you never truly cared.

Zhu Piaoling's expression turned cold as he pointed at the Suzhou prefect. "Get out of my sight. If you dare look at Xue'er again, I will submit an impeachment memorial. The Emperor will strip you of office, have you arrested, and send you to Ningxia to herd horses."

The Suzhou prefect was so frightened that he stumbled back several steps.

Even the eunuch from the capital shook his head, looking at the prefect with open disdain. If we eunuchs form a paired-meal relationship with a palace maid, we cherish her and give her everything we have, he thought. Unlike this man, full of fake affection.

Xue'er stepped forward and curtsied gracefully. "Thank you, Manager, for standing up for Xue'er."

Zhu Piaoling laughed. "You are truly formidable. If I were the Heir Apparent, I would not dare take you as a concubine. I fear it would not take long before the other concubines were eliminated and you claimed the position of primary consort."

Xue'er replied softly, "Manager, you jest. I have already said that I do not wish to compete for favor. I only want a quiet life and peaceful days."

Zhu Piaoling nodded. "Then you shall have it."

With Xue'er's declaration, the thirty or forty courtesans stopped pretending altogether and hurried to stand behind Zhu Piaoling.

Zhu Piaoling rose to his feet. "Let's go."

"Yes!"

The group swaggered out of the Pear Garden.

The Suzhou prefect stood where he was, his face ashen, watching them disappear into the distance.

After they had gone some way, Xue'er, the boldest among them, asked, "Manager, where are we going now? Are we traveling to Shaanxi by carriage?"

Zhu Piaoling chuckled. "Traveling to Shaanxi by carriage would be courting death. We will go to Anqing first and then find a large ship to take us upriver."

"By ship?"

The courtesans collectively breathed a sigh of relief. The Central Plains were in chaos, and traveling overland was extremely dangerous. Moreover, they were all women with no combat ability. Even if they resisted, it would only provoke bandits further. Falling into such hands would be worse than death.

The women began to imagine life in the inner court of the Prince's Mansion, no longer needing to entertain guests, dealing only with the Heir Apparent himself. Compared to their current lives, it sounded far easier.

However, among them, Chen Yuanyuan's attention was not on the Prince's Mansion at all.

Her gaze was fixed on the embroidered image on Zhu Piaoling's chest.

Just moments earlier, while Xue'er and the prefect were acting out their emotional scene, she thought she saw it again. The embroidery seemed to speak, and Zhu Piaoling appeared to be listening.

She could not be sure.

Chapter 962: He's Listening to a Demon

Zhu Piaoling, accompanied by a large group of young women, set off for Nanjing.

His planned route was to travel from Suzhou to Nanjing, then take a boat from Nanjing to Anqing. From a logistical standpoint, the arrangement was perfectly reasonable.

However, the journey itself seemed to be plagued by far too many interruptions.

Sure enough, the group soon found themselves wandering through the streets of Nanjing.

Xue'er suddenly pointed ahead. "Oh? Look, there's a brothel over there."

Having originated from brothels themselves, the women naturally paid special attention to such establishments. Among dozens of storefronts lining the street, they could spot a brothel at a glance.

Once it was noticed, chatter immediately broke out, and before long, that chatter reached Zhu Piaoling's ears.

"A brothel?" Zhu Piaoling asked. "Where?"

"To the front-left, about a hundred paces," Xue'er replied.

"Haha, excellent," Zhu Piaoling said with a laugh. "We're going there. I'll buy them all."

"What?" The women gasped in unison. "You're buying more?"

"What's with those looks?" Zhu Piaoling snorted. "Are you looking down on His Royal Highness? Let me tell you, His Royal Highness is extremely wealthy. Do you really think I can't afford to buy a few dozen, or even a hundred women?"

"This humble servant is only worried about His Royal Highness's health," Xue'er said cautiously.

"Nonsense," Zhu Piaoling scoffed. "From your conversation with the Suzhou prefect, I could tell everything clearly. You're all hoping His Royal Highness drops dead sooner rather than later. That way, you wouldn't have to deal with him anymore, and you could finally live out the rest of your lives quietly, without forcing smiles for anyone."

The women hurriedly shook their heads. "No, no. This humble servant would never think such a thing."

"Do you take me for a three-year-old child?" Zhu Piaoling snapped. "I'm not as easy to fool as the Suzhou prefect. You'd rather be widows than my concubines. The thing you probably dislike most in this world is men."

The women fell silent, clearly struck by how accurately he had guessed their thoughts.

"Tch. I don't like you lot," Zhu Piaoling muttered.

A loyal bodyguard stepped forward and whispered from behind him, "Master, you let your catchphrase slip again."

Zhu Piaoling rolled his eyes. "What does it matter? Do you think these women will recognize it? Hmph. To even remind me of that, are you taking me for an idiot? I don't like you either."

The bodyguard immediately retreated.

Hearing this exchange, Li Daoxuan finally could not help but let a faint smile appear on his lips.

Within the crowd, Chen Yuanyuan trembled faintly once again. She had seen it clearly this time. The embroidered divine figure on Zhu Piaoling's chest was truly moving. It was not an illusion caused by folds in the fabric. The figure itself was stirring.

The young girl was terrified, her entire body shaking uncontrollably.

Yet her upbringing had taught her never to blurt out everything she noticed. Instead, she endured in silence, keeping everything hidden within her heart.

There's a demon, Chen Yuanyuan thought. A demon has possessed the steward. He's probably taking us to the demon's lair to be eaten.

I'm so scared.

But I don't dare say anything. What if all the guards around him are demons too? If I scream, they'll devour me immediately.

Zhu Piaoling swaggered forward, leading his large group of loyal bodyguards and an entire troupe of brothel women straight into another brothel.

The madam of that establishment was completely dumbfounded.

She had seen men bring their subordinates to brothels before, but she had never witnessed anyone bringing women from another brothel to visit her own. The scene was so bizarre that even this worldly madam openly declared it absurd.

Zhu Piaoling wasted no time on explanations. He casually tossed down a stack of silver. "All the women here, young and old. I'm buying every single one."

"Huh?" The madam froze.

She was just about to explode in anger, but after seeing the large group of women following behind him, she immediately understood. These were women he had already bought from another brothel.

That establishment had really sold off all their women just like that?

This was clearly someone she could not afford to offend.

Without another word, the madam obediently led out the dozen or so women from her brothel and sold them all to Zhu Piaoling.

Zhu Piaoling's retinue grew once again.

The grand procession, now an even larger throng of women, continued roaming through the streets of Nanjing.

"There's another brothel ahead!"

"Buy it!"

"There's one more!"

"Buy it!"

"Up ahead..."

"Master," a bodyguard whispered urgently, "we don't have much hard cash left."

"What?" Zhu Piaoling exclaimed. "No money left? Are you joking?"

"This isn't Xi'an," the bodyguard said quietly. "Our silver disappears fast with every purchase."

Zhu Piaoling fell silent.

"The suffering of the world cannot be resolved all at once," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "Save as many as you can within your means. Let fate decide the rest. Turn back."

"As you command," Zhu Piaoling replied.

After circling the city, and with dusk approaching, Zhu Piaoling spent a large sum to book out the biggest inn in Nanjing, settling all the women there.

Concerned about their safety, he ordered his loyal bodyguards to rotate shifts guarding both the front and back entrances of the inn, preventing any troublemakers from approaching.

On the second floor of the inn...

Xue'er was preparing for bed when she heard a soft knock on her door.

She opened it to find Chen Yuanyuan standing outside. "What brings you here so late?"

Chen Yuanyuan glanced left and right, making sure the corridor was empty, then slipped inside and quietly shut the door.

Seeing her cautious behavior, Xue'er grew anxious. "What's wrong?"

"Sister Xue'er," Chen Yuanyuan whispered, "that steward who bought our freedom... he's following someone else's orders."

"Of course," Xue'er replied. "He answers to the Prince of Qin's Manor."

"No," Chen Yuanyuan insisted softly. "I suspect he's obeying a demon."

"A demon?" Xue'er gasped, her voice jumping in pitch.

Chen Yuanyuan quickly motioned for silence, opened the door to check the corridor, then shut it again. "Sister, the steward has a golden embroidered figure on his chest. You saw it, didn't you?"

"Yes, I saw it," Xue'er said. "What's strange about that?"

"That figure is alive," Chen Yuanyuan whispered.

"What?" Xue'er froze.

"It's true," Chen Yuanyuan said firmly. "It grinned several times and even spoke. The steward often bends down to listen to it."

Xue'er inhaled sharply, fear written all over her face. "If that's true, then maybe he isn't sending us back to the Prince of Qin's Manor at all, but instead..."

"...sending us to become wives of a demon?" Chen Yuanyuan finished softly.

"That would already be fortunate," Xue'er said shakily. "What if the demon prefers to devour beautiful women instead?"

The two women were utterly terrified.

"We have to escape," Xue'er said.

"We can't," Chen Yuanyuan replied. "I already checked both the front and back entrances. His subordinates are guarding them tightly. Our indenture contracts are still in his hands. With imperial backing, the authorities would help capture runaway servants. We have no way out."

"Then what do we do?" Xue'er asked helplessly.

She thought for a long moment before speaking again. "Sister, you must keep this a secret. Do not let anyone notice that we know anything. We'll wait and search for an opportunity during the journey."

Chapter 963: We'll Pretend to Drown

Zhu Piaoling and his companions remained in Nanjing for several more days.

Originally, they had planned for the Wanli Sunshine to come and pick them up. However, the flagship was busy suppressing the Huangmei river bandits and simply could not spare the time to sail to Nanjing.

Left with no alternative, Zhu Piaoling continued his leisurely stay in the city. After all, the main purpose of this outing had been enjoyment, and he did not mind lingering a few extra days.

As the saying went, a lean camel was still bigger than a horse. Although his loyal guards complained constantly about shrinking funds, Zhu Piaoling himself remained extravagantly wealthy. Wherever he went, he ate well, lived well, and spent freely. He did not only indulge himself. He showered the women around him with gifts as well.

One day, he treated dozens of women to lavish banquets. The next, he took them shopping for cosmetics and perfumes. On the day after that, he led them on sightseeing trips to famous historical sites outside the city. Silver flowed from his hands like water, and he never hesitated.

His reckless spending injected a large amount of wealth into Nanjing's local economy. Countless small vendors profited from his presence. Single-handedly, he raised the recent quality of life for the city's hawkers by a noticeable margin.

This indulgent spree lasted nearly a month.

Only after he had satisfied himself thoroughly did the long-awaited ship finally arrive.

It was not the Wanli Sunshine.

Instead, it was a newly built vessel from Cai Xinzi's second batch of ships. It had departed from Xiaolangdi, sailed down the Yellow River into the open sea, then entered the Yangtze River from the ocean. Its name was the Black Pearl.

The massive Black Pearl docked before the women, and its overwhelming size caused many of them to tremble with fear.

At that moment, a head appeared above the ship's rail.

It was Li Daoxuan.

This time, Li Daoxuan's avatar had arrived in person as well.

Moreover, this avatar was a specially modified aquatic combat form of Dao Xuan Tianzun. Its internal frame was no longer made of steel, but of composite materials that Li Daoxuan had placed into the sandbox from the outside world. This ensured sufficient rigidity while greatly reducing weight.

When entering water, it would not sink immediately.

Unlike the land-combat Dao Xuan Tianzun with steel bones, this aquatic version no longer had wheels embedded in its feet. Instead, concealed propellers were installed in the soles. Its arms were no longer cannons, but spring-powered harpoon launchers. These could be fired underwater, though their effective range was limited.

In a word, it was magnificent.

This was an improvement Li Daoxuan had conceived after his previous experience dragging an enemy into the Yellow River. From now on, water battles would be unavoidable, and an avatar that sank the instant it touched water was far too inconvenient. That was why he had instructed the craftsmen of Gao Family Village to create this aquatic combat Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Li Daoxuan leaned over the railing and smiled at Zhu Piaoling. "Come aboard."

Zhu Piaoling was overjoyed. "Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatar has arrived as well!"

He immediately led the women toward the ship.

Within the crowd, Chen Yuanyuan tightly held Xue'er's hand. The two young women gazed up at the colossal vessel, their hearts filled with indescribable emotions.

Chen Yuanyuan whispered, "The demon himself has come this time. Look at his face. It looks exactly like the embroidery on the steward's chest."

Xue'er nodded gravely. "Yes. It is the demon in person."

Chen Yuanyuan continued in a trembling voice, "He is using such a massive ship to pick us up, and it is packed with soldiers armed with muskets. Once we board, we may never get another chance. We will either become the demon's wives or his food."

Xue'er clenched her teeth. "We must escape."

"But if we escape, the authorities will issue warrants for our arrest," Chen Yuanyuan said anxiously. "Did you see that official earlier? He barely stepped onto the gangplank before someone from the ship frightened him away with a token. This demon has influence even in the imperial court."

Xue'er's eyes flashed. "I have an idea."

Chen Yuanyuan gasped softly. "What idea?"

"We'll pretend to drown ourselves."

"What?" Chen Yuanyuan was shocked. "Will that really work?"

"I do not know," Xue'er replied, "but it is worth trying. When the ship reaches the middle of the river, we jump into the Yangtze. If the demon rescues us, we will claim that we no longer wished to live and threw ourselves in. They will not think we were trying to escape. If they do not rescue us, we will swim away underwater. He will assume we drowned and will not send officials to pursue us. Then we can hide, change our names, and live as refugees. You can swim, right?"

Chen Yuanyuan nodded hesitantly. "I can swim, but not very well. And I cannot hold my breath for long."

Xue'er clenched her fists. "No matter what, we must try. Remember, if we are pulled out, just cry and say we no longer wanted to live. That will get us through."

With their plan settled, they followed the crowd and boarded the ship.

This voyage carried two hundred sailors from Xiaolangdi as reinforcements, along with more than a hundred courtesans. There was not enough space on deck for everyone.

The sailors' captain shouted loudly, "Brothers, we must show courtesy and discipline. Leave the deck with its scenery and fresh air to the civilians. Everyone, please bear with the inconvenience and move into the lower cabins."

The sailors responded in unison and filed below deck.

The women were relieved. These soldiers were not rude at all. On the contrary, they seemed disciplined and considerate.

Chen Yuanyuan and Xue'er exchanged glances, their thoughts aligned.

Good. There are fewer of the demon's subordinates on deck now. It will be easier when we jump.

The great ship slowly departed from the dock and entered the river.

The vast waters of the Yangtze rolled eastward.

When the ship reached the middle of the river, Xue'er glanced around and whispered, "Jump."

She placed her hands on the railing and leapt overboard.

Chen Yuanyuan silently prayed, Heaven, save me from this sea of suffering.

Then she followed, plunging into the water.

Cries erupted instantly from the ship.

"Xue'er! Yuanyuan!"

"They fell into the river!"

"They're sinking!"

The two girls had not fallen by accident. They had jumped deliberately. Once in the water, they did not move their limbs, and naturally sank rapidly.

However, they had made a fatal mistake.

A massive ship in motion created a powerful undertow along its hull. Anyone entering the water nearby would be dragged beneath it.

This was why swimming was forbidden near major shipping routes on the Yangtze.

The two girls did not know this. They intended to swim away underwater, but were instantly pulled beneath the ship by the current.

In the blink of an eye, they vanished from the surface.

The women screamed in panic.

Zhu Piaoling and Li Daoxuan had been admiring the scenery along the riverbanks. Hearing the commotion, both rushed to the railing and looked down, but saw nothing.

Zhu Piaoling panicked. "What do we do? Stop the ship, now!"

Several sailors who were strong swimmers rushed up from below deck. "We'll go save them!"

Li Daoxuan stopped them. Rescuing someone beneath a moving ship is dangerous for ordinary sailors.

"I'll go," he said calmly.

Placing one hand on the railing, Li Daoxuan leapt into the Yangtze.

Chapter 964: Let Me Die

Carried by the momentum of his leap, Li Daoxuan plunged several meters beneath the river's surface.

The moment he opened his eyes, he saw nothing. The Yangtze's water was murky, and visibility was extremely poor. One could not see even a few meters ahead.

That was not a problem.

As long as he knew the general direction, it was enough.

Li Daoxuan's body, constructed from special materials, activated its internal balance. Its built-in buoyancy prevented him from sinking further, keeping him suspended in the water.

He peeled back the silicone layer on the soles of his feet and flipped open two concealed panels. A pair of compact propellers extended outward.

"Mystical drive," Li Daoxuan muttered inwardly. "Activate."

The propellers spun instantly, whirring at high speed and propelling him straight toward the ship's hull.

Compared to this, frog kicks and crawl strokes were child's play. His posture remained perfectly straight, his body motionless, like a divine being flying through the depths.

In the blink of an eye, he reached the underside of the ship.

At last, he saw them.

Not far ahead, two young women were struggling underwater.

They were utterly bewildered.

They had intended to jump into the river and dive away using their swimming skills. Instead, the instant they entered the water, an overwhelming current seized them and dragged them downward. No matter how hard they paddled, it was useless.

If this continued, death was inevitable.

At that moment, Li Daoxuan spoke calmly.

"Do not be afraid. I am here."

An ordinary person could not speak underwater. Opening one's mouth would only invite water inside. Li Daoxuan, however, was no ordinary being. Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice did not rely on vocal cords, but on metaphysical transmission.

The sound traveled clearly through the water and reached the ears of the two women.

They shuddered violently.

Turning their heads, they saw Li Daoxuan approaching rapidly, his body unmoving, his speed unnatural.

Their hearts plunged.

These women were no innocents. Having lived among men for years, they were adept at reading situations and adapting instantly. The moment they saw him, they knew escape was impossible.

The demon had come.

Xue'er sharply elbowed Chen Yuanyuan.

Chen Yuanyuan understood at once.

Plan A had failed.

It was time for Plan B.

The two immediately stopped trying to swim and instead began flailing wildly, kicking and struggling in exaggerated motions, perfectly mimicking people on the verge of drowning.

A few seconds later, Li Daoxuan reached them.

With his left arm, he scooped up Xue'er. With his right, he wrapped Chen Yuanyuan into his embrace.

If an ordinary man tried to hold two struggling women like this, he would be dragged straight to the bottom.

Li Daoxuan was completely unaffected.

Holding both women, he shot upward.

With a loud splash, the three broke through the surface.

The instant her head emerged from the water, Xue'er screamed at the top of her lungs, "Let me go. Let me die. I do not want to live."

Chen Yuanyuan had not prepared herself for this level of commitment, but seeing Xue'er take the lead, she followed immediately. "Please let me die. Why did you save me. I do not want to live anymore."

Li Daoxuan's thoughts moved swiftly.

Suspicious.

Earlier, they were desperately fighting the current, clearly trying to survive. The moment I spoke, they switched to drowning theatrics.

Very suspicious.

No need to expose them yet. Let us see how far they intend to act.

By now, the Black Pearl had already stopped moving. Its propellers were shut down, and the turbulent currents around the hull gradually subsided.

Li Daoxuan held the two women beside the ship.

Several rope ladders were lowered. Sailors clung to them, peering down anxiously.

Two sailors instinctively reached out, then hesitated. The women were drenched. Touching them directly would be inappropriate. Worse still, they were trying to kill themselves. If physical contact provoked them further, the consequences would be unbearable.

The sailors withdrew their hands and instead fashioned rope loops, securing them carefully around the women's waists.

With a coordinated effort, the crew hauled them aboard.

Li Daoxuan did not rush.

He retracted the propellers into his feet, sealed the silicone covering, then grasped a rope ladder and climbed back onto the deck at an unhurried pace.

On deck, the two women sat wrapped in thick wool blankets from the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory. Their hair clung to their faces. Their heads were bowed, their expressions desolate.

The other women crowded around them in alarm.

"What happened?"

"Why did you suddenly jump into the river?"

"Why are you so miserable?"

Li Daoxuan stood to the side, observing silently.

Zhu Piaoling rushed over, his face pale with anxiety. "What are you doing? Why would you try to die? Especially you, Xue'er. Didn't you say you wanted to live peacefully in the Prince's residence? I promised you that myself. Why are you still so distressed?"

Xue'er let out a soft sob.

Then she truly began to cry.

Tears streamed down her face as if a dam had burst, her grief overwhelming and utterly convincing.

"This lowly one's fate is too bitter," she cried. "Only now did I realize that once one enters a noble household, it is like falling into a sea without shore. My entire life will be locked inside a small courtyard. Peaceful, yes, but utterly without hope."

Her voice suddenly rose, as if she had made up her mind. "Since I already wish to die, I am no longer afraid of offending anyone. This lowly one dares to say it plainly. Although the Prince of Qin's heir is only an heir, is he not already forty years old? Must I force smiles and serve such an old man for the rest of my life? My heart truly aches."

Zhu Piaoling froze.

He slowly turned to look at Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan shrugged. "She is not wrong."

Zhu Piaoling felt as if he had been stabbed in the chest.

Critical damage.

Chen Yuanyuan also began to cry. "This lowly one is only twelve years old. I do not want to marry a forty-year-old man. After thinking it through, I followed Sister Xue'er and jumped into the river."

Zhu Piaoling panicked. "His Highness does not look old at all. Although he is forty, he looks youthful, his mind is young, and his vitality is abundant. He is no different from someone in his twenties."

Several women spoke up at the same time.

"Lies."

Zhu Piaoling was struck dumb.

Li Daoxuan nearly laughed aloud.

Interesting. This play keeps getting better.

Zhu Piaoling looked up at the sky, his expression desolate. "So the Prince of Qin's heir is truly so unbearable in your eyes? You would rather die than become his concubines."

He sighed deeply, then turned to the others. "Do all of you feel the same?"

The women fell silent.

They did not want to die, nor did they dare offend the Prince of Qin's heir. Yet their expressions betrayed everything.

Zhu Piaoling ordered a guard to bring a wooden chest.

From it, he withdrew a thick stack of indentured servitude contracts.

"I had planned to deal with these once we reached Shaanxi," he said slowly. "Who would have thought the Prince of Qin's heir would be so detested? So detested that you would rather die. Very well. I will handle them now."

The women gasped.

They understood immediately.

He was going to tear up their contracts.

Zhu Piaoling straightened his back, assuming a righteous and benevolent posture, radiating an aura of moral grandeur.

He grasped the thick stack of contracts and pulled hard.

It was too thick.

He could not tear it.

Chapter 965: It's Not That Easy to Die

Did you have any idea how thick a stack of more than a hundred indentured servitude contracts would be when piled together?

It was impossible to tear apart with bare hands. At best, one could only twist and fray the edges slightly. To rip through them completely, one would need the legendary "Qilin Arm" of a thirty-year bachelor.

Zhu Piaoling clearly did not possess such an arm.

He tugged and pulled with all his strength, but the papers stubbornly refused to budge.

Finally, he stopped, panting heavily. "Good heavens," he gasped. "Turns out trying to look impressive is also a technical skill."

Just as he was about to try again, Li Daoxuan stepped forward and took the stack of contracts from him.

"Stop showing off," Li Daoxuan said in a low voice. "If you free them here, they will most likely be bullied again once they return home, and their final outcome will not be good. We need these contracts to keep them under protection, bring them back to our territory, and then grant them freedom. That is the responsible way to help them."

"But..." Zhu Piaoling hesitated. "They just tried to kill themselves. If they really die, then everything is meaningless."

"If they truly wanted to die," Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "they would have done so seventeen or eighteen times already when they were first sold into the Pear Garden. Do you think someone with a weak spirit could survive that place, let alone master music, chess, calligraphy, and painting?"

Zhu Piaoling's eyes widened.

Understanding dawned on him.

The way women were trained in the Pear Garden involved beatings, insults, hunger, humiliation, and relentless psychological pressure. Anyone who could endure that environment was not someone who would lightly seek death.

Zhu Piaoling lowered his voice. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... then their jump just now..."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "It was an act. They wanted to pretend to commit suicide so they could escape by swimming away. They simply did not expect the suction beneath a massive ship. That nearly killed them for real."

Zhu Piaoling inhaled sharply. "So that's how it was. These women look delicate, yet their minds are frighteningly sharp."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "You know Zhou Daya from the News Department, right? She is now a war correspondent in Henan. She looks fragile, but she uncovered the Rushing General's green-hat scandal. Never underestimate women who come from brothels."

Zhu Piaoling finally stopped trying to tear the contracts.

He carefully smoothed them out, placed them back into the wooden box, then turned toward the women and coughed awkwardly. "Ahem. I am only a humble steward. I cannot make such decisions. I would love to tear up these contracts, but I truly dare not. If I did, the higher authorities would skin me alive."

The women exchanged glances, completely speechless.

Their hopes fell straight to the bottom.

With soft murmurs, they gradually dispersed.

For a moment, silence settled over the deck.

Several women supported Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan and escorted them into the cabin to change into dry clothes.

Li Daoxuan's heroic attire was also soaked through. He himself felt nothing, since his avatar did not experience physical discomfort. However, the Gao Family Village militia could not tolerate it. To them, Dao Xuan Tianzun's physical manifestation was sacred, and allowing it to remain damp was unthinkable.

A group of soldiers escorted him into the cabin. An orderly brought clean clothes, and before long, Li Daoxuan emerged once again immaculate and dignified.

Zhu Piaoling, on the other hand, became cautious. He instructed his personal guards to keep a close watch on the women near the ship's railing to prevent any further attempts to jump overboard.

This time, the guard was strict.

After changing clothes, Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan returned to the deck and immediately saw the "monster's minions" standing watch at the rail. They understood at once that their chance to escape was gone and could only wait in silence.

After a long voyage, Anqing Dock finally came into view.

The Black Pearl had not come to Jiangnan solely to transport women. It had arrived to reinforce the Wanli Sunshine. As soon as it docked, the marine soldiers disembarked in formation, lined up neatly on the pier, and saluted Shi Kefa, Jiang Cheng, and Tie Niaofei.

"Reporting," a marine called out loudly. "Xiaolangdi Militia Marine Third Battalion, one hundred and fifty men, has arrived to support the front lines by order. The ship also carries provisions, gunpowder, and ammunition. Please inspect."

Shi Kefa was delighted. "Excellent," he said. "We are badly short on manpower. Your arrival is a true blessing."

Then his gaze shifted to the women still standing on the Black Pearl. "Who are those women dressed so brightly?"

Zhu Piaoling jumped down from the ship and laughed. "They are unfortunate women rescued from brothels by order of Dao Xuan Tianzun. They are resting here temporarily. When the Black Pearl returns, I will take them back to Shaanxi."

Shi Kefa nodded. "I see."

Lowering his voice, Zhu Piaoling added, "These women have... complicated thoughts. They keep trying to escape, and I am not good at calming them. Does Lord Shi have any suggestions?"

Shi Kefa laughed without hesitation. "That is simple. Let them stay for now with the women we rescued from pirates last time. They will quickly understand whether we are villains or benefactors."

Zhu Piaoling's eyes lit up. "An excellent idea."

Two hours later.

More than a hundred brothel women, escorted by Shi Kefa's men, arrived before a large manor inside Anqing Prefecture. The manor was old, once the ancestral home of a local gentry family. After their decline, it had been sold, and Shi Kefa purchased it.

At present, it housed eighteen women who had been bought back from pirates.

As Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan entered the manor, unease filled their hearts. They knew that escape was easiest while moving. Once they stopped, their chances would vanish completely.

Unfortunately, the guards watched them closely, leaving no opportunity to "commit suicide" again.

With heavy hearts, they followed the others through the gates.

The towering entrance and deep courtyards made them feel as if, once inside, they would never be able to leave.

They feared what awaited them beyond the doors. In their worst imaginings, they expected to witness some horrifying scene involving the monster.

Instead, the moment they reached the front courtyard, they froze.

The scene before them was unexpectedly peaceful.

More than a dozen women were busy working in the yard. Some were carefully reeling silk from cocoons, while others wove the threads into cloth.

The brothel women stood dumbfounded.

Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan nearly thought they had entered the wrong place.

"Huh?" Xue'er murmured. "Is this... a silk workshop?"

The eighteen women saw the newcomers and assumed they were also rescued victims. They immediately greeted them warmly.

"New sisters."

"Have you suffered hardships as well?"

"These people are truly kind. They rescue unfortunate women wherever they go."

Their enthusiastic voices overlapped, leaving the brothel women completely stunned.

Xue'er stepped forward and raised her hand to quiet them. "Sisters, may I ask how you came to be here?"

One of the women explained, "We are from a coastal fishing village. Pirates raided our home, killed all the men, and captured us. They took us onto their ships. On the way back to their lair, we encountered a giant ship. The gentlemen aboard intervened and bought us back."

"Bought back?"

Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan's hearts tightened.

So these women had once faced the same fate as them.

Chapter 966: Anqing Yingjiang Sericulture Cooperative

Xue'er cautiously surveyed the courtyard, glancing left and right. To her surprise, it was filled entirely with women. Not a single man was in sight, not even the soldiers who had escorted them inside.

Lowering her voice, she whispered, "Sisters, how long have you all been staying here?"

The eighteen women exchanged glances and thought for a moment. "Quite a while now," one of them replied. "A few months, perhaps. We never really counted the days."

Xue'er hesitated, then asked even more quietly, "Has the master who bought you ever come here to... favor any of you?"

The women burst into laughter. "No, nothing like that at all," one said. "After bringing us here, the master arranged food and lodging for us, had us spin silk, and then went off to suppress bandits. We have barely seen him since."

Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan exchanged startled looks.

Xue'er continued, "Then are you allowed to leave this place?"

"Of course," one woman answered naturally. "We can go out whenever we want."

Xue'er frowned slightly. "But I saw guards at the gate."

"That's for our protection," the woman explained. "This manor is full of women. If bad people wandered in, the consequences would be terrible. So the master hired guards to watch the entrance. They only stop outsiders from entering. They do not stop us from leaving."

Another woman chimed in cheerfully, "I even went out yesterday to buy some patterned cloth."

"Yes," someone added, "you just tell the gate guards, and you can go."

Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan were stunned.

They had assumed that once they were brought here, escape would be nearly impossible. Instead, it seemed they could leave freely if they wished.

Still suspicious, they were led to their temporary quarters. Inside, they found neat, uniform rooms furnished with simple beds, ordinary tables, and all necessary daily items.

The furnishings were not luxurious, clearly inferior to what they had used in the Pear Garden. Yet everything was arranged thoughtfully. Every daily necessity was present, placed with care.

This was not the kind of careless arrangement where people were dumped into a space and forgotten.

The courtesans understood this distinction well.

In their past lives, they had seen countless officials, corrupt bureaucrats, wealthy merchants, and extravagant patrons. For such people, tossing out a hundred or two hundred taels of silver meant nothing. That was not generosity, merely indulgence.

But genuine consideration was rare.

Chen Yuanyuan whispered, "Sister Xue'er, this monster did not just throw us here and ignore us. He arranged everything carefully."

Xue'er nodded slowly, though her vigilance did not lessen. "That is what makes it frightening. We can only wait and see when he finally appears. When that happens, we must deal with it carefully."

And so, with their nerves stretched tight, the two remained on edge.

Days passed. Then weeks.

Yet the "monster" never once came to the manor.

Life inside was unexpectedly calm. Food and necessities were delivered daily. No one demanded they serve others or perform for anyone.

Soon, however, another problem emerged. They had no spending money.

Before long, weaving machines were delivered to the manor. Anyone willing to work could raise silkworms, spin silk, or weave cloth and earn wages in return.

To the courtesans, such wages were insignificant. In their former lives, a single evening entertaining an official could earn a lump of silver far exceeding this.

Some of the women simply chose not to work.

Surprisingly, no one forced them. Those who wished to idle were allowed to do so.

Xue'er, however, could not remain idle.

Before being sold into the Pear Garden, her family had raised silkworms. Mulberry trees once filled her courtyard. After her parents died of illness and relatives seized the family property, she had been swept into the Pear Garden.

Now, seeing silkworm trays and mulberry leaves again stirred memories deep within her. She began spending her days helping the eighteen women tend silkworms and reel silk, finding a sense of peace she had not felt in years.

One evening, Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan sat chatting in their room.

"When will that monster finally show himself?" Chen Yuanyuan sighed. "Being tense every day is exhausting."

At that moment, excited voices rang out from outside. "Lord Shi has arrived!"

The two hurried outside and saw Shi Kefa entering the courtyard, walking side by side with the very person they feared.

Their hearts tightened.

What they had dreaded had finally come.

They hid among the crowd, peeking out cautiously.

Shi Kefa spoke clearly, "Young ladies, after careful consideration, I have decided to convert this manor into a workshop."

The women exclaimed in surprise. "A workshop?"

Shi Kefa announced, "It will be called the Anqing Yingjiang Sericulture Cooperative."

Confusion spread across many faces.

He continued, "The cooperative will be divided into five departments: Mulberry Cultivation, Silkworm Rearing, Silk Reeling, Weaving, and Dyeing and Finishing. Female workers will be recruited and assigned to each department accordingly."

"You have all stayed here for some time already," Shi Kefa said. "Anyone willing to join may register for a department. Once operations begin, you will work there and receive proper wages."

The eighteen women rescued from pirates erupted into cheers. For them, this was the best possible future. Many were already discussing which department to join.

The courtesans, however, remained reserved. Such work felt unfamiliar and awkward to them.

None spoke up immediately.

Shi Kefa then turned toward them and smiled. "You are all literate, skilled in numbers, calligraphy, painting, music, chess, poetry, and prose. Assigning you to these manual tasks would be a waste of your talents."

The women listened intently.

"With so many female workers," Shi Kefa continued, "appointing male managers could lead to inappropriate situations. You understand what I mean."

The courtesans understood all too well.

Shi Kefa declared, "Therefore, I plan to try something bold. All management positions in this cooperative will be held exclusively by women."

A ripple of murmurs spread. "Only women?"

"For managers," Shi Kefa explained, "they must read, calculate, manage correspondence, coordinate with merchants and transport services, and possess social tact. After much thought, I believe you are the most suitable candidates."

The courtesans were completely stunned.

"Us?" they asked in unison.

Chapter 967: You Have Regained Your Freedom

The courtesans were worldly women. They had sharp eyes and long memories, and they understood immediately what becoming a manager in this cooperative truly meant.

It meant wealth.

In their line of work, they had entertained silk merchants and grand magnates who ran silk workshops. Every one of them was richer than most officials. Even a minor supervisor or shopkeeper in a silk workshop would be decked out in gold and silver, spending money with careless extravagance.

Those were the people the courtesans once had to flatter and please.

And now, Shi Kefa was suggesting that they themselves could take on such roles.

Could such a vast fortune really fall into their hands?

"Wait," they warned themselves. "Do not celebrate too soon."

Almost at the same time, a cruel realization surfaced in every mind.

The supervisors and shopkeepers in silk workshops were wealthy because they were free people. They earned wages for their work.

But they were different.

They were indentured.

They were slaves.

Any money they earned would be handed over to their masters.

At the Pear Garden, earning silver was never difficult. A flick of a finger, a coy smile, and dozens of taels could be coaxed from an official or noble. Yet what did it matter. Every single coin would be taken by the Pear Garden.

This was the sorrow of slavery.

Just as these thoughts weighed heavily on their hearts, Shi Kefa spoke.

"Any young woman who stays here to manage the Anqing Yingjiang Sericulture Cooperative will not need to go to Shaanxi. I will tear up your indenture contract here and now."

The women gasped.

Several nearly cried out "I agree" on the spot.

But they stopped themselves. They were not foolish. An offer that sounded too good often hid a hook. They steadied their breathing and forced themselves to listen until the end.

Shi Kefa continued calmly.

"I can guess that most of you wish to have your contracts torn up immediately so you can remain here. However, I must tell you this. Whether for your safety or your future prospects, staying here does not compare to going to Shaanxi. Shaanxi has already eradicated banditry. Governance there is clear, policies are enlightened, and society is stable. Here in Anqing, everything is only just beginning. The Huangmei water bandits are still active. Zhang Xianzhong's rebel forces continue to harass the region. The local official networks are deeply entrenched and tangled. It is nothing like Shaanxi, where matters can be settled with a single word. Furthermore, resources here are not abundant."

The women were completely bewildered.

Had Jiangnan not long surpassed the Northwest in prosperity?

Was Jiangnan not famed for enlightened thought and cultural openness?

Did it not possess far greater resources?

"When Huguang prospers, the empire is well fed."

By what measure could Shaanxi possibly compete with Anqing?

They could not understand Shi Kefa's reasoning.

Shi Kefa did not elaborate further.

"In short," he said, "I have said all that needs to be said. Whether you choose to go to Shaanxi or stay here is up to you. One more thing. The cooperative does not need more than ten managers. Staying here will not be easy. You will have to compete, based on your abilities."

That final sentence instantly sobered the room.

Xue'er and Chen Yuanyuan were equally stunned.

Could something like this truly be happening?

Chen Yuanyuan whispered, "I am still too young. I cannot possibly stay on as a manager."

She was only twelve years old, and she knew her limits.

Xue'er hesitated.

She did not want to go to Shaanxi. To her, it sounded like a den of monsters. If she could stay here, especially if her indenture contract was truly destroyed, she would immediately escape the shadow of those so called demons.

"I must try," Xue'er said firmly. "If he really tears up my contract, then perhaps this whole demon matter is nothing more than our own fear. At the very least, I can see Sister Yuanyuan safely off to Shaanxi."

Chen Yuanyuan nodded. "Go ahead and try, Sister."

And so, the selection began on the spot.

Shi Kefa personally conducted the evaluations. He did not test them on music, chess, calligraphy, painting, poetry, or prose. Those talents were useless here. What he examined instead was literacy and arithmetic. He focused especially on whether they could keep clear and accurate accounts.

After one round of evaluation, the result surprised no one.

Xue'er ranked first.

Her reading and arithmetic were excellent. More importantly, she had grown up in a family that cultivated mulberry trees and raised silkworms. From feeding the worms to reeling silk and weaving cloth, she understood the entire process intimately. She was the ideal candidate to lead the cooperative.

In the end, ten women, including Xue'er, were chosen to remain.

Before everyone, Shi Kefa produced a box filled with indenture contracts. He selected ten and said solemnly, "I will now tear these up. From today onward, you are free. You are no longer indentured."

The ten women stared at the contracts in his hands, barely daring to breathe.

At that moment, Xue'er stepped forward.

"Lord Shi," she said, bowing. "There is something I do not understand. I ask for your guidance."

"Oh?" Shi Kefa replied. "Ask."

"It was the Prince of Qin's heir who purchased us," Xue'er said steadily. "The Emperor was even alerted and sent eunuchs to the Pear Garden to oversee the matter. Everyone knows we were bought to

become the Prince of Qin's heir's concubines. These contracts should be with his steward. How is it that they are now in your hands? If you tear them up, will it truly count? If one day the Prince of Qin's heir's people arrive, claiming you destroyed the contracts without authority, and demand that we be seized again, what are we to do then?"

Her questions came one after another, precise and unflinching.

Shi Kefa was briefly stunned.

Standing nearby, the Dao Xuan Tianzun who specialized in naval warfare, and who had remained silent until now, could not help but smile inwardly.

Interesting. This girl's thinking was remarkably thorough.

In this era, how many people truly believed in the sanctity of contracts? An indenture contract was little more than a formality. If the Prince of Qin's heir chose to ignore it and use power to seize them again, whether the paper existed or not would make no difference.

If the Emperor wished, new contracts could be issued at any time. Who would dare object? What official would risk his position for the sake of a few courtesans?

Shi Kefa raised the box slightly.

"The fact that these contracts are in my hands," he said, "means that the Prince of Qin's heir and I are acting in agreement. If I tear them up, he will honor it."

He looked at Xue'er and continued, "You have lived in darkness for too long. You have never seen true light, so you do not dare to trust easily. But tell me, what harm is there in trusting me once? Even if your trust is misplaced, could your lives possibly become worse than they already are?"

Xue'er bowed deeply and said no more.

Shi Kefa took up the ten indenture contracts and tore them apart.

Shredded.

They were only ten thin sheets of paper, not a thick stack. With a few quick motions, he ripped them into pieces and scattered them aside. Then he said solemnly,

"You have regained your freedom."

Chapter 968: Action Code, Jiang Gan Steals the Letter

Shi Kefa had just finished tearing up the indenture contracts. He had not even managed to say a second sentence when chaos arrived.

A household steward burst into the courtyard, his voice cracking with panic.

"Master, disaster. King Saodi is attacking Qianshan County. The county militia is fighting desperately and barely holding the city walls. King Saodi has sent his trusted subordinate, King Dadan, to shout outside the city, urging the common people to open the gates, surrender, and join the bandits. The city is in total panic."

At the mention of King Saodi, Shi Kefa's expression barely changed.

Li Daoxuan, standing to the side, let out a quiet chuckle. "Him again?"

The Gao Family Village Militia had already clashed with King Saodi once before, at Wu Pass.

Back then, it had also been King Dadan standing outside the pass, shouting himself hoarse, urging the defenders to surrender and join the bandit army.

Now, in the blink of an eye, the same scene was being replayed in Qianshan County.

Li Daoxuan sighed softly. "Truly old acquaintances of the martial world."

Shi Kefa had no time for sentiment. He gathered the hem of his official robe and rushed out at once.

Moments later, the thunder of hooves echoed through the streets as he headed straight for the militia camp.

Li Daoxuan did not follow.

Land battles were not his specialty. Steel bones, packed formations, and bloody sieges were matters for others. He excelled at naval warfare. There was no need for him to insert himself into the chaos at Qianshan County.

Instead, he turned back toward the courtyard.

His gaze settled on the group of young women, lingering briefly on Xue'er. A faint, knowing smile touched his lips.

"Miss Xue'er," he said gently, "you and Chen Yuanyuan have been worrying about something, haven't you?"

Xue'er gasped in surprise.

Chen Yuanyuan stiffened, her face turning pale.

Li Daoxuan's tone remained calm and reassuring. "Whatever it is you have been worrying about, you no longer need to worry. You are safe here, and you will be even safer in Shaanxi. You will be able to live the lives you have always wished for."

With that, he turned and walked out of the courtyard.

Leaving the two girls standing there, utterly bewildered.

Shenyang.

The Later Jin imperial palace.

Not long ago, Huang Taiji had officially abolished the old clan name "Zhoushen," also known as Jurchen, and renamed his people "Manchu."

At this time, the strength of the Later Jin state was steadily rising. They were victorious again and again, holding their own against the Mongols, the Great Ming, and Joseon. They had even managed to clash with the northern Rus' state without suffering defeat.

Each victory fed Huang Taiji's ambition.

Yet recently, a serious problem had begun to trouble him. If it was not resolved, it would force him to be far more cautious in his next campaign against the Great Ming.

"Dorgon," Huang Taiji said coldly, his expression grim. "About these rampaging iron chariots, are you telling the truth? Or are you fabricating stories to cover up your defeat?"

Dorgon stood below him, his back straight, his eyes defiant.

"I would never fabricate such a thing. Yue Tuo was there as well. Even he was helpless against those iron chariots."

Yue Tuo immediately stepped forward. "It is true. The iron chariots are far too formidable. We could not find a way to counter them."

Huang Taiji frowned deeply. "If that is truly the case, then something that can rampage freely across open plains is indeed difficult to resist. I have thought long and hard. The only viable method would be to lure it into marshlands or rugged mountain terrain, where it cannot maneuver freely. Then we would climb onto it, force open its doors, and kill those inside."

The Later Jin generals nodded in agreement.

"That is the only way."

Huang Taiji continued, "There is another method."

The generals looked up at once. "Oh?"

"To fight iron chariots with iron chariots," Huang Taiji said.

The generals exchanged startled glances.

Huang Taiji went on, "We learned how to cast cannons from the Han people. Why should we not learn from them how to build these iron chariots?"

The generals hesitated. "But how would we learn such a thing?"

Huang Taiji suddenly pulled out a book.

It was Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

He flipped through it rapidly, stopping at a familiar chapter. He tapped the page with his finger.

"I have always told you to read more military texts. This book contains all the cunning stratagems and brilliant schemes under Heaven. Look here."

The generals leaned forward, confused.

"The method for learning how to build iron chariots is written right here."

The generals stared blankly.

Huang Taiji explained patiently, "Go to Kong Youde. Have him select some clever subordinates. Disguise them as Ming people and send them into Great Ming territory. They must locate the artisans who construct the iron chariots, befriend them, get them drunk, and steal the blueprints."

The generals were delighted. "An excellent plan."

Yue Tuo raised his hand. "I have an objection."

Huang Taiji frowned. "Speak."

"All of Kong Youde's subordinates have shaved heads," Yue Tuo said. "Their bare foreheads would expose them immediately. It would be impossible for them to infiltrate the Great Ming."

Silence fell over the hall.

Huang Taiji's expression darkened. "Is there not even one among them who has not shaved his head?"

Yue Tuo raised his hand again. "When Kong Youde surrendered, you personally declared that not shaving one's head meant incomplete submission. Kong Youde and all his subordinates shaved their heads at that time."

The silence grew heavier.

This made the situation even more awkward.

Huang Taiji slammed the arm of his chair. "Can you truly not find a single suitable spy?"

After an exhaustive search, they finally found one man among the surrendered Ming soldiers who had not shaved his head.

His name was Bin Sheng.

He was literate, quick witted, and adaptable. He was the perfect candidate.

Bin Sheng soon departed, carrying a large pouch of operating funds personally provided by Huang Taiji. He was accompanied by a ten man support team.

Bearing the hopes of the entire Later Jin state, he embarked on the operation known as "Jiang Gan Steals the Letter."

Through spies planted among the Mongols, Huang Taiji had already learned that the iron chariots originated in Shaanxi.

Thus, Bin Sheng headed west.

Crossing the border in those days was not difficult. Bin Sheng simply found a remote path and slipped into Great Ming territory with ease.

All eleven of them were Han Chinese to begin with. They needed little disguise. They merely traveled as ordinary refugees.

If questioned, they would say they came from the Liaodong frontier. Their village had been ravaged by Manchu forces, and they had barely escaped with their lives.

Such refugees were everywhere at the time.

They blended easily into the massive refugee flows, endured a grueling journey, passed through the mountain passes, crossed the Taihang Mountains, and finally entered Shanxi.

"I have heard Shanxi is in chaos," Bin Sheng whispered to his companions. "Bandits have plagued this region for years. Be careful. We do not want to die before the mission even begins."

They dressed themselves in rags and starved themselves deliberately, appearing so poor that even bandits might look down on them.

Feigning hardship and misery, they slowly advanced.

"Look," one of the men murmured. "Dust ahead. A large group is moving."

They assumed it was a bandit force and immediately hid in the woods. Using the trees as cover, they cautiously moved closer.

After a long while, they finally reached the edge of the forest and peered out.

They watched for a long moment in silence.

Then Bin Sheng frowned.

"This isn't a bandit camp," he muttered.

Ahead of them, hundreds of men were at work, cutting, hauling, and laying stone. A road was being built where none should have existed.

Chapter 969 The Spy Team in Action

"Didn't they say Shanxi was crawling with bandits?"

Bin Sheng frowned as he looked around. "Then why are they building roads on this scale?"

They kept moving west. Mile after mile, the same sight greeted them. Freshly leveled ground, stacked stone, timber laid out in neat rows. Everywhere they passed, roads were under construction.

This did not look like a province ravaged by rebellion. It looked like a place where people had rolled up their sleeves and decided to get to work.

"It seems our intelligence is badly outdated," someone muttered. "Still, this trip into the Great Ming is already worth it. Even if we fail to steal the heavy armored car, updating our information alone will be a major gain."

The group quietly observed and memorized everything they saw, committing the scale of construction in Shanxi to memory.

After days on the road, they finally reached Taiyuan.

Just outside the city, a strange vehicle caught their attention. A sign on its side read "Route 101." The vehicle itself was broad and boxy, clearly different from carts or wagons. It moved without horses, gliding forward in near silence under the sun.

"A heavy armored car," someone whispered excitedly. "This must be the one General Dorogon mentioned."

Bin Sheng shook his head after a closer look. "No. It doesn't match. It's larger than described, and there are no mounted weapons. It isn't armored either. Those windows alone would make it easy to attack."

He paused, watching it roll past.

"This is just a passenger vehicle. Like a carriage, only bigger. It's not meant for war. We need to find the real thing."

Dressed in rags and deliberately looking miserable, they lingered by the roadside, openly discussing the strange vehicle. Their appearance drew attention at once. The driver slowed, then stopped beside them.

"You people," he asked, "are you refugees?"

"Yes," Bin Sheng replied without hesitation. "The Manchu invaders took our homes. We had no choice but to wander."

The driver had once read A Soldier from the Dalinghe Border Garrison. Hearing the word "Manchu," his expression darkened instantly.

"Damn those Manchu invaders," he cursed. "May eighteen generations of their ancestors rot. And the Han traitors who side with them, may their mothers be defiled."

Bin Sheng and his men exchanged glances, completely silent.

Being cursed straight to their faces, and having to swallow it, was humiliating. Bin Sheng's fists tightened, anger burning in his chest. But discipline won out. A spy could not afford to lose control.

The driver calmed down slightly and waved a hand. "You lot look pitiful. Go find some work. Shanxi has no shortage of jobs now. As long as you're willing to put in effort, you won't starve. If you have skills, getting rich isn't hard."

"Thank you, brother," Bin Sheng said respectfully. "By the way, that vehicle of yours looks impressive."

The driver grinned. "Of course it is. This was bestowed by the immortals. It's the Rooster Star Deity's solar chariot. Every morning, he uses it to wake the sun and get it moving. Dao Xuan Tianzun borrowed it so we mortals could enjoy it too."

Bin Sheng felt a dull ache bloom in his temples. He had no idea what nonsense this man was spouting.

He forced a calm expression. "So this vehicle isn't man-made?"

"Man-made ones exist too," the driver replied casually. "Go wait at Taiyuan South Gate Railway Station. The man-made version will arrive in half an hour."

Bin Sheng's heart leapt. What he had expected to be a difficult search had yielded clues almost effortlessly. Their Jiang Gan Steals the Letter operation was already halfway there.

The group entered Taiyuan city, asking for directions until they found the Taiyuan South Gate Railway Station.

Just as they arrived, a train was pulling in.

A long whistle echoed through the station as the massive iron beast rolled to a stop. For those used to such sights, it was nothing special. For Bin Sheng and his team, newly arrived from beyond the passes, it was overwhelming.

He and his ten support members stood frozen on the platform, staring at the train in stunned silence for a long time.

"What are you staring at?" a platform attendant laughed as he walked over. "First time seeing a train? You must be from out of town. Don't worry, I looked just as stupid the first time I saw one."

Bin Sheng snapped back to himself. "This... this was made by human hands?"

"Of course," the attendant said proudly. "Built at the forging factory in Gao Family Village."

A deep sense of awe filled Bin Sheng. He had never seen such a colossal machine beyond the passes. Its transport capacity alone was terrifying.

Still, he did not forget his mission. He put on a curious, harmless expression.

"A forging factory in Gao Family Village," he said. "Amazing. Can that factory also build smaller iron vehicles?"

The attendant chuckled. "You mean automobiles? Those are made at the Chang'an Automobile Factory in Xi'an."

Bin Sheng nearly laughed out loud. Everything was falling into place.

"If a vagrant like me wanted to work there," he asked, "would they take me?"

"As long as you're willing to work hard, they'll hire you," the attendant replied.

"How would I get there?"

"Take the train from here to Puzhou. From Puzhou, transfer to the train bound for Xi'an. Get off at the Chang'an Automobile Factory station. The factory gates are right there."

"Thank you, brother."

Under various pretexts, Bin Sheng and his ten-man support team purchased tickets to Puzhou, boarding the train one by one.

The journey left them stunned.

From Taiyuan to Puzhou, the iron beast carried them effortlessly. What would once have taken days of hardship passed in comfort.

The experience cracked open their understanding of the world.

"Has the Great Ming really become this powerful?"

"With transport like this, how could we ever fight them?"

"Don't panic," someone whispered. "As long as we steal the blueprints, we can counter them. At worst, it will be heavy armored car against heavy armored car."

They arrived in Puzhou only to learn that the day's trains had stopped running. The next train to Xi'an would not depart until noon the following day.

With a night to spare, they decided to observe the city.

As they exited the station and stepped into Puzhou, the roar of an engine echoed down the street. A small cargo truck, loaded with goods and pulling a trailer, rumbled past them.

Every head turned at once.

In their minds, the same thought formed. The size was right. With armor added, this would match General Dorogon's description perfectly.

As the truck disappeared down the road, their eyes were still fixed on it.

"What an incredible machine."

"The cities of the Great Ming are unbelievably prosperous."

"And those lights," someone added quietly. "They're not oil lamps. They're far too bright."

Chapter 970 Funds Depleted

Puzhou City was lively to the point of feeling unreal, and it left Bin Sheng and his team completely dazzled.

Every street was packed with shops. Snack stalls lined the roads, sizzling and steaming from morning to night. Food was cheap, portions were generous, and the variety was overwhelming. Mixed in among them were all kinds of strange delicacies said to be bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun, each one richer and more delicious than the last.

Bin Sheng and the others had no resistance at all.

They dug out the "spy operation funds" Huang Taiji had issued them and began sampling everything in sight. A bite here, a drink there, something curious to try, something interesting to buy. A little at a time, without noticing, the silver began to vanish.

Wandering aimlessly as they ate and spent, they eventually found themselves standing before the Puzhou Grand Theater.

After asking around, they learned that this place showed something called a "movie." That evening, a new one was premiering, titled *The Heartless Scholar and the Sentimental Lady*.

Bin Sheng checked the remaining funds. According to the principles of reconnaissance, anything unfamiliar in the Great Ming was worth investigating. With that justification firmly in mind, he bought tickets for himself and all ten members of the support team, and they entered the theater together.

The story itself was simple.

A poor scholar set off for the capital to take the imperial examinations. Along the road, he collapsed from hunger. A merchant's daughter happened upon him, saved his life, fed him, cared for him, and gradually fell in love. The two secretly pledged themselves to each other.

The scholar swore that once he achieved success in the examinations, he would return and marry her.

He did achieve success.

Afterward, he married the Prime Minister's daughter and completely forgot the merchant's girl.

In the end, the merchant's daughter threw herself into the river. The scholar rose to become a marquis and later a prime minister.

The story was viciously satirical, a classic piece of critical realism.

Even though they were spies, Bin Sheng and his team could not help but curse the scholar aloud. The entire theater rang with angry shouts.

"That heartless scholar, I know him!"

"He's Xiao Tianzuo from Mu Guiying, and Zu Dashou from Dalinghe!"

"Yes, yes, that's him. He even played Huang Taiji!"

"All the evil in the world, he's done it all himself."

The words "played Huang Taiji" hit Bin Sheng and his men like a hammer. Their expressions stiffened.

"What is this supposed to mean?"

"Are these Han people using our Jin Emperor as entertainment?"

"This must be recorded."

"We need to watch more films and figure out what's going on."

They decided not to leave Puzhou for the time being. Bin Sheng led them to the ticket seller and questioned him at length. After a great deal of effort, they finally obtained the screening schedule for the coming days.

Only then did they piece things together.

The film that featured Huang Taiji was called The Xuan-Da Defense. It depicted the Jin invasion of Xuanfu and Datong several years earlier, as well as the Han defense.

This immediately piqued their interest.

They stayed in Puzhou for three full days, eating, drinking, and enjoying themselves, all while waiting for The Xuan-Da Defense to be re-screened.

Originally, they had expected a film that smeared the Jin people, portraying them as clowns or savages. To their surprise, the movie did not deliberately vilify them at all. Instead, it emphasized the strength of the Jin soldiers.

On screen, the Jin warriors were fierce, highly skilled, and terrifying in combat.

When the Ming troops of Xuan-Da and the local militias clashed with them, they were consistently pushed back, suffering heavy losses.

Again and again, the film hammered home the same message. The Jin soldiers were extremely strong. They could not be taken lightly or dismissed as mere barbarians.

Bin Sheng felt a chill of unease. He whispered to his support team, "These Han people genuinely respect our Jin nation. They don't look down on us the way others do."

The others nodded in agreement.

Near the climax of the film, reinforcements from Gao Family Village arrived. Beneath the walls of Daizhou, they used flintlock rifles and cannons to repel the Jin soldiers, saving the protagonist. The protagonist then joined the Gao Family Village Militia with firm resolve.

The screen faded to black.

Bin Sheng pointed sharply. "There. That part."

One of the support team members whispered, "I know that battle. The troops attacking Daizhou were badly beaten. We always thought it was the Ming Divine Machine Regiment. I never imagined it was the Gao Family Village Militia."

"This intelligence is extremely important," Bin Sheng said quietly. "Remember it."

They had never expected that watching a movie would yield information of such value. It seemed that their spending had not been entirely wasteful after all.

They continued to linger in Puzhou, eating, drinking, and watching films under the excuse of gathering "intelligence." Along the way, they accumulated a strange collection of knowledge, including titles like Dao Xuan Tianzun Demon Slayer The Movie, Summer at the Chang'an Factory, and A Gao Family Village Love Story.

Lao Nanfeng's Flower World Star Agency had begun producing its own films in large numbers. Using crude video-editing software installed on tablet computers, they clumsily stitched scenes together. The special effects were cheap and rough, barely more than five-coin filters.

Even so, the common people loved them.

Bin Sheng and his team found themselves watching one film after another, growing increasingly absorbed.

They had no idea how many days had passed when a support team member finally spoke up in a low voice.

"Boss Bin, the funds are gone."

"What?" Bin Sheng was startled. "Gone already? We brought a whole sack of silver."

"There's too much to enjoy here," the man replied helplessly. "Food, entertainment, movie tickets. We lost track."

Bin Sheng pressed his temples, a headache forming. "What do we do now? This money was meant to bribe Han craftsmen and create opportunities to steal the blueprints for those iron vehicles. With nothing left, how are we supposed to continue?"

Going back to ask for more funds was impossible.

He thought it over carefully, weighing every option.

"We'll earn it back ourselves," he said at last. "We've been here several days now. We understand the customs. In this place, as long as you're willing to work, you can earn good money."

He looked around at his men.

"We need funds, and we need access to the Chang'an Automobile Factory. So why not do both at once? We apply for jobs there, just like in Summer at the Chang'an Factory. We earn money openly, and secretly learn how those great iron vehicles are made. Isn't that the best solution?"

The support team agreed unanimously.

Pooling their remaining coins, they bought eleven train tickets and boarded the train from Puzhou to Xi'an.

When they arrived at the gates of the Chang'an Automobile Factory, the first thing they saw was a large recruitment notice.

The factory was suffering from severe production shortages. Both ordinary trucks and combat armored cars were behind schedule, and workers were desperately needed.

Bin Sheng and his men quietly discussed their approach. Each would enter a different workshop, starting from the most basic labor positions. They would earn wages on the surface, while carefully probing for technical secrets beneath.

The infiltration of the Chang'an Automobile Factory had begun.