

I. Dynasty 326

Chapter 326: The Man Who Wants to Fly

“Lin Wentao?”

Xiao Ming didn’t think the man was crazy—but to someone like Luluo, who lived in this era, the man definitely seemed like a lunatic.

He turned to Zhao Long and said, “Go to Bowen Academy and find out if there’s really a student named Lin Wentao.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Zhao Long left, and Luluo continued, “This man even said that once he gets his scholarship, he’ll pay us for making his cloth bag. He spoke so seriously. Your Highness, could he really be a student from Bowen Academy?”

“Who knows? Scholars these days can come up with anything. Let’s wait for Zhao Long to return.”

From the words ‘cloth bag’ and ‘fly into the sky’, Xiao Ming easily guessed what this was about—it had to be a hot air balloon.

The world’s first hot air balloon was created in 1782 by the Montgolfier brothers, who were French papermakers. Their first balloon only floated up to the roof, but later they built one with a ten-meter diameter using linen and paper, powered by burning damp straw and bits of wool to create hot smoke.

The French king, Louis XVI, and the Academy of France invited them to demonstrate at the Palace of Versailles.

They hung a cage beneath the balloon, placing a chicken, duck, and sheep inside.

The balloon rose to about 450 meters and floated for eight minutes before landing in the Vaucresson forest, about three kilometers away.

Now that history had changed, Xiao Ming wasn't sure if hot air balloons already existed in the West—but clearly, someone in Bowen Academy wanted to try it.

...

Zhao Long returned quickly and reported, "Your Highness, he really does exist!"

Luluo covered her mouth, laughing. She seemed delighted by the strange news.

Zhao Long chuckled as well. "Your Highness, I brought him with me."

Xiao Ming gave Zhao Long a look of approval. After spending so much time together, Zhao Long had come to understand him well.

He had known Xiao Ming would definitely want to meet Lin Wentao.

A moment later, Zhao Long brought the man in.

“Lin Wentao greets Your Highness.”

Xiao Ming set down his pen and stood up, circling Lin Wentao once.

In chemistry, he had Lu Tong. But when it came to physics—such an important field—no one had yet dared to try what was written in the textbooks.

Lin Wentao was the first.

“I heard you asked for a large cloth bag,” Xiao Ming said. “Why didn’t you tell me directly?”

“Your Highness handles state affairs every day. How could I bother you with such a small matter?” Lin Wentao answered calmly.

Xiao Ming chuckled. This man wasn’t just a bookworm—his eyes were sharp and alert.

“You’re trying to build a hot air balloon, aren’t you?”

Lin Wentao froze, then smiled bitterly. “I couldn’t hide it from you, Your Highness. Yes, it’s a hot air balloon.”

“You’ve got guts. Aren’t you afraid of falling?” Xiao Ming asked with amusement.

Lin Wentao said seriously, “Lu Tong’s not afraid of explosions, so I won’t be afraid of falling. We’re both from Bowen Academy. I don’t want to lose to him. If I did, it would shame all scholars.”

Everyone knew Lu Tong had started out illiterate. But he studied hard and was now one of the top students.

Many scholars at the academy looked down on Lu Tong. Now that he was proving them wrong, they couldn’t accept it.

Lin Wentao was one of those scholars—the first to step up, risking his life just to save face.

“Not bad. You’ve got backbone,” Xiao Ming said. He turned to Luluo. “Sew them a balloon, ten meters in diameter. Let them conduct their test.”

Then he looked back at Lin Wentao. "If you need any materials, just tell me."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Lin Wentao replied with excitement.

After a short discussion, Xiao Ming allowed him to leave. But before he went, Xiao Ming reminded him to stay safe during the experiment.

"You can tether the balloon to the ground so it doesn't float away. That way you can practice handling it."

Lin Wentao promised again and again, then left the hall beaming with joy.

...

Luluo hesitated. "Your Highness, that hot air balloon sounds dangerous. Are you really going to let them test it?"

"Isn't war more dangerous?" Xiao Ming said, his tone serious. "I've taught them everything I can. What they need now is the chance to turn their studies into reality. Otherwise, no matter how much they learn, it's all theory. Worthless."

Last time, Lu Tong had taken the initiative to extract phosphorus himself, just to better understand it. That had solidified Xiao Ming's resolve.

His duty was to pass knowledge to the students of Bowen Academy. How they used that knowledge was their own responsibility.

He wasn't going to hold their hands forever. If he had to act as both father and mother to these people, what good were they?

Luluo nodded slowly. She finally understood.

...

These days, she could tell that the Prince of Qi had changed.

Before, he had always done everything himself. But now he was starting to let go—giving orders and leaving the rest to others.

Unless the problem was especially difficult, the prince no longer took matters into his own hands.

Even with the recent leather flintlock covers, all he did was draw the design and hand it to her.

But she thought this was a good change. It meant Xiao Ming had more free time.

She looked at him with a complicated expression, clearly holding something back.

From the moment she entered the hall, Xiao Ming had noticed something was off.

“What is it, Luluo? You’ve got something to say, don’t you?”

Her palms were sweating, but she gathered her courage and asked, “Your Highness, Brother Yue Yun told me... Is it true that my brother is locked up in the Qingzhou prison?”

Xiao Ming sighed. So Yue Yun had spilled the beans. That guy really couldn’t keep a secret.

Still, it wasn’t his fault. He had just returned from sea and didn’t know Xiao Ming’s decision regarding Meng Youliang.

“It’s true. Your brother is under suspicion for collaborating with the enemy. The investigation isn’t complete yet, so I’ve kept him in prison—for now he’s being treated well. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to worry.”

Luluo’s face went pale. Her lips trembled, and she looked like she was about to cry.

Xiao Ming sighed again. This was exactly what he had wanted to avoid.

She was his personal maid. He didn't want to see her sad or distracted because of this.

But it was too late now.

"If you want to see your brother, I won't stop you. Maybe seeing you will get him to tell the truth. Do you want to go?"

Luluo's face suddenly turned firm. She said quietly, "Your Highness, I want to ask him face to face. If he really betrayed the country, then I beg you—please execute him."

"You don't have to jump to conclusions. He risked his life to bring us a warning about the Wokou's plan to attack Dengzhou. If that turns out to be true, then maybe he's not completely beyond redemption."

Luluo bit her lip and nodded. She bowed and quietly left the hall.

...

Right after she left, Ziyuan walked in. She glanced at Luluo's tearful eyes and asked with a grin, "Did Your Highness bully Luluo again?"

“I’m not in the mood for that today,” Xiao Ming replied, shaking his head.

Ziyuan gave a sly smile. “Oh really? Anyway, there’s someone outside who wants to see you. He says his name is Cao Zhengyang.”