

## Great Ming 1011

### Chapter 1011: Solving the Problem

Li Daoxuan could not help letting out a long, heavy sigh, the kind that came from the depths of the chest rather than the throat, as a single thought repeated itself in his mind with growing bitterness.

The imperial court truly behaved inhumanely. Time and time again, it forced the border army into rebellion, squeezing them until they had nowhere left to retreat. How far did those fools seated high above intend to push the frontier soldiers before they would finally stop and realize the consequences?

The caravan manager cautiously poked his head out from the side, his expression tense and uncertain.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he asked in a low voice, "from the looks of it, Yinchuan is on the brink of great chaos. What should we do now?"

Li Daoxuan answered without hesitation, his tone calm and measured.

"If Yinchuan truly descends into chaos, our wool trade will be impossible to continue. You should first lead the caravan to hide in Dingbian Fort. The border troops stationed there will be willing to shelter you. Once the village sends additional supplies, you will take them and come directly to Ningxia Prefecture."

The caravan manager immediately straightened his posture and bowed deeply.

"As you command!" he replied, then paused, suddenly realizing something. "Eh? Dao Xuan Tianzun, does this mean you will not be staying here?"

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"I must make a trip to Ningxia Prefecture. That is where the border army is currently launching its attack."

The manager instantly understood what those words implied. Just moments ago, the messenger had reported that the border troops from the seven rebellious forts were advancing toward Ningxia Prefecture. For Dao Xuan Tianzun to personally head toward the very target of the rebellion could only mean one thing. He intended to stop the disaster with his own hands.

Suppressing the shock in his heart, the manager bowed even lower.

"Then this subordinate will wait here. Once the follow-up supplies arrive, I will immediately deliver them to you in Ningxia Prefecture."

Li Daoxuan took several quick steps forward, and once he was beyond everyone's line of sight, his body abruptly flattened against the ground. With a faint mechanical sound, concealed internal mechanisms activated, several wheels unfolding beneath him as four-wheel drive engaged. In the blink of an eye, he shot forward, racing straight toward Ningxia Prefecture like a gust of wind skimming the earth.

Ningxia Prefecture was the administrative seat of the Ningxia Governor.

Inside the governor's hall, Wang Ji, Right Vice Censor-in-Chief and Governor of Ningxia, sat stiffly in his chair, his face pale and lined with fear.

"Has Supreme Commander Hong's relief army still not arrived?" he asked anxiously.

A subordinate replied with an awkward expression.

"Yes. The messenger has already been dispatched, but Supreme Commander Hong is currently stationed in Guyuan. Even if he mobilizes troops immediately, how fast can they arrive?"

Wang Ji's heart sank.

"It's over. It's all over. If the reinforcements cannot arrive in time, my life is finished."

In truth, he was not the only one gripped by panic. Hong Chengchou was just as anxious.

The moment he received the news, Hong Chengchou immediately ordered the Military Preparation Vice-Commissioner Ding Qirui to lead troops to suppress the rebellion. However, the distance between Guyuan and Ningxia Prefecture exceeded five hundred li. For a messenger to run there, and then for Ding Qirui to muster troops and march back, meant a round trip of more than a thousand li.

By the time they arrived, it would be far too late.

All Hong Chengchou could do was pray silently in his heart.

Please, do not let the border army cause a catastrophic disaster. The realm cannot endure such repeated upheavals.

During the Guyuan Rebellion of the past, large numbers of border troops had joined the roving bandits, causing their combat strength to surge dramatically. If the Yinchuan border troops were to follow the same path, the consequences would be unimaginable.

Seven border forts, led by Dashapu Fortress, gathered three thousand soldiers and completely surrounded Ningxia Prefecture.

No one could stop these three thousand men.

They were border troops, the most elite fighting force of the Great Ming Dynasty. Only other border troops could hope to stop them, yet those same units had also gone unpaid for over a year. They were not fools. Why would they rush to suppress comrades who were rebelling for the very same reason?

At this moment, the only thing capable of delaying the rebels was the towering city wall of Ningxia Prefecture.

Outside the city, the three thousand border soldiers prepared ladders and siege equipment. As they worked, their voices thundered in unison.

"Wang Ji, come out and die!"

"Where is our pay, Wang Ji? Did you embezzle it?"

"If you cannot produce our wages today, we will eat Wang Ji for dinner!"

"Eat Wang Ji! Eat Wang Ji! Eat Wang Ji!"

The roaring shouts surged like waves, shaking the air and rattling the city walls.

Inside the city, the common people trembled in terror.

They knew all too well that if these enraged border troops truly broke into Ningxia Prefecture, it would not end with the execution of Governor Wang Ji alone. Soldiers driven mad by rage would set fires, loot homes, slaughter innocents, and violate respectable women, reducing the entire city to ruin.

At that point, even if someone stood before them and shouted that the imperial court's unpaid wages had nothing to do with the common folk, who would listen?

In such circumstances, the only thing the people could do was hide inside their homes, shivering as they peered through cracks in doors and windows, secretly watching the chaos outside.

Before long, someone noticed something strange.

Amid the city's overwhelming panic, a young man dressed in the attire of a wandering chivalrous warrior was calmly walking down the deserted street, heading straight toward the city walls.

As he walked, the young man stopped in front of a residence and knocked lightly on a window.

"Elder brother," he asked, "is Governor Wang Ji currently at the North Gate?"

The resident peeking out from behind the window was startled and quickly replied, "Yes, yes! Young hero, what are you planning to do? Quickly hide yourself!"

The young man smiled faintly.

"I am going to solve his problem."

The commoner froze, staring at him in stunned disbelief.

That chivalrous warrior was none other than Li Daoxuan.

He had just arrived at Ningxia Prefecture, and by sheer coincidence, the South Gate had not yet been sealed. Some wealthy residents had bribed the gate guards to open it so they could flee the city, and Li Daoxuan had happened to pass by at that exact moment, strolling in openly without being questioned.

After entering the city, he asked around and learned that Governor Wang Ji was stationed at the North Gate, so he made his way there.

Before long, the North Gate came into view.

Atop the city wall stood a small, elderly man dressed in the official robes of a governor. Around him were only a few hundred scattered soldiers, their faces pale and their bodies stiff with fear. Outside the walls, three thousand border troops prepared for the assault, their killing intent soaring skyward.

"Wang Ji, produce our pay now, and we might still spare your life!"

Several dozen rebels shouted in unison.

"We do not wish to rebel either! Once we receive our wages, we will withdraw immediately. Any blame, I, Zhao, will bear alone!"

Wang Ji's face was filled with grief and despair.

"This official has no money to distribute," he cried. "If the imperial court does not grant me funds, what am I supposed to give you?"

Zhao Bazong roared furiously, "Then do not blame us for being ruthless!"

"Don't!" Wang Ji shouted in panic. "Do not act impulsively! Attacking the city is a capital crime!"

Zhao Bazong sneered.

"Capital crime or not, I do not care. As long as I chop off your dog head first and you go to the grave before me, it will be worth it!"

Wang Ji was left utterly speechless.

The situation had reached a complete deadlock.

At this point, Wang Ji knew that no amount of words would change anything. Any attempt at delay was meaningless. If he could not produce their pay, these border troops would never retreat.

Just then, footsteps sounded behind the city wall as Li Daoxuan climbed the stairs.

His sudden appearance startled the defending soldiers. Someone shouted sharply, "Who are you? This is a critical military situation. Do not climb the walls recklessly. Get down at once!"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "I am here to help Wang Ji solve his problem."

"Nonsense! This is no time for jokes. Get down immediately!"

One soldier reached out to shove him away, but Li Daoxuan seized the man's arm, turned his body, and flung him backward. The soldier was sent flying several meters before crashing to the ground.

The remaining soldiers gasped in shock. With sharp metallic sounds, countless waist swords were drawn at once.

Wang Ji witnessed everything from the city wall. He did not know whether this young man truly possessed the ability to resolve the crisis, but what choice did he have? When facing certain death, even a dying horse was worth trying to save.

He immediately shouted, "Let him come up!"

Wang Ji's subordinates hesitated, then sheathed their swords and stepped aside. With an unhurried stride, Li Daoxuan walked onto the city wall and stopped in front of Wang Ji.

Chapter 1012: I'm Actually Quite Humble

Wang Ji carefully sized up the young man standing in front of him. The man was dressed in the robes of a wandering hero, simple yet neat, carrying a confident smile that felt strangely unsettling. His steps were heavy, firm, and steady, the kind that suggested his weight was grounded rather than sluggish.

After a moment of observation, Wang Ji finally spoke.

"Young hero, may I ask who you are?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, his tone unhurried.

"Who I am is not important. I came here to resolve this chaos."

Wang Ji gave a bitter laugh.

"With the situation as it stands, there is only one way to resolve it. We must pay them immediately. If you, young hero, truly possess great wealth, then perhaps you can help."

Li Daoxuan tilted his head slightly.

"And after paying them this time? Delay again for half a year, then another year, until they rebel once more?"

Wang Ji froze.

For a moment, the two men stood facing each other in silence. The air between them felt stiff, almost suffocating.

At last, Wang Ji forced himself to speak again.

"Then tell me, how do you intend to solve it?"

Li Daoxuan's voice remained steady.

"I have only one condition. From this day forward, the Yinchuan region must manage its economy according to my methods. If Governor Wang agrees, I will immediately resolve this uprising. If you refuse, then I will simply stand aside and watch as they storm the city and take your head."

Wang Ji inhaled sharply.

Inside his heart, thoughts raced.

So that's it. A local gentry figure, dissatisfied with my governance, using this mutiny as leverage to force policy changes. Such tactics are hardly new. Variations of this have appeared countless times throughout the dynasty's long history.

Yet, knowing this did not give him the luxury of refusal.

If he rejected the terms now, he would not live to see another day.

Wang Ji made his decision silently.

I will agree first. Once the mutiny is settled, I can always go back on it.

With that resolved, he spoke aloud.

"Very well. I agree to your terms."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"It is good that Governor Wang has agreed."

Before Wang Ji could say anything more, Li Daoxuan suddenly took a step forward and leapt straight off the city battlements.

The sight struck Wang Ji like a thunderbolt.

From such a height, he jumped without hesitation.

Does he want to die?

Wang Ji was not the only one who saw it.

The soldiers defending the wall saw it.

The three thousand border troops outside the city saw it.

Cries of alarm rang out instantly.

"Someone jumped!"

Even Zhao Bazong of Dashapu Fortress witnessed it. He subconsciously shook his head, thinking that perhaps the official inside the city had realized death was inevitable and chosen to end his life on his own terms.

But as the figure fell, Zhao Bazong's expression changed.

Something was wrong.

There was no panic in the man's movements. No flailing limbs. No screams. His body remained steady, his posture controlled, almost composed.

The figure crashed down from the wall with a heavy thud, landing directly on the ground outside the city.

The earth caved in.

A deep crater formed beneath his feet, soil and dust flying outward. Yet the man remained standing, upright and unmoved.

Zhao Bazong blurted out, "What in the world... is that even human?"

On the city wall, Wang Ji leaned forward, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"By the heavens... a man?"

Anyone else would have shattered their legs from such a fall. Yet this man stood firm, and even dented the ground beneath him.

With that single jump, both sides were rendered completely silent.

Li Daoxuan understood this better than anyone.

In negotiations, strength was the only true bargaining chip.

And now, his leverage was unquestionable.

He lifted his feet out of the crater, shook them lightly, sending clumps of dirt scattering in all directions, then began walking forward at an unhurried pace toward Zhao Bazong and the three thousand rebel troops.

Almost instinctively, the entire formation of soldiers stepped back half a pace.

They were elite border troops, hardened by years of war, yet even they could not suppress the unease rising in their hearts.

On the city wall, Wang Ji clenched his fists, excitement surging within him.

There's hope. This man might truly be able to pacify them.

Li Daoxuan deliberately took his time, closing the distance slowly, before finally stopping in front of Zhao Bazong. A faint smile appeared on his face.

"You must be Commander Zhao of Dashapu Fortress," he said. "I heard your name mentioned not long ago by the commander of Dingbian Fortress. Seeing you today, you truly live up to your reputation."

Zhao Bazong felt a chill crawl up his spine. His eyes flickered uncontrollably toward Li Daoxuan's legs.

How did this man jump from that height and still stand?

Li Daoxuan continued casually.

"You already know why I am here. Withdraw your troops. Return to your fortress. Guard the frontier and end this unrest. If the Mongolians were not so quiet lately, your rebellion would hand them the perfect opportunity to invade, and that would spell disaster."

Had it not been for the earlier display, Zhao Bazong would have already drawn his blade. Now, he merely snorted coldly.

"Go back and starve? We can defend the frontier, but at the very least, we need food. Is that unreasonable?"

"Very well," Li Daoxuan replied without hesitation. "I will provide it. Not just grain, but meat. You will have meat every day."

Zhao Bazong frowned.

"You make it sound easy. Who are you to guarantee this? How do I know this isn't empty talk?"

Li Daoxuan briefly shifted his focus, confirming the distance of the merchant caravan through his internal system, then returned his gaze with a relaxed smile.

"Two days. Give me two days, and I will deliver the grain directly into your hands."

Zhao Bazong sneered.

"You think I'm a child? Two days is clearly a delaying tactic so you can mobilize troops and surround us."

Li Daoxuan laughed softly.

"If I wanted you dead, I wouldn't need two days. I could do it right now."

Zhao Bazong's eyes widened.

Behind him, six generals stepped forward in unison, their expressions sharp and hostile.

Li Daoxuan's gaze swept across them calmly. Seven men in total. The true core of the rebel army.

He smiled, that strange smile that made people uneasy.

"I could kill all seven of you at any moment. But I haven't. Because I am not here for Wang Ji. I am here for you. That is why I am speaking so politely. As for delaying tactics, they are unnecessary. If you doubt me, then all seven of you may attack me together."

Zhao Bazong stiffened.

The six generals stared in disbelief.

"There's a limit to arrogance!" Zhao Bazong roared.

The others shouted, "Are you courting death?"

Li Daoxuan smiled gently.

"Then come."

For a moment, the seven men stood frozen.

This was no longer arrogance. This was madness.

Yet, if they backed down now, they would lose all authority in front of their troops.

Zhao Bazong clenched his teeth.

"You asked for it. Don't blame us."

The six generals echoed him.

"Have you prepared your last words?"

Li Daoxuan only smiled, his expression calm and unshaken.

"Bring it on."

Chapter 1013: The Need for Self-Sufficiency

Wang Ji stood atop the towering city wall, his hands clasped behind his back as he stared into the distance beyond Yinchuan City.

Outside the walls, the rebel army had already formed their camp.

They were positioned deliberately far away, roughly a li from the city. This was the standard distance for an attacking force. Close enough to intimidate, far enough to avoid being struck by arrows or stones from the battlements. It was a posture that said, we are not attacking yet, but we can at any moment.

From where he stood, Wang Ji could vaguely make out a single figure standing at the forefront of the rebel formation.

Li Daoxuan.

His figure was small against the mass of soldiers, yet unmistakable. Around him stood several men. Even from this distance, Wang Ji could guess who they were. Zhao Bazong, along with the core generals of Dashapu fortress.

They appeared to be talking.

Unfortunately, distance robbed Wang Ji of any details. He could not hear their voices, nor see their expressions clearly. All he could do was stare, his heart tightening with every passing breath.

Then, suddenly, the scene changed.

Zhao Bazong and six other rebel leaders abruptly spread out, moving in unison. In just a few breaths, they had formed a loose circle around Li Daoxuan, sealing him inside.

Wang Ji sucked in a sharp breath.

"Ah? The negotiations failed?"

His fingers dug into the stone parapet.

"They are going to fight? Damn it... what a pity I cannot see clearly."

From the city wall, everything that followed looked like a blur of motion.

The battle began.

Zhao Bazong was the first to move.

He stepped forward and threw a punch straight at Li Daoxuan's chest, fast and fierce, carrying the strength of a hardened border general.

But the moment his fist landed, Zhao Bazong's face twisted violently.

He staggered backward several steps, clutching his hand to his chest. His fingers trembled uncontrollably, and his mouth twitched as pain surged through his arm.

At the same time, another general launched a kick from behind, aiming directly at Li Daoxuan's waist.

The kick connected solidly.

Yet the result was identical.

The general recoiled instantly, hopping backward on one leg, his face contorted as he sucked in air through clenched teeth.

"So painful," he gasped. "This bastard's bones are hard as iron."

Two more generals seized the opening and rushed forward together.

They grabbed Li Daoxuan's wrists, one on each side, intending to restrain him by brute force.

For a brief moment, it looked like they had succeeded.

Then, without warning, their hands suddenly went slack.

The two generals froze.

They stared down in disbelief.

In their palms were Li Daoxuan's hands.

Separated cleanly.

"Ah?"

Their voices came out thin and broken.

They looked up again, eyes wide, and saw that there was no blood spraying, no torn flesh. Where Li Daoxuan's wrists should have been, there were only two dark, hollow openings.

Round.

Deep.

Cold.

They looked exactly like the muzzles of cannons.

Before either man could scream, Li Daoxuan lifted his arms.

The twin cannon muzzles were aimed directly at their faces.

The two generals shrieked in sheer terror.

Almost reflexively, they slammed the severed palms back onto those dark holes.

A sickening click echoed.

Both men collapsed backward, legs turning to jelly, barely able to remain standing.

"This fellow... he's not human!"

"What kind of monster is this?"

"Something's wrong. This fight is wrong!"

At that moment, Li Daoxuan's head rotated.

Completely.

With a smooth, unnatural motion, it twisted one hundred and eighty degrees until his face was staring directly at the two men behind him.

His mouth curved into a broad, cheerful grin.

It was the kind of sight that could haunt a man's dreams for the rest of his life.

The seven rebel leaders screamed at the same time.

They leapt backward as if burned, then drew their swords in a panic. Blades crossed before their chests, not in attack, but in desperate defense.

Every line on their faces screamed the same message.

Do not come any closer.

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly.

"See?" he said calmly. "What did I tell you?"

The seven men trembled.

One of them stammered, "You... what kind of demon are you?"

Li Daoxuan tilted his head slightly, as if genuinely puzzled.

"Why must it be a demon?" he asked. "Can it not be a god?"

He did not wait for an answer.

Turning around, he began to walk away.

"It's settled," he said casually. "Two days. Wait for two days. I will bring you food and resolve the issue of your overdue wages. Stop rebelling. Go back to guarding the border and do what you are supposed to do."

Zhao Bazong and the others stood rooted in place, watching his retreating figure.

A cold chill crawled up their spines.

After a long silence, one general whispered, "Commander... what do we do? Are we still attacking Yinchuan City?"

Zhao Bazong let out a hollow laugh.

"Attack?" he scoffed. "Are you joking?"

He clenched his teeth.

"With a monster like that inside the city, how are we supposed to attack? He is clearly invulnerable to blades and spears. His body is iron. His arms are cannons. Even if we throw all our soldiers at him, we cannot kill him. But he could charge into our main camp at any moment and slaughter us all."

The other generals fell silent.

Finally, Zhao Bazong made his decision.

"We retreat," he said heavily. "Hide for two days. Stay alert. If he keeps his promise, then we stand down."

As the rebel leaders withdrew, Li Daoxuan walked back toward the city gate at an unhurried pace.

He raised his head and called out, "Open the gate."

The guards on the wall exchanged uncertain glances.

None of them dared to move.

Only after Wang Ji spoke did they act.

"Open it," Wang Ji said. "The rebels no longer intend to attack."

From the city wall, he had already seen the rebels abandoning half of their siege equipment and pulling back.

The gates creaked open.

Li Daoxuan entered the city and returned to the wall.

Wang Ji stepped forward and bowed deeply.

"Thank you, young hero, for entering the enemy camp alone and driving back three thousand men by yourself."

"Enemy?" Li Daoxuan frowned. "I do not like that word. Those are clearly my troops. How did they become enemies?"

Wang Ji froze.

Li Daoxuan continued, his tone sharpening slightly.

"Governor Wang, you have not forgotten why they came here, have you? Is this really their fault?"

Wang Ji felt his face heat up.

"Well... regardless, I must still thank you for saving my life."

"I did not save you," Li Daoxuan replied calmly. "I saved the common people inside Yinchuan City. If the border army had truly broken in, they would have lost control in the chaos. Civilians would have suffered. I intervened because I did not want to see innocent people harmed, nor good men turned into monsters by rage."

Wang Ji was left speechless once more.

A trace of bitterness welled up in his chest. As a provincial governor, he was accustomed to respect. Rarely had anyone spoken to him so bluntly.

Yet he dared not protest.

He had already seen enough.

That young man's strength was unfathomable.

"Now," Li Daoxuan said, "it is time for us to talk."

Wang Ji straightened. "Please, young hero, instruct me."

"In two days," Li Daoxuan said, "supplies will arrive. I will provide them to the border army free of charge to stabilize the situation."

Wang Ji was overjoyed.

But Li Daoxuan did not stop.

"This only patches things up temporarily," he continued. "Once I leave, you will fall behind on their pay again. In a few months, they will return."

Wang Ji opened his mouth, then closed it again.

He knew this was true.

Finally, he pleaded, "Young hero, then save me completely."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"To solve this problem, Yinchuan must become self sufficient. Do not wait for the court to rescue you. Create industries. Generate income. Use that income to support the border army."

Wang Ji sighed deeply.

"I understand this in theory," he said. "But what can Yinchuan produce? Other than cattle, sheep, and horses, what else do we have?"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Cattle, sheep, and horses are enough."

Wang Ji hesitated.

"But animal husbandry is vulnerable to Mongol raids. People can flee. Livestock cannot. Once stolen, everything is lost."

Li Daoxuan's eyes gleamed.

"That," he said, "is exactly why we need to talk about how to protect them."

Chapter 1014: I'll Help You This Time

"Rest assured," Li Daoxuan cut him off before Wang Ji could finish voicing his concerns. His tone was calm, almost casual, as though what he was about to say was nothing more than a trivial matter. "The Mongol problem, I'll handle it."

Wang Ji froze for a moment, then blurted out in shock, "Ah? Young hero, you can even solve that?"

Li Daoxuan let out a soft, knowing chuckle, the kind that made it sound as if Wang Ji had just asked an obvious question. "Governor Wang, have you not noticed something strange lately?"

"Strange?" Wang Ji blinked, momentarily at a loss.

"The Mongols," Li Daoxuan continued slowly, "have not raided our borders for quite some time now."

Wang Ji's eyes widened slightly. "Oh?"

Li Daoxuan explained patiently, "They are currently moving east. Right now, they are busy plundering the Khorchin tribe. After that, they will turn their attention toward the Later Jin. In short, they have no interest in coming here anymore."

He paused briefly, then added with an easy confidence that made Wang Ji's scalp tingle, "And even if they truly dare to come back, I will deal with them personally. You can let your cattle and sheep graze freely on the plains. No one will touch them."

Wang Ji was stunned.

He stared at the young man in front of him as if trying to pierce through his calm expression and glimpse the truth hidden beneath. In the end, he could only bow deeply, his posture full of respect.

"If that is truly the case," Wang Ji said solemnly, "then the entire region under my jurisdiction will finally know peace. Many thanks, young hero."

In his heart, countless questions churned violently.

Who exactly was this young man?

How could he so easily subdue the rebel army?

What kind of power did he possess to speak of the Mongols as if they were nothing more than a minor inconvenience?

Yet Wang Ji understood one thing very clearly.

This man would not answer.

Asking would only embarrass himself.

So he swallowed all his questions and decided to think about them later, when he was alone and had the luxury of time.

The God of Time Management quietly turned the Wheel of Time.

In the blink of an eye, two days passed.

Five li outside Yinchuan City, Zhao Bazong and his three thousand starving border soldiers remained encamped.

Every day, scouts were dispatched at regular intervals to keep watch on Yinchuan Prefecture from afar. All of them were waiting, waiting for the so called transport convoy promised by that strange, terrifying young hero.

For soldiers stationed at seven border forts to abandon their posts and march on Yinchuan was, in truth, an extremely dangerous gamble.

Just north of their garrisons lay the territory of the infamous Ordos Tribe.

The border soldiers did not know that the Ordos Tribe had already been subdued by Li Daoxuan. To them, every moment away from their forts was like standing on the edge of a blade. They constantly feared that the Ordos Tribe would discover their defenses were empty and seize the chance to burn, kill, and plunder.

Yet, strangely enough, the Ordos Tribe made no move at all.

They behaved with inexplicable restraint.

Two full days passed without incident.

As evening fell on the second day, the sky gradually darkened, and the setting sun dyed the horizon in layers of crimson and gold.

Zhao Bazong sat atop a small hill, staring toward Yinchuan Prefecture in the distance. His brow was deeply furrowed.

"Two days are almost up," he muttered. "And the supplies that monster promised us still haven't arrived."

A general approached cautiously. "Commander... could it be that we were tricked?"

Before Zhao Bazong could respond, the thunder of hooves suddenly echoed in the distance.

A scout came galloping back at full speed, his face pale, his voice hoarse as he shouted, "General, bad news! Military Preparation Vice Commissioner Ding Qirui's reinforcements have arrived. They are heading straight for us!"

"What?"

The entire camp erupted in shock.

"This is bad."

"We were fooled."

"That demon lied to us!"

Zhao Bazong's eyes turned bloodshot as he clenched his fists. He roared, his voice echoing across the camp, "Brothers, grab your weapons! Prepare to fight to the death!"

At the same moment, far away on the road leading to Yinchuan, Li Daoxuan was co sensing through the embroidery on the caravan leader's chest.

It was already evening.

The sun was sinking rapidly.

And Yinchuan City was still nowhere in sight.

Li Daoxuan asked calmly, "How much longer until we reach Yinchuan?"

The caravan leader quickly consulted the local guide, then answered, "Just over an hour. If we arrive before the third watch, it still counts as today. We won't have broken our promise."

Li Daoxuan nodded slightly. "Good. Speed up. Even if arriving before the third watch technically counts, I am worried those border soldiers may not be able to endure much longer."

"Yes!" the caravan leader replied immediately.

He then raised his voice and shouted at the top of his lungs, "The Dao Xuan Tianzun commands us to increase our speed! Brothers, spare neither man nor horse! Run the final stretch! Being tired doesn't matter. Arriving early will put the border soldiers at ease!"

The entire caravan responded in unison, voices rolling like thunder.

"We humbly obey Dao Xuan Tianzun's decree!"

The convoy surged forward, wheels creaking, hooves pounding, the entire line accelerating as if driven by an invisible force.

Li Daoxuan then performed a swift tangent maneuver, instantly shifting his co sensing back to the mass produced Dao Xuan Tianzun avatar inside Yinchuan City.

The moment his consciousness returned, he felt it.

Something was wrong.

A heavy, oppressive atmosphere hung over the city, thick with tension and suppressed dread.

From inside the inn, he could no longer hear the familiar sounds of daily life. No vendors shouting, no idle chatter from the streets.

He pushed open the window and looked out.

His pupils shrank.

A large Ming army was marching through the city, entering from the South Gate and moving straight toward the North Gate, just as they had on his first arrival.

A massive banner fluttered above the formation.

The character "Ding" was emblazoned clearly upon it.

Military Preparation Vice Commissioner Ding Qirui.

Li Daoxuan cursed inwardly.

"This is bad. The imperial reinforcements arrived far too quickly."

He did not hesitate. Leaving the inn, he darted through side streets at full speed, heading straight for the North City Gate.

By the time he arrived, the area was already under strict martial law.

Even before he reached the wall, furious shouts echoed from outside the city.

"Liars!"

"You are all liars!"

Li Daoxuan leapt onto the city wall and looked down.

Outside, three thousand border soldiers were already assembled.

Zhao Bazong stood at the forefront, his eyes blazing as he roared toward the battlements, "I refuse to yield! You withheld our wages, then sent a liar to deceive us, promising that our back pay would arrive in two days. Instead, your reinforcements showed up first!"

"What a shameless delaying tactic!"

Seeing this, Li Daoxuan felt a wave of frustration wash over him.

Why did the government army have to arrive at this exact moment?

The caravan was less than half an hour away.

He shook his head, then leapt down from the city wall in a single bound.

With a deafening thump, he landed on the ground, his feet carving a large crater into the earth. Dust and wind scattered in all directions.

He pulled his feet free and strode toward Zhao Bazong.

Zhao Bazong's fury boiled over. "Trying that trick again? This time, nothing you say will convince us!"

Six generals behind him drew their swords in unison. Hundreds of personal guards followed suit, steel flashing as blades were unsheathed.

At this point, they had already cast aside thoughts of life and death.

Starving to death or dying in battle.

What difference did it make?

Li Daoxuan raised both hands, signaling peace, and continued walking forward. "Hold on. I'm not here for pointless talk this time."

He stopped at the distance of an arrow's shot, careful not to push them further.

"I've come," he said clearly, "to stand with you."

The border soldiers were stunned.

Li Daoxuan turned his back to them and faced Yinchuan City instead.

"I'll stand right here," he said calmly, "and help you resist Ding Qirui."

A collective gasp rippled through the ranks.

On the city wall, the large Ding banner was fully unfurled.

The city gate opened.

Ding Qirui led several thousand soldiers out, his voice booming across the field, "Rebels, seeing this official, why do you not surrender at once?"

Zhao Bazong was about to shout back when he suddenly froze.

Li Daoxuan raised his left hand and pointed it directly at Ding Qirui's army.

The palm of that hand was gone.

In its place was a dark, cannon like muzzle.

With his right hand, Li Daoxuan calmly produced a tinder lighter and ignited something attached to his left arm.

A sharp hiss rang out.

A fuse began to burn.

Zhao Bazong's heart nearly leapt out of his chest.

"He's going to fire his cannon."

Chapter 1015: I'm Only Going to Deal With You

Ding Qirui led his troops out of Yinchuan City in a neat formation, armor clanking, banners fluttering as they advanced toward the rebels. He had only taken a few dozen steps when his eyes narrowed.

Ahead of him stood a lone figure.

The man wore the clothes of a wandering martial artist, his back facing the rebel army, his front facing Ding Qirui's forces alone. He stood there calmly, feet planted on the ground, as though he were merely taking a stroll on an empty plain.

This posture was so strange that it left everyone momentarily confused.

Was he protecting the city, or blocking the army?

Before Ding Qirui could fully process the situation, he saw the man lift one arm, point it directly toward his side, and calmly ignite a fuse.

The fuse hissed sharply as sparks danced along its length, clearly visible even from this distance.

Ding Qirui sucked in a breath. "That... that isn't a cannon, is it?"

His subordinates on either side immediately exclaimed, voices full of disbelief. "How is that possible? How could a cannon be mounted on a human arm? Even if such a thing existed, wouldn't firing it blow the person himself apart?"

Their words had barely fallen when a deafening boom shook the air.

The strange man had fired.

Ding Qirui jumped in alarm, and almost every soldier under his command flinched instinctively. Horses reared, grips tightened, and hearts thumped violently.

Then, farther ahead, another explosion erupted.

Boom.

The ground shook again.

It turned out that the cannonball fired by the strange man detonated a second time after landing.

Ding Qirui halted his steps abruptly.

Only then did he realize that the shot had been deliberately placed. It had not been aimed at his army at all. It was fired close, frighteningly close, but not lethal.

It was a warning.

If he continued to advance, the next shot would not be so restrained.

"What is this man trying to do?" Ding Qirui demanded, his brows furrowing.

At that moment, Wang Ji, the Governor of Yinchuan, rushed out from the city gate behind him, his voice loud and urgent. "Commissioner Ding, stop. That man is one of ours. Just two days ago, he single handedly persuaded the rebels to halt their siege."

Ding Qirui frowned deeply. "Hm? Then what is he doing now? What exactly is his intention?"

"I will go ask him," Wang Ji said quickly.

He hurried forward but dared not approach too closely. Instead, he stopped at a safe distance and shouted, "Young hero, what exactly are you trying to do?"

Li Daoxuan answered without hesitation, his voice steady and clear. "To protect these border troops."

A collective gasp erupted from both sides.

Even Wang Ji froze for a brief moment.

Zhao Bazong, who had been cursing Li Daoxuan moments earlier and calling him a liar, was also completely stunned.

Li Daoxuan lowered his left hand, which still emitted faint wisps of smoke. He first glanced back at the border soldiers behind him, then turned to face Wang Ji and Ding Qirui.

"Do not advance your soldiers," he said calmly. "If you take even one more step forward, do not blame me for firing a cannon directly into the middle of your formation."

Then he turned around again and addressed Zhao Bazong and the three thousand border troops behind him.

"You too. Stay where you are. Be patient and wait for another hour."

Zhao Bazong roared back angrily, "We waited two full days. Not only did the supplies not arrive, imperial troops showed up instead. You still expect us to wait?"

"The supplies are already on the way," Li Daoxuan replied evenly. "They will arrive within another hour."

Zhao Bazong sneered. "And why should I believe you again?"

Li Daoxuan looked at him calmly. "Whether you believe me or not makes no difference. You have no other choice. Otherwise, you will have to fight Ding Qirui right now."

Zhao Bazong laughed coldly. "With three thousand seasoned border troops under my command, why would I fear a mere Ding Qirui?"

Li Daoxuan sighed softly, his tone almost weary. "Do you truly believe all three thousand men are willing to rebel with you? All Ding Qirui needs to do is promise them 'no repercussions for followers', and most of them will drop their weapons immediately and stand aside to watch."

Zhao Bazong's face turned pale in an instant.

Behind him, the other six commanders froze at the same time.

Because they all knew he was right.

This was not speculation. This was reality.

Li Daoxuan was not bluffing them. In fact, he had already examined the historical outcome. In the original timeline, these seven men had indeed been captured and beheaded by Ding Qirui.

Li Daoxuan continued, his voice unhurried but mercilessly clear. "None of you truly want to rebel. If you did, would you have given me two whole days? You waited because all seven of you only want your overdue pay. Nothing more. Since that is the case, give me a little more time. You are also giving yourselves a chance."

Zhao Bazong and the others fell completely silent.

Li Daoxuan then turned his gaze toward Ding Qirui.

"Commissioner Ding," he said, "I spoke loudly just now. You heard everything, didn't you?"

Ding Qirui answered curtly, "I heard it."

"Good," Li Daoxuan replied. "Then you also know that these men are not true rebels. They only want the military pay owed to them. Their methods are extreme, yes, but if they were not extreme, would anyone at court ever listen to them?"

Ding Qirui said nothing.

High ranking officials often understood these truths all too well. Before matters escalated, nobody cared. Everyone simply pushed responsibility upward or sideways.

Who did not know about the overdue military pay?

Everyone knew.

Yet no one acted.

If not for the seven border garrisons rising together this time, Ding Qirui would never have been dispatched.

There was a reason the ancients said that a crying baby gets fed.

Ding Qirui understood all of this, but understanding did not mean he was willing to submit to a stranger.

His authority mattered. His prestige mattered even more.

How could he allow some inexplicable martial artist to undermine him in front of thousands of soldiers?

After a brief silence, Ding Qirui lifted his chin. "So you believe you can threaten this official?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Oh? Putting on high official airs now?"

Ding Qirui sneered. "A cannon mounted on an arm is indeed novel. But it will not intimidate me. With a single order, thousands will charge at you. How many times can you fire? How many men can you kill?"

Li Daoxuan nodded thoughtfully. "That is a fair point."

Then he continued casually, "In that case, I will not use the cannon. Your soldiers are also unfortunate border troops. Their pay may well be overdue too. They are simply more obedient and less vocal. With one order from you, they would charge even if they did not want to. If I blasted them with a cannon, I would actually feel a little sorry for them."

As these words spread through the ranks, the expressions of the soldiers behind Ding Qirui grew strange.

Some clenched their jaws. Some lowered their eyes. Some looked as though they wanted to cry but could not.

Li Daoxuan then said calmly, "So instead, I will only deal with you."

With that, he lifted his foot and began walking toward Ding Qirui.

Ding Qirui blinked in disbelief. "Hm? He is coming alone?"

Wang Ji's heart nearly leapt out of his chest. He hurriedly warned, "Commissioner Ding, this man is extremely strong. Or rather, extremely strange. You must be careful."

Ding Qirui did not take it seriously.

A cannon was terrifying from a distance, but once close, how useful could it be?

If the man wanted to die, then so be it.

He raised his hand and gave the order. "Take him down."

It was just one man.

Only a few dozen personal guards stepped forward lazily. The thousands behind them did not even bother to move.

On the opposite side, Zhao Bazong's men grew visibly excited.

The memory of seven commanders failing to injure Li Daoxuan two days ago was still fresh in their minds.

All of them were thinking the same thing.

If this man could handle Ding Qirui as well, then everything he said before was true.

Thus, between two armies totaling six or seven thousand men, all eyes were fixed on Li Daoxuan as he walked forward step by step, drawing closer and closer to Ding Qirui.

Chapter 1016: He's Not Human

Only a little over a dozen of Ding Qirui's personal guards were dispatched first, stepping forward to intercept Li Daoxuan.

Against a lone individual, there was no need to mobilize a larger force. That was the common sense of the battlefield.

Ding Qirui's command had been simple and clear. "Take this man down."

As a result, his personal guards advanced without hesitation. Their weapons remained sheathed, hands bare, expressions relaxed. To them, this was nothing more than subduing an overly bold martial artist who had wandered too far out of line.

A storm of punches immediately rained down on Li Daoxuan.

Dull thuds echoed one after another, the sound of fists striking solid flesh.

Then, in the next instant, several of the guards staggered back, faces twisting in pain as they clutched their swollen hands.

Li Daoxuan himself showed no reaction whatsoever. His steps never slowed, his posture never shifted, and his expression did not change in the slightest. He continued walking forward as though the blows had never landed at all.

Ding Qirui frowned deeply. A confused sound escaped him almost involuntarily. "Hmm?"

On the opposite side, Zhao Bazong's lips twitched. A knowing smile flickered briefly across his face, mirrored by the men behind him. This outcome was exactly what they had expected.

Unwilling to accept it, the guards surged forward again. This time, fists and kicks came in rapid succession, reckless and desperate. One man even aimed a vicious low kick, clearly abandoning all restraint.

The result did not change.

A messy chorus of impacts followed, and once more the attackers rebounded as if they had struck a wall of iron. Some hopped backward on one foot, others sucked in sharp breaths while clutching their bruised hands. Shock and disbelief were written plainly across their faces.

Ding Qirui's eyes widened.

"Arm yourselves!" the captain of the personal guards shouted, alarm finally breaking through his composure.

At once, several men grabbed long spears while others drew their waist swords.

Blades and spearpoints were not meant for restraint. When steel met flesh on the battlefield, death was the expected result. Mercy was never part of the calculation, and no soldier would hesitate once the order to strike was given.

The spears lunged forward together.

"Clang! Clang! Clang!"

The spearheads barely touched Li Daoxuan's body before rebounding violently, as though they had slammed into solid metal. The sharp ringing echoed across the field as the force of the recoil sent the soldiers stumbling backward several steps.

Swordsmen rushed in next. Their blades hacked down with full strength, only to deflect off Li Daoxuan's raised arm. Each impact produced a sharp metallic clang, twisting the blades slightly and jolting the swordsmen's wrists so badly that several cried out in pain.

A wave of horrified gasps spread through the ranks.

"What kind of monster is this?"

"To preserve my dashing good looks," Li Daoxuan said lightly, amusement lacing his voice, "it seems I should wear a mask."

With exaggerated elegance, he produced a metal mask and placed it over his face.

The mask bore a painted image that perfectly matched his own features, down to the smallest detail.

"What an absurd affectation," a soldier muttered under his breath, utterly baffled.

Despite the murmurs and shock, the clash did not stop. Li Daoxuan continued forward at the same steady pace, step after step, never wavering as he closed the distance to Ding Qirui.

"Charge! Take him down!"

Sensing that something was deeply wrong, the border guards finally surged in together. This time, there was no hesitation. Swords, spears, halberds, and every weapon at hand were brought down upon Li Daoxuan in a frenzy.

The air filled with an unbroken clamor of metal striking metal.

Yet, no matter how concentrated their assault became, not a single strike had any effect.

Li Daoxuan casually swung his fist once. The guard directly in his path let out a scream as his body was launched backward, crashing to the ground with limbs splayed awkwardly.

"Move aside," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "I only deal with those blocking my way."

He ignored the attacks coming from behind and from both sides, continuing his relentless march forward without sparing them another glance.

The sight was terrifying.

From atop his horse, Ding Qirui stared at the scene unfolding below. Weapons crashed against Li Daoxuan's body without pause, yet the man advanced as though he were walking through rain. With every step, he drew closer, and the painted face on his iron mask seemed to curl into a mocking smile.

"Stop him! Stop him now!" Ding Qirui screamed, his voice shrill and undignified.

No one could stop him.

Spears snapped, swords dulled and chipped, and still Li Daoxuan remained unharmed.

"He must be wearing armor under his robes!"

"How thick would it have to be? My spear would pierce normal armor easily!"

"At least two inches of iron!"

"That's impossible. The weight alone would crush him."

"And yet his build looks completely ordinary!"

"Damn it, nothing works!"

"Just stop him!"

Li Daoxuan continued forward, his steps measured and steady, each one pressing down on Ding Qirui's nerves like a hammer.

Ding Qirui's composure shattered completely. Even his horse sensed the unnatural danger and began to retreat, hooves scraping anxiously against the ground.

Animals trusted instinct more than reason, and every instinct it had was screaming that the man approaching was not human.

"What are you?" Ding Qirui asked hoarsely.

Li Daoxuan laughed and tilted his head back slightly. The painted face on the mask seemed to echo his amusement. "An emissary sent by the Heavens to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked. Do you believe me?"

"I believe you as much as I believe in ghosts," Ding Qirui snapped, forcing himself to sneer.

At that moment, a sword slashed in from the side, striking Li Daoxuan's shoulder. He caught the blade with a backhanded grip. His bare hand closed around the sharpened edge, yet no blood appeared. The soldier froze in horror, released the sword, and stumbled backward.

Li Daoxuan took the weapon and flicked his wrist, sending it spinning toward Ding Qirui. "Behold. Little Li's Flying Dagger."

The sword flew wildly and missed Ding Qirui by a wide margin.

Even so, Ding Qirui shrieked in terror and tumbled off his horse in a heap.

His attendants rushed to help him up, but the horse, completely panicked, spun around and bolted, disappearing in moments.

"My horse!" Ding Qirui shouted helplessly.

When he looked up again, Li Daoxuan was even closer.

"Form a line! Stop him!" Ding Qirui screamed.

By now, everyone understood the truth. This man was not human.

The border guards who had charged earlier now retreated step by step, courage drained from their bodies. Only a few stubborn or foolish souls remained in Li Daoxuan's path.

Li Daoxuan brushed one aside and crossed the remaining distance in a blink.

Ding Qirui's loyal retainers rushed forward. One wrapped his arms around Li Daoxuan's waist and shouted desperately, "Master, flee! I will hold him!"

"Oh, how dramatic," Li Daoxuan said lazily. "If I smashed your back a few times and you coughed blood while saying that, it would really move the audience."

The retainer froze, utterly confused.

Ding Qirui turned to flee, but Li Daoxuan lifted the man clinging to him and threw him like a sack.

The body slammed into Ding Qirui, sending both crashing to the ground.

Li Daoxuan stepped forward and placed his foot firmly on Ding Qirui's chest.

No one moved.

Ding Qirui was paralyzed with fear. He wanted to beg, but pride strangled the words before they could escape. For a high official, losing face like this was worse than death.

Li Daoxuan did not kill him. He merely looked toward Wang Ji and shook his head slightly.

"Official Wang," he said calmly, "you conduct yourself with far more dignity. Two days ago, we spoke peacefully. But this one here..."

He clicked his tongue softly.

"What a pity."

Chapter 1017: How to Handle the Situation

The atmosphere was stretched taut, as though a single careless breath might tear it apart.

Li Daoxuan remained standing exactly where he was, one foot planted firmly on Ding Qirui's chest, his posture relaxed yet utterly unyielding. Around them, the border soldiers stood locked in a tense standoff, none daring to advance, none daring to retreat.

Ding Qirui lay flat on the ground, rigid as a corpse. He did not dare move even the slightest bit, fearing that any motion might provoke this terrifying man into crushing him outright. Yet remaining perfectly

still for so long was its own kind of torture. His back began to itch, then his legs, then his shoulders, until the sensation spread through his entire body like ants crawling beneath his skin.

His thoughts drifted, unwillingly and absurdly.

Why does my whole body itch just from lying here? And how can this man stand on one foot, pressing me down, without twitching at all? Does he not feel tired? Does he not feel numb?

Li Daoxuan, of course, felt nothing of the sort. Standing there was effortless.

One man lay pinned to the earth, humiliated and terrified. The other stood above him, calm and unmoving. The soldiers surrounding them wanted to intervene, yet none possessed the courage to step forward. And so, half an hour passed in this grotesque stalemate.

From afar, Zhao Bazong and his men watched in stunned silence.

Three thousand border soldiers stared at the scene, eyes wide, minds blank.

That strange young hero had truly charged alone into Ding Qirui's army and subdued him with sheer force.

Good heavens.

At this moment, they finally believed him completely. Two days ago, Li Daoxuan had insisted he was not delaying for time, and now the truth was laid bare. He had never lied.

This man genuinely possessed the strength to walk through an entire army by himself.

Another half hour slipped by.

Then Li Daoxuan suddenly spoke. "They are here. The supplies have arrived."

The soldiers exchanged confused looks, murmurs spreading through both camps.

Almost immediately, scouts from both sides galloped back at full speed, shouting as they rode. "A convoy. The convoy is here. A massive one. It stretches for more than a mile, loaded with goods. Supplies have arrived."

Zhao Bazong's face lit up with pure joy. Ding Qirui and Wang Ji, on the other hand, were struck dumb.

They actually came?

Both armies turned as one, gazes fixed on the official road to the southeast.

Dust rolled into the sky.

Every soldier present was a veteran. Experienced generals knew how to read the signs written in dust. With a single glance, they could estimate the size of an approaching force.

And with that glance alone, everyone understood that a massive convoy was approaching.

"They really came."

Zhao Bazong was so excited his voice trembled. "He did not lie to us. He really did not."

As the dust cloud drew closer, the details became clear. There were two separate convoys. One flew merchant banners belonging to the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory. The other was a military supply train bearing the banner of Shi Jian, Regional Commander of Yansui.

A junior officer riding at the front shouted loudly, his voice echoing across the plain. "Are those the Yinchuan border troops ahead? Stop fighting. Stop fighting at once. By order of Regional Commander Shi Jian, I am escorting relief supplies. You will not go hungry anymore. Put down your weapons and stop fighting."

Zhao Bazong's three thousand soldiers erupted into cheers.

Ding Qirui and Wang Ji were still in shock, but the border troops under their command had also gone unpaid for a long time, often surviving on meager rations. Many had not eaten a proper meal in ages. Seeing such a massive convoy, how could they not cheer as well?

Cheers rose from both sides at once, and the hostility that had filled the air moments ago dissolved instantly.

Only then did Li Daoxuan lift his foot from Ding Qirui's chest.

"You may get up now."

Ding Qirui scrambled to rise, but his body had been pressed flat for far too long. Halfway up, his legs gave out and he collapsed again, limbs numb and unresponsive.

Attendants from both sides rushed forward to help him steady himself.

Li Daoxuan paid them no attention and strode directly toward the convoy.

Two people were in charge. One was the steward of the merchant caravan, the other a so called junior officer dispatched by Gao Family Village under Shi Jian's name.

Upon seeing Li Daoxuan, both immediately bowed. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, the supplies have been delivered with utmost urgency, exactly as you instructed."

"Well done," Li Daoxuan replied calmly. "This counts as a great merit."

Both men were overjoyed.

Li Daoxuan turned away from the convoy and faced the two groups of border soldiers. "Now form two orderly lines. Supplies will be distributed in turn. Anyone who shoves, cuts in line, or disobeys the staff will receive nothing."

The effect of his words was immediate and astonishing.

With a series of crisp movements, the soldiers formed two neat lines.

Ding Qirui burned with silent fury. I am the commander here. Why are my soldiers listening to him instead of me?

Wang Ji, however, let out a long, weary sigh. Several days earlier, Li Daoxuan had told him plainly that border mutinies could not be solved by force alone, that economic measures were essential. Watching the scene before him, the truth could not have been clearer.

Whoever provided food and clothing was a parent. Whoever failed to do so became an enemy.

If the court could not feed these soldiers, someone else inevitably would.

Wang Ji thought deeply. That young hero told me to raise cattle, sheep, and horses, to develop the northern grasslands without fearing the Mongols. I truly must take those words seriously.

Soon, the sun sank completely below the horizon.

Torches were lit, and the convoy continued distributing supplies in an orderly manner through the night.

Meanwhile, Ding Qirui, Wang Ji, Zhao Bazong, and the other leaders gathered together. Both sides regarded each other stiffly, the tension far from gone.

Li Daoxuan walked over and sat down. "Alright. Let us discuss how to handle the aftermath."

Ding Qirui spoke first. "They led troops in rebellion. If this is not accounted for properly, the imperial court will never let it pass."

Zhao Bazong scowled, anger flashing in his eyes, but under the circumstances, he swallowed his words and remained silent.

Li Daoxuan spoke for him. "If the court had not defaulted on their pay, would they have come demanding wages? What sort of reasoning is that?"

"Rebellion is rebellion," Ding Qirui replied stiffly. "Regardless of the reason, rebellion is a capital crime."

"Tch." Li Daoxuan clicked his tongue. "I truly cannot stand officials speaking in that tone."

The moment he said this, Ding Qirui shut his mouth immediately, fear flooding his face as memories of being pinned to the ground resurfaced.

Li Daoxuan turned to Zhao Bazong. "You were demanding wages, not rebelling. Is that correct?"

Zhao Bazong understood instantly that Li Daoxuan was giving him a way out. He nodded quickly. "Yes. We were only demanding our pay."

"Good," Li Daoxuan said. "Then the matter is simple. Zhao Bazong gathered three thousand soldiers whose wages were overdue and came to the gates of Yinchuan to demand payment. The numbers were large, but they did not attack the city, nor did they kill anyone. They only shouted a few demands outside the gates. Does that violate the Great Ming Code?"

Ding Qirui cursed inwardly. You are clearly favoring them. They even half built siege equipment. If that is not rebellion, what is?

As if hearing his thoughts, Li Daoxuan continued, "Minister Ding, what comes after the line, 'Of all evil deeds, lust is foremost'?"

Ding Qirui answered reflexively, "Judge by deeds, not by intent. If judged by intent, no one in the world would be innocent."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "Exactly. Apply that here. Did they attack the city? No. As long as no attack occurred, it does not constitute mass rebellion. At most, it is a large group demanding wages."

Ding Qirui was left speechless.

"Minister Ding," Li Daoxuan added calmly, "as a civil official, you must be very skilled at writing memorials. Frame this matter properly, and everything can be smoothed over."

Chapter 1018: Who Truly Cares for Them

Ding Qirui cursed inwardly, his chest still faintly aching from where Li Daoxuan's foot had pressed him into the ground earlier, yet he did not dare show the slightest trace of resistance on his face as he lowered his head and spoke in a subdued tone, "Understood. After I return, I will reflect deeply on this matter, draft a memorial to the throne, and do my utmost to smooth things over for them."

Before his words had fully settled, Wang Ji immediately followed up, afraid that even a moment's delay might cause things to change again. "I will also submit a memorial identical to Commissioner Ding's," he said earnestly. "With memorials from both of us corroborating each other, His Majesty will certainly believe that this matter was handled properly."

Only then did Zhao Bazong and the others finally let out the breath they had been holding for what felt like an eternity.

For these rough frontier officers, the fear was not the clash of blades or the charge of cavalry, but the reckoning that came afterward, the cold, ink stained lines of an imperial document that could decide life and death with a single stroke. Now, with two high ranking civil officials willing to stand in front and speak on their behalf, the shadow hanging over their heads finally seemed to lift.

The seven men exchanged glances, then hurriedly expressed their resolve, swearing that from this day forward they would obey the law, serve the court loyally, and never again stir up trouble for the empire, their words spilling out in a rush as though loyalty itself could be proven by speed alone.

Li Daoxuan listened to them for a moment, then laughed softly and waved a hand, interrupting them mid flow. "Don't rush to pledge loyalty just yet," he said lightly. "Words are cheap. Let me ask you this instead. If you return to your posts and, after another year or two, your military pay is still delayed, still missing, still nowhere to be seen, what then? Will everything you just said turn into nothing but empty air?"

The seven men froze, their expressions stiffening all at once.

No one answered.

Ding Qirui and Wang Ji both felt a faint heat creep up their faces, as though the question had struck them just as hard as it had struck the frontier generals.

Li Daoxuan turned his gaze toward Wang Ji, his tone no longer teasing. "You are the Governor of Yinchuan. All civil administration in this region ultimately falls under your authority. Two days ago, I already spoke with you about this. If the issue of frontier army pay is not resolved at its root, rebellion is not a question of if, but when, and each time it happens, it will only grow larger and more uncontrollable, until the situation collapses completely."

Wang Ji straightened his posture and replied solemnly, "Young Hero, everything you discussed with me that day, I have kept firmly in my heart."

Li Daoxuan nodded slowly. "Large scale livestock farming, cattle and horses alike, must be pushed forward as soon as possible. Governor Wang, you understand internal administration far better than I do. I should not need to spell out the specific measures for you, correct?"

Wang Ji cupped his hands respectfully. "Young Hero, you may rest assured. This time, I very nearly lost my life. Even if only for my own survival, I will seize this matter firmly and see it through. However..." He hesitated for a moment before voicing the doubt that had been weighing on him. "If Yinchuan truly develops large scale livestock farming, how are these animals and their products to be sold?"

At these words, Li Daoxuan fell silent, as though deliberately leaving the question hanging in the air.

Before Wang Ji could grow anxious, the manager of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory suddenly stepped forward from the side, his movements quick and practiced, and presented a calling card with both hands. "Governor," he said respectfully, "I am the manager of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory. This time, I came to Yinchuan to conduct business with the local herders. In the future, our factory is willing to purchase their wool in large quantities. However, the herders roam constantly and lack fixed residences, making it difficult for us to contact them directly. We hope the imperial court can step in and help organize this process."

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly, as though everything had fallen neatly into place. "Lord Wang, I will teach you a simple way to make money," he said. "Have the government establish an Official Wool Collection Station. Let the herders bring their wool there, and let the government purchase it at a standardized price. When the Warm and Sleepy caravan arrives, they can buy the wool directly from the government. The court takes a small, reasonable margin in between. Is that not far more reliable than squeezing the people through taxes? Not only does it avoid the infamy of tax collection, it earns praise for genuinely benefiting the people."

Zhao Bazong's eyes lit up immediately upon hearing this. "Many families of the frontier army also raise livestock," he added eagerly. "But the quantities are small, so large merchants usually ignore them. If the government opens a collection station, even our small amounts of wool would have somewhere to go. That would solve the livelihoods of many frontier households."

Wang Ji fell into deep thought.

The more he considered it, the clearer the advantages became. As long as the price difference was modest and his subordinates were strictly supervised to prevent deliberate price suppression, this policy could bring stable revenue while preserving a good reputation. It was rare to find a measure that benefited both the state and the people so cleanly.

As he was pondering this, Li Daoxuan let out another soft laugh. "Lord Wang, you are thinking about how to strictly manage your subordinates so they do not lower prices and harm the people, aren't you?"

Wang Ji was startled. "Oh? Young Hero, you seem to understand this very well."

"I do," Li Daoxuan replied calmly. "No matter how strict the supervision, there will always be those who line their own pockets by suppressing prices and exploiting the people. If you want to prevent official collection stations from doing this, there is only one effective method."

Wang Ji leaned forward slightly, his expression earnest. "What method? Please enlighten me, Young Hero."

"Do not allow government stations to form a monopoly," Li Daoxuan said. "Grant the common people the right to establish private wool collection stations as well."

Wang Ji paused, momentarily stunned. "Oh?"

"Herders are not fools," Li Daoxuan continued patiently. "If official stations suppress prices too harshly, herders will naturally turn to private stations. If the officials cannot buy any wool, those who wish to profit illicitly will find themselves with empty hands and will be forced to raise prices again. This is the market regulating itself. Likewise, if private stations collude to manipulate prices, the government station only needs to raise its own price, and the private ones will instantly lose their profit margin."

Wang Ji's eyes widened as understanding dawned on him. "That... does make sense."

"Of course," Li Daoxuan added, "there is always the possibility of collusion between officials and private merchants. As this policy develops, new problems will certainly emerge. Still, I trust that a provincial governor is not an incompetent man and will be able to deal with them appropriately."

Wang Ji straightened and declared firmly, "I have been enlightened. Young Hero, your insight is extraordinary. I will put this method into practice."

A few days later.

After returning to Guyuan, Ding Qirui reported the Yinchuan incident in detail to Hong Chengchou, the Supreme Commander of the three border regions of Shaanxi. He explained that earlier reports had been mistaken, that the Yinchuan frontier army had not truly rebelled, but had merely gathered beneath the city walls to demand long overdue pay. Upon arriving, he had mediated impartially, inviting Governor Wang Ji and the frontier generals to negotiate together.

In the end, Wang Ji had borrowed grain and silver from merchants, advancing the soldiers' pay, while also implementing a series of internal policies aimed at increasing local revenue and supplies, with the goal of gradually eliminating reliance on external subsidies.

After hearing the report, Hong Chengchou felt that something about it was not quite right, yet suppressing the issue and keeping it from escalating was, in the end, the best possible outcome.

Some time later, the news reached the capital.

Emperor Zhu Youjian read the memorial and finally felt a weight lift from his heart. He issued an imperial rescript, praising Ding Qirui for handling the situation properly and easing the court's concerns, and promoted him to Right Administration Commissioner.

As for the Yinchuan frontier army.

They knew very clearly who truly cared for them.

It was not Wang Ji. It was not Ding Qirui.

It was that mysterious Young Hero who had appeared out of nowhere, and the caravan he had brought with him.

From the caravan, the frontier soldiers obtained copies of Tales of Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demonic Exorcisms. After reading it, they finally understood why the Young Hero could remain unscathed by blades and spears, why he could charge alone into an army and capture Ding Qirui with his bare hands.

As a result, the Dao Xuan Tianzun Daoist Sect rapidly gained followers among the frontier troops.

For a time, the phrase "Dao Xuan Tianzun bless us" was heard more often in the barracks than "Amitabha Buddha."

While Li Daoxuan's influence quietly spread across the northwestern frontier...

In central Henan, at Pingdingshan, Lao Huihui was leading three thousand iron cavalry in a steady retreat deeper into the mountains.

There was no other choice.

Zuo Liangyu, Zu Kuan, and Luo Dai had divided their forces into three columns, closing in from multiple directions, while behind them, the armies of He Renlong, Cao Wenzhao, and Lu Xiangheng pressed forward relentlessly.

The imperial forces were vast and overwhelming.

Even with elite frontier iron cavalry under his command, Lao Huihui could not withstand such a coordinated encirclement and could only withdraw for the time being, waiting for an opening that might never come.

Chapter 1019: Is That Yours?

After the great battle of Luzhou, the situation of the rebel forces changed drastically.

Due to the unexpected intervention of the Gao Family Village Militia, what had originally been a chaotic but expansive rebel alliance collapsed in a single stroke. The armies of the seventy two allied rebel groups were utterly routed, scattering in all directions like startled birds. Some fled into the hills, others vanished into forests and valleys, and the once intimidating main force of the rebel army dissolved almost overnight, hiding deep within the vast Dabie Mountains.

This was not unique to the late Ming era.

Even in modern times, once an armed force hid itself in complex mountainous terrain, it was nearly impossible for an outside army to completely wipe them out. In an age without radar, without satellite positioning, without fast transport or real time communication, the imperial forces could only stare at the endless mountain ranges in frustration, knowing the enemy was there, yet unable to grasp them.

The imperial troops were powerless.

The Gao Family Village militia was no exception.

Bai Yuan and Shi Kefa had both attempted pursuit after Luzhou, but after several futile searches through treacherous terrain, they were forced to acknowledge reality. Bai Yuan led his men back to Luoyang, while Shi Kefa withdrew his forces to Anqing Prefecture. Other imperial units continued hunting scattered bands of roaming rebels, but the core threat had already slipped through their fingers.

As a result, the rebel force still active in Henan, the one led by Lao Huihui, became the primary target of the imperial armies.

Lao Huihui's troops were all cavalry.

On open plains, they were swift as the wind, striking and retreating before enemies could react. But in the mountains, that same advantage turned into a crippling weakness. Horses struggled on narrow paths, slipped on rocky slopes, and tired quickly at altitude.

Recognizing this, the imperial army spread out a wide net.

From the east, the west, the north, and the south, multiple columns advanced, sealing off escape routes and steadily tightening the encirclement. Each movement was deliberate, each step calculated, forcing Lao Huihui to retreat again and again, until there was nowhere left to go.

Eventually, he was driven into Pingdingshan.

At that moment, Lao Huihui stood atop a mountain peak more than five hundred meters above sea level, staring silently toward the southeast. The distant ridgelines overlapped endlessly, layer upon layer, while faint traces of smoke from imperial camps drifted in the valleys below.

A scout hurried up the slope and knelt. "Chief," he reported, his voice strained, "our horses are suffering badly in this terrain. Several have already injured their legs. I am afraid... they can no longer be used."

Lao Huihui nodded slowly, his expression dark and heavy.

The situation had truly become dire.

By refusing to align himself with Li Zicheng and the other major rebel leaders, he had chosen independence, but that choice had also isolated him completely. Now, trapped in Pingdingshan, commanding a cavalry force unsuited for mountain warfare, he knew that if the imperial troops launched a full scale assault, he would have no effective way to respond.

All he could do was hope they would hesitate.

Yet deep down, he knew better.

Among the pursuing generals, Zuo Liangyu was the one he feared most. In the past, Zuo Liangyu had fallen into his ambush and narrowly escaped with his life. The humiliation and hatred from that defeat ran bone deep. Now that the imperial army held the overwhelming advantage, how could Zuo Liangyu possibly resist the temptation to crush him completely?

"Chief," one of his subordinates said carefully, "we can retreat west. The imperial troops have blocked the east, south, and north, but they cannot fully encircle the west. It is all continuous mountain ranges. As long as we cross those mountains, we can break free."

Lao Huihui asked calmly, "And after crossing the mountains, where do we end up?"

The subordinate hesitated before answering. "After crossing the mountains, we would reach Luan County. Further west from there lies Shangnan County."

"Shangnan County..." Lao Huihui repeated softly.

The name stirred an old memory. Back when the roaming rebels wreaked havoc in Yunyang, Shangnan had been the site of several brutal engagements. He frowned deeply. "The Shangnan garrison is no pushover. What was their commander's name again? Luo... Xi. Yes, Luo Xi."

The subordinate nodded. "That's him. Reports say he has repelled several rebel forces already. He is extremely difficult to deal with."

Lao Huihui let out a long sigh. "I truly do not wish to retreat toward Shangnan County. Luo Xi alone is troublesome enough, but once we move that way, we will be buried deep in continuous mountain ranges. Communication with Master Bai will become extremely difficult. Without his grain supplies..."

His voice trailed off, his expression souring. "Without food support, we will return to being nothing more than a roaming bandit army."

Silence fell.

These men were originally border garrison troops. They had never wanted to become bandits. In their hearts, they did not see themselves as criminals. They had risen only because of unpaid wages, discrimination as surrendered troops, and years of mistreatment.

Recently, with Master Bai providing steady grain assistance, they no longer needed to pillage towns or raid granaries like common bandits. For a brief period, they had even begun to remember what it felt like to be proper soldiers again.

If supplies were cut off now, forcing them back into looting, the psychological blow would be unbearable.

Just as despair crept in, another scout came running up the mountain, nearly stumbling in his haste. "Urgent report! Master Bai's people have arrived!"

Lao Huihui's eyes lit up instantly. "Quickly, bring him here!"

Moments later, a Gao Family Village intelligence agent was escorted forward. He was dressed in night black clothing, blending naturally with the shadows, yet embroidered on his chest was the image of Dao Xuan Tianzun, marking him unmistakably as one of Master Bai's men.

Lao Huihui laughed, genuinely pleased. "With so many imperial camps surrounding us, it must have taken considerable effort for you to get in."

The agent smiled faintly. "It was not difficult. Zuo Liangyu's army lacks discipline. Their camps are full of gaps. Slipping in was easy. I am here to deliver a message."

Lao Huihui's expression turned solemn. "What does Master Bai say?"

The agent replied calmly, "Instructor Bai advises that you lead your army west, cross the mountains, proceed first to Luan County, but do not attack the county seat. Bypass it entirely, move only through mountain roads, and continue on to Shangnan County."

Lao Huihui's heart sank slightly. "Even Master Bai suggests Shangnan..." He shook his head. "I had already considered that route. There is no other way out. But once we enter Shangnan, communication with Luoyang will be extremely difficult. And Luo Xi is no ordinary opponent."

The agent chuckled softly. "General, you need not worry about Luo Xi. Once you enter Shangnan County, avoid attacking towns or villages. Simply move through the mountains. Luo Xi will not fight you. Not only that, he will provide you with grain. You may send someone to inform him of your location, and supplies will be delivered."

Lao Huihui stiffened. "Luo Xi... is one of yours?"

"Indeed," the agent replied lightly.

Lao Huihui's pupils shrank in shock.

The agent continued, "After that, you may proceed to Shangluo Pass, then cross Wu Pass."

"I can just cross Wu Pass?" Lao Huihui blurted out. "That is heavily guarded!"

"The Wu Pass garrison will pretend not to see you," the agent said calmly.

A cold breath escaped Lao Huihui's lips. There was no need to ask further. Wu Pass was also theirs.

"After crossing Wu Pass," the agent went on, "you will reach Shanyang County. There is a mountain there called Tianzhu Mountain. You may camp there. People inside will receive you and provide provisions."

Lao Huihui's heart pounded violently. "That is dangerously close to Xi'an. The closer we get, the stronger the imperial resistance should be."

The agent shook his head. "No. The closer you get to Xi'an, the more support we will provide. At that point, you will never lack food or safety."

Lao Huihui's body trembled. "Xi'an... is it also... yours?"

The agent smiled and said nothing. "I cannot say more. Spies are everywhere. General, if you trust us, follow this route."

Lao Huihui straightened, his doubts swept aside. "Understood. How could I not trust Master Bai? Among everyone in this world, he is the one I trust most."

The agent clasped his hands and withdrew.

Lao Huihui clenched his fists, made his decision, and issued the order with a firm voice, "The entire army moves west. Cross Pingdingshan. Head for Shangnan County."

In the rolling mountains, the rebel cavalry began to move once more, unknowingly stepping deeper into a web far larger than they could yet comprehend.

Chapter 1020: This Group Is Formidable

Lao Huihui had sensed it for some time already.

Mr. Bai's strength did not stop at Xiaolangdi.

Xiaolangdi was nothing more than a naval base. It had no vast farmland, no major commerce, no way to endlessly support thousands of cavalry on its own. Yet supplies kept flowing. Grain, fodder, equipment, all arriving with unsettling precision.

That meant only one thing.

Someone far more powerful was standing behind Mr. Bai.

Lao Huihui had guessed there was a backer. What he had not imagined was that the backer would be this terrifying.

This force clearly had enormous ambitions. It might even rival the Chuǎng King himself. But unlike the Chuǎng King's crude, grassroots rebellion, these people moved with discipline, order, and an almost frightening sense of planning.

After weighing it carefully, Lao Huihui made a decision.

He had to see it with his own eyes.

Three thousand elite cavalry set out immediately, beginning the most grueling march of their campaign.

They were all cavalry, and mountains were the natural enemy of horses. Steep slopes tore at hooves. Loose rocks injured legs. Every step forward came with losses. Warhorses limped. Soldiers clenched their teeth and said nothing.

But stopping was not an option.

If they slowed down, the imperial armies would close in from all sides.

So they endured.

They crossed Pingding Mountain, skirted Zhaoping Lake, and forced their way through Yaoshan, Baiyun Mountain, and Funiu Mountain. All the while, imperial troops chased them relentlessly.

Zuo Liangyu, burning with hatred and desperate for revenge, pursued them harder than anyone. Yet even he was forced to give up in the end. The terrain was too brutal. If even Zuo Liangyu could not continue, the rest of the imperial detachments stood no chance.

At last, Lao Huihui shook them all off and entered Shangnan County's territory.

Following the intelligence officer's instructions, he deliberately avoided the county town and surrounding villages. The army slipped into Yinyang Gully, north of Shangnan County.

By this point, exhaustion had reached its limit.

Men collapsed the moment they dismounted. Provisions were nearly gone. If aid did not arrive soon, Lao Huihui would have no choice but to return to the old ways, storming cities and looting government granaries.

He sent out a scout.

The man dressed himself as a common hunter and slipped out of the gully alone, heading straight for Shangnan County town.

When he reached the barracks of Luo Xi, the Shangnan military commander, he barely had to speak before he was escorted inside.

Luo Xi personally received him.

"Lao Huihui is at Yinyang Gully?" Luo Xi asked.

"Yes," the scout replied. "We urgently need provisions."

As the words left his mouth, his heart tightened. If Luo Xi turned out to be an enemy, this visit would doom the entire army. Not only would supplies fail to arrive, imperial troops would follow close behind.

That would be a dead end.

Luo Xi laughed softly. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun already gave instructions. I have been waiting for you for a long time."

He waved his hand. "The supplies are prepared. I will dispatch the convoy immediately. You can lead them back."

The scout's eyes lit up.

Still, he remained cautious.

If what followed him was not a supply convoy but an army, he would become the man who betrayed his own general.

An hour later, his doubts vanished.

What Luo Xi sent was exactly what he promised. Cart after cart of grain. Each wagon escorted by only two soldiers. No hidden troops. No ambush.

This force posed no threat at all to three thousand elite cavalry.

Only then did the scout finally relax and lead the convoy into Yinyang Gully.

When the grain was unloaded and stacked before him, Lao Huihui at last lowered his guard.

His trust in Mr. Bai, and in the power behind him, deepened.

"Good," Lao Huihui said. "We advance through Shangluo Pass and head for Xi'an."

With a single command, the cavalry turned west.

They had not gone far when something caught everyone's attention.

Below the mountain, a gray road cut cleanly through Shangluo Pass, stretching toward Wuguan Pass. It was wide, hard, and unnaturally smooth. Merchants filled it. Vehicles of every kind moved along it. And among the carts were massive iron vehicles carrying loads that would have been impossible before.

Lao Huihui and his men stared in silence.

"How did the official road become like this?"

"What kind of road is that?"

"And those iron carts... they're moving on their own?"

Lao Huihui's expression hardened. "Be careful. Shangluo Pass is no longer what we remember. The changes here are too great."

They did not dare step onto the road.

Instead, they led their horses through the forests beside it, moving parallel until Wuguan Pass came into view.

Colorful banners flew atop the walls.

Lao Huihui's eyes widened. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun's banners."

Joy surged through him. "Wuguan belongs to them."

He immediately sent a scout ahead.

Not long after, the gates of Wuguan Pass opened. Soldiers emerged, their chests embroidered with the image of the Dao Xuan Tianzun. They moved with crisp efficiency, blocking the official road several li in both directions.

Merchants and travelers were halted. A perfect vacuum zone formed in front of the pass.

Under the guidance of the Wuguan garrison, Lao Huihui's army passed through safely and entered Shaanxi territory. The moment they were through, they turned away from the road and disappeared back into the forests.

Only after they vanished did the soldiers lift the blockade.

The road resumed its flow as if nothing had happened.

From the mountains, Lao Huihui watched carts and iron vehicles roll past once more. His heart was filled with awe.

"This group's organizational ability is terrifying," he murmured. "They sealed off several li of official road and let us pass without a single soul noticing. Even the imperial court cannot manage this."

His subordinates nodded.

"When the court blocks roads, soldiers slack off," one said. "They take bribes, let people through, and the blockade turns into a joke."

Lao Huihui exhaled slowly. "These people grow more inscrutable by the day. Let's move on. Tianzhu Mountain."

They marched on.

Before long, Tianzhu Mountain came into view.

What they saw shocked them.

Temples dotted the slopes. Houses clustered along paths. Factories hummed. Farmland spread across the lower reaches. This was not a desolate hideout at all.

It was lively.

Too lively.

Lao Huihui frowned. "Stationing us rebels here? Aren't they afraid the people will leak information?"

As he pondered this, an old man rode toward them. His posture was straight, his movements steady. He laughed warmly as he approached.

"I am Luo Xi's father," the old man said.

Lao Huihui clasped his hands. "Old General Luo."

The old man laughed. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun has entrusted Tianzhu Mountain to this old man for now. Since you have arrived, I will handle all arrangements."

Lao Huihui followed him.

At the foot of Tianzhu Mountain stood a massive estate, Luo Xi's ancestral home. A mountain path wound upward beside it. At the entrance stood an enormous gate.

Upon it were written six large characters.

Tianzhu Mountain Labor Reform Camp