

Chapter 13

Dadu, August 1362: A Secret Departure

Ayushiridara's escape from Dadu was a desperate but calculated maneuver. He knew his family's survival hinged on secrecy. The riverbank he chose was no ordinary spot; it was the hidden exit of a long, secret tunnel, a lifeline built by his parents for emergencies. This passage, concealed behind library bookshelves in the palace, was known only to their immediate family and Empress Bayan. Every loyal worker who helped build it could be trusted with their lives.

Ayushiridara didn't wait long. As he ate a shaobing, a sturdy, simple carriage approached from the east, driven by Li Zhenxing. Ayushiridara nodded in satisfaction; Li Zhenxing had packed provisions for a long journey north, even winter clothes.

"Liang Zhihui and Furen are coming soon," Li Zhenxing said, accepting a shaobing. "Where does Taizi wish to go?"

"The bandits ruined my parents' plans," Ayushiridara replied, referring to the recent chaos. "We can't use Shangdu Palace now, it's too obvious. Do you have a suggestion? At worst, I'll temporarily stay in Ningxia."

Li Zhenxing began to grasp Ayushiridara's strategy. "This doesn't involve the Emperor?" he asked, a hint of caution in his voice.

"Eventually, it will, because my father still wants to rule," Ayushiridara explained. "So, we'll give him a new 'toy' to play with."

"Shangdu could still be used for that," Li Zhenxing mused, "but perhaps not now. We wait until their attention shifts elsewhere."

Ayushiridara's eyes sharpened. "Now is precisely the time! The Shandong incident must have drawn their attention. I believe they'll soon target the northeast, perhaps even Goryeo—through Liaoning."

"I understand," Li Zhenxing said, a wide grin spreading across his face. "We'll investigate. How will we contact Taizi?"

"I'll use the homing pigeon posts along the northern route to Ningxia," Ayushiridara confirmed. "I'll have them send my messages directly to the four of you. For now, don't tell my mother."

Soon after, his wife, Andong, emerged from the secret tunnel, which was camouflaged by wild plants. Ayushiridara embraced her. "Andong, we must leave quickly. Don't talk much; I'll explain on the way."

Andong's beautiful face furrowed in surprise. "Where are we going? Taking a two-month-old? Are you sure it's safe?"

Ayushiridara gently took their baby boy from her, kissing his cheek. "Have you named him?"

"*Muqin*[^muqin] named him—Elbeg," Andong replied.

Ayushiridara smiled faintly. His mother had chosen the name of a loyal follower of Zhang Wuji, a true Manichaeen. He hadn't met Elbeg himself but was familiar with his companions. "That's a good name," he

said. "Let's go."

He chose to drive the simple carriage himself. They would blend in as an ordinary young couple from Datong, disappearing into the vast northern plains, leaving behind the crumbling imperial capital and its deadly political games.

[^muqin]: Muqin (母親), a formal term to address a mother.