

Great Ming 1031

Chapter 1031 The Xuan De Imperial Proclamation

In the age of wooden sailing ships, the carrying capacity of a single vessel could be astonishing enough to defy intuition.

Take the famed Spanish galleons as an example. Under ordinary circumstances, they could easily accommodate more than a hundred sailors on long ocean voyages, their decks and holds arranged to endure months at sea. When the moment of decisive battle arrived, they could cram in more than five hundred men, transforming the ship into something like a moving fortress of wood and canvas, bristling with bodies, weapons, and cannon fire.

The iron steamships built by Bai Gongzi, however, were a completely different matter.

They simply could not carry that many people. It was not a matter of poor design or lack of ambition. It was genuinely impossible.

The iron hull itself was already crushingly heavy, and on top of that came the enormous steam engines that squatted within the ship's belly like iron beasts. To make a steam engine run over long distances, the vessel also had to carry a staggering amount of coal. This was not light cargo. A single hold filled with coal could weigh more than ten thousand jin, roughly equivalent to the combined weight of a hundred grown men pressed together.

Standing by the plans, Bai Gongzi shook his head slowly, his expression thoughtful. "Their troop transport capability is quite weak."

A Blue Hat official standing beside him nodded and spoke after a moment's consideration. "Bai Gongzi, it seems our steamships cannot all be built to the same design. We will have to divide them into different categories."

"Oh?" Bai Gongzi turned slightly, interest flickering in his eyes. "And how would you categorize them?"

The Blue Hat explained carefully, choosing his words as he laid out the idea. "Ships fitted with more cannons should carry fewer troops and specialize purely in artillery engagements. On the other hand, ships meant to transport a large number of soldiers should not mount cannons at all, focusing instead

on speed, landing operations, and close-quarters fighting. Beyond that, we can also design ships dedicated entirely to supply. Such vessels would only require a small crew to operate, abandon cannons and armor altogether to minimize weight, and devote all their carrying capacity to coal. These supply ships could follow behind the fleet, much like the logistics trains that support an army on land, allowing the main warships to carry less coal and reduce their own burden."

Bai Gongzi's eyes brightened. He let out a small laugh and nodded. "Excellent. A very excellent point. It seems we truly must design several types of ships and assemble them into a mixed grand fleet. Unfortunately, I am not well versed in military strategy. As for how this mixed fleet should be composed, what exact roles each ship should play, and how they should cooperate in battle, I will need to consult proper combat professionals before finalizing the designs."

The Blue Hat immediately volunteered, "I will summon Bai Yang and Dao Ke at once. Those two were pirate leaders before their reform in the labor camps, and they have real experience at sea. They should be able to offer useful advice."

"There's no need to rush," Bai Gongzi replied calmly. "Rushing will not make things happen any faster. Building even a single iron ship takes at least half a year, often more. Dao Xuan Tianzun has already said that achieving naval supremacy over the Westerners is a task that will take generations of sustained effort. It is not something that can be accomplished overnight."

As he spoke, another thought surfaced in his mind. He paused and asked, "By the way, how are the preparations for the Naval Industrial Academy coming along?"

Another Blue Hat stepped forward and reported, "It will be ready to open next month and can begin enrolling its first batch of students then."

Bai Gongzi nodded in satisfaction. "Good. We must train a large number of specialized shipbuilding technicians. This is a plan that spans centuries. We cannot continue with the old custom of passing skills only from father to son and never to others. At the same time, ensure that all students undergo strict political background checks. This technology must not fall into Western hands. A long-term technological blockade may be unrealistic, but in the short term, it is entirely achievable."

The Blue Hats exchanged amused looks, and one of them chuckled softly. "Indeed. Dao Xuan Tianzun has also said that it must not fall into Western hands in the short term."

While they were speaking, the group happened to pass by the two brothers from Suzhou.

The brothers exchanged a quick glance, then both lowered their voices instinctively. "Good heavens," one of them whispered, eyes wide with curiosity. "What is this Naval Industrial Academy they're talking about? If we study there, could we become technical workers and wear Blue Hats too? We should definitely go take a look later. We're not Westerners, so they won't block us, right?"

The ninth year of Chongzhen, fifth month. Northeast, Shengjing.

Huang Taiji sat high above, his expression dark as he looked down at Yue Tuo kneeling before him. "The Wushen tribe in the west has stirred up trouble again," he said coldly. "These past few days, they have been attacking several tribes that are aligned with us, throwing everything into complete chaos."

Yue Tuo answered with a strained and embarrassed expression. "The Wushen tribe has the Ming dynasty's great iron vehicles supporting them. At present, we truly have no effective way to counter those machines. The only tactic that has shown any success is to lure them into swamps, marshlands, or shallow rivers, where they cannot advance."

Huang Taiji's brow furrowed deeper. "And what of the spies I sent for the 'Jiang Gan Steals the Letter' operation? Have they still not returned with the blueprints for those great iron vehicles?"

"No, Your Majesty," Yue Tuo replied, his face pale. "We have lost all contact with them. We sent people to search for them three times, but received no response. Not a single one of the agents dispatched afterward has returned."

Huang Taiji's eyes narrowed. "Could it be that..."

Yue Tuo continued quickly, "Stealing an enemy's core technology is an undertaking of extreme danger. It is possible that all of our spies have already perished in the line of duty."

Huang Taiji let out a long sigh. "Then it seems the 'Jiang Gan Steals the Letter' operation has failed. Well, even in Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Jiang Gan's attempt to steal the letter was not a successful stratagem. Our failure here is, perhaps, understandable."

Just as he finished speaking, a group of Han Chinese officials and scholars entered the hall.

Among them were Bao Chengxian, Ning Wanwo, Fan Wencheng, Luo Xiu, and several others, all men whom Huang Taiji held in high esteem. This was no coincidence. Most of the Manchu ministers were illiterate, skilled only in warfare and unfamiliar with the intricacies of governance. For matters of institutions, administration, and statecraft, these Han Chinese officials were indispensable.

Bao Chengxian, Ning Wanwo, Fan Wencheng, Luo Xiu, and the others stepped forward one after another to present their memorials. "Your Majesty," they proclaimed in unison, "your grand strategy is unmatched under Heaven. The time has come for you to formally ascend the imperial throne."

"Formally ascend the imperial throne?" Huang Taiji adopted a look of modest hesitation. With a swift motion, he drew a copy of Romance of the Three Kingdoms from his sleeve and flipped through it rapidly. He stopped at a passage and pointed to the text. "Gentlemen, look here. Chen Qun, Sun Quan, and others once urged Cao Cao to proclaim himself emperor. Yet Cao Cao replied, 'I have served the Han for many years. Though I have rendered service to the people, my position as a king is already the highest honor. How could I dare harbor other ambitions? If Heaven's will lies with me, I shall be King Wen of Zhou.'"

He closed the book and looked at the assembled officials with an earnest expression. "Even a villain like Cao Cao restrained himself and refused to claim the imperial title. How could I possibly dare to do so? Would that not make me appear even worse than him?"

Fan Wencheng stepped forward and spoke calmly. "Cao Cao was a treacherous man, and his ways are indeed not worth imitating. But Liu Xuan De was benevolent and virtuous. He is the one you should learn from. The moment Liu Xuan De entered Xichuan, he immediately declared himself emperor. You now command Liaodong, and like Liu Xuan De, you are favored by Heaven. This realm ought to belong to you. For you to ascend the throne is precisely what righteousness demands."

Huang Taiji stroked his beard and murmured, "When you put it that way, it does seem to make sense."

He pondered for a few heartbeats, then suddenly slammed Romance of the Three Kingdoms onto the table with a loud thud. "Very well," he declared. "I have decided. I shall also ascend the imperial throne. We will call this the Xuan De Imperial Proclamation."

The officials immediately cried out in unison, "Your Majesty is brilliant!"

Huang Taiji laughed softly. "The 'Jiang Gan Steals the Letter' operation failed because it was doomed from the start. But the Xuan De Imperial Proclamation must succeed, because Liu Xuan De's proclamation of emperorship was a great success."

Once again, the officials chorused, "Your Majesty is brilliant!"

Thus the matter was settled. Preparations for the Xuan De Imperial Proclamation began at once, with officials busily arranging ceremonial regalia and laying every necessary foundation for Huang Taiji's ascension.

On the eleventh day of the fourth lunar month, the plan came to fruition. Huang Taiji formally ascended the throne, changed the era name to Chongde, and declared that year to be the first year of Chongde. He changed the dynastic title from Later Jin to Great Qing, established Shengjing as the capital, and received from his ministers the honorific title of Benevolent and Sagacious Emperor of Broad Clemency.

No sooner had the coronation ceremony concluded than Huang Taiji once again pulled out Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Pointing at its pages, he declared loudly to his ministers, "After Liu Bei became emperor, he immediately sent troops to campaign against Cao Cao. I shall follow this example. I hereby decree that Dolo Wuying Prince Ajige will lead an army of one hundred thousand to attack the Ming. This operation shall be named the Xishu Campaign Against Cao."

Ajige hesitated and replied, "Your Majesty, we do not actually have an army of one hundred thousand men."

Huang Taiji flew into a rage. "Fool. At the Battle of Red Cliffs, Cao Cao did not truly have a million soldiers, yet he still claimed to have a million. Can you not read Romance of the Three Kingdoms more often and learn a few more military stratagems?"

Chapter 1032 I Am Destined by Heaven

"My! Heaven! Rabbit! Rending! Overlord! Sword!"

Flat Rabbit roared at the top of his lungs, his voice echoing across the training ground as he sprang high into the air, both hands gripping his sword as he brought it crashing down toward his opponent with all the drama and momentum he could muster.

Ma Shouying, standing calmly opposite him, could not help but shake his head.

In the midst of actual combat, this fellow had leapt straight into the air, arms raised overhead, his entire torso wide open, his balance floating and unsupported. If this had been a real battlefield, he would not merely have been injured. He would have been dead ten times over before he ever landed.

Ma Shouying stepped in and delivered a clean, decisive kick, his foot slamming squarely into Flat Rabbit's abdomen.

Flat Rabbit let out a strangled grunt as his body flew backward, tumbling across the ground before hitting it with a heavy thud. His ancestral sword spun free from his grasp and skidded far away. Clutching his stomach, he writhed on the ground, groaning pitifully. "Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch... Brother Ma... that was vicious... you kicked me so hard!"

Ma Shouying replied evenly, "On a real battlefield, that kind of move would not just hurt. It would send you straight to meet the King of Hell."

Still holding his belly, Flat Rabbit struggled to his feet and began searching around frantically. It took him a long while before he finally retrieved his sword. Then, with his cheeks puffed out in grievance, he muttered, "On the battlefield these days, there's no chance to use moves like that anyway. For years now, enemies do not even get close. They are all shot down by flintlock rifles from a hundred meters away. Swordsmanship is dead, the spirit of the swordsman is dead, ah, it's dead, the sword is dead!"

He spread his arms wide, palms turned toward the sky, and wailed theatrically, "There's no place left for swordsmen anymore!"

Standing nearby, Sun Chuanting scolded him with visible irritation. "If you were actually a swordsman, you might have the right to say something like that. But you are not a swordsman at all. You do not even know a single proper sword move."

Flat Rabbit froze for a heartbeat, then instantly sheathed his sword. He glanced left and right like a thief caught red-handed and quietly slipped away from the scene.

Ma Shouying watched him go and could not help but laugh. "That fellow..."

Sun Chuanting also smiled, though there was a hint of complexity in his expression. "He never behaves seriously, but..."

He deliberately drew out the pause before finishing, "he is very popular among the new students."

Ma Shouying looked surprised. "Someone like him is actually popular?"

Sun Chuanting nodded. "Even though he jokes around all day, he is genuinely kind to the newcomers. He always digs into his own pocket to treat poor students to meals, buys them daily necessities, and whenever someone runs into trouble, he is the first to step forward. These days, whenever the new students face difficulties, the first person they think of is Senior Flat Rabbit. Hahahaha."

Ma Shouying stared at him in silence, momentarily at a loss for words.

As they were speaking, the sound of galloping hooves suddenly rang out. A rider on a fast horse charged through the academy gates, dust billowing behind him.

The rider shouted at the top of his lungs, "Bad news, terrible news. Ah? Headmaster Sun, you are here, perfect. Dao Xuan Tianzun has given the order. All veteran students in the academy must immediately return to their military units. Everyone, right now, at once..."

Sun Chuanting was stunned. "All veterans recalled? Has something major happened?"

The rider shouted back in panic, "The Manchus have invaded. A massive Manchu invasion."

Sun Chuanting's expression changed instantly. "This is extremely bad."

Before long, the alarm of the Yellow Pole Military Academy rang out, shrill and urgent. Teachers and students poured onto the parade ground. Sun Chuanting stood atop the platform and announced loudly, "News has just arrived from beyond the passes. Huang Taiji has ascended the throne, proclaimed himself emperor, and changed his dynastic name to Qing. He has dispatched a hundred thousand troops to invade the passes. Dao Xuan Tianzun commands that all those with military duties immediately suspend their studies and return to their posts."

The entire Yellow Pole Military Academy erupted into chaos.

Wang Er and Bai Mao did not hesitate for even a moment. They immediately rushed out, heading straight for Pingyang Prefecture.

Chen Qianhu, that half-scholar, half-working villain actor, quickly returned to the Puzhou garrison.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu, the two clumsy and good-natured fellows, laughed foolishly, not even sure whether they had truly learned anything. They slapped palms, then split up, one rushing toward Zao Ying's cavalry battalion, the other hurrying toward Hedong Circuit.

Ma Shouying cupped his fists. "I am returning to Tianzhu Mountain to lead my Iron Cavalry Battalion."

At the same time, Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi both leapt up, eager to rush out as well. But halfway through their movement, they suddenly froze.

They seemed to have no unit to return to at all.

The last time they had gone to war, they had led a militia unit under Luo Xi, accompanying him to Shangnan County to resist rebel incursions into Shaanxi. After that battle, Flat Rabbit had been assigned to oversee the labor reform camp at Tianzhu Mountain, while Zheng Gouzi remained with Luo Xi, helping manage the militia.

But that militia unit was now entirely under Luo Xi's direct command.

Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi stood there, dumbstruck.

"Oh no," Flat Rabbit cried out. "Where are we supposed to report back to?"

He wailed in despair, "We're finished. We do not even have a unit anymore."

Zheng Gouzi snapped back angrily, "It's all because you are so stupid. You probably got kicked out of the militia. Now I am stuck suffering because of you."

The two of them could only watch helplessly as everyone else hurried away to their respective posts, leaving them standing there like a pair of wooden statues.

Sun Chuanting walked up behind them, smiling. "You two have not even completed your studies yet. It is only right that you are not returning to the army. Otherwise, a single mistake could cost you both your lives. Stay here and help look after the new students. Coincidentally, I am preparing a large-scale practical exercise. Flat Rabbit, you will serve as the Red Team captain. Zheng Gouzi, you will serve as the Blue Team captain."

Both of them cupped their fists and cried out in grief, "No. We do not want exercises. We want real combat."

Sun Chuanting's face hardened. "You have no room to refuse. That was an order."

The two immediately straightened their backs. "Understood."

Meanwhile...

Outside Dabie Mountain.

Lu Xiangheng deployed his massive army, sealing Dabie Mountain in from all sides.

Trapped within the mountains, Chuǎng Wang Gao Yixian, Chuǎng Jiang (Dashing General) Li Zicheng, the Eight Great Kings, Cao Cao, and their forces had been besieged for months. Every attempt to break out

in search of supplies was intercepted by Lu Xiangheng, leaving them battered and humiliated time and time again.

Food within the mountains had long since run out. They were reduced to scraping tree bark, digging up grass roots, and eating whatever else they could find. With no salt, no sugar, and no fats of any kind, their bodies weakened by the day, and it felt as though they could not endure much longer.

Chuǎng Wang's face was drawn tight with worry. More than half a year earlier, the entire Gao Family Village had come to persuade him to wash his hands of rebellion and start anew. He had refused. At the time, he commanded hundreds of thousands of men, brimming with youthful vigor and ambition, convinced that the empire was already within his grasp.

He had never imagined that he would soon suffer a crushing defeat at Luzhou, that his seventy-two rebel factions would scatter like smoke, and that only tens of thousands would remain at his side.

The rebel army was losing men faster than water evaporated from a shallow puddle under the summer sun.

His once-grand dream of conquering the realm now felt like nothing more than a fading illusion.

And now, it seemed, the time had come to wake up.

A deep sense of despair settled over him, and he began to question the path his life had taken.

Chuǎng Wang turned to Chuǎng Jiang and asked quietly, "What should we do now?"

Chuǎng Jiang shook his head slowly. "There is nothing we can do. We can only endure. Endure this most difficult period and wait for the moment when the government forces loosen their grip. When that time comes, an opportunity will surely appear."

Chuǎng Wang sighed. "Everyone is starving to death. How can we endure this? Alas. Do we still have any chance to seize this empire?"

Chuǎng Jiang replied firmly, "Yes. As long as this drought continues, we do."

Chuǎng Wang fell silent.

For the first time, he doubted it.

Perhaps I lack the talent, he thought. Perhaps I am not worthy to rule this land.

Just as this thought took shape...

A scout burst in from outside, his face flushed with excitement, shouting, "Lu Xiangheng has withdrawn. Lu Xiangheng has lifted the siege. He has gone."

Chuǎng Jiang cried out in surprise. "Is it true? It is not a feigned retreat?"

The scout laughed as he explained, "The Manchus have sent a hundred thousand troops to invade the passes. The imperial court has no one capable of resisting them. Lu Xiangheng has become the old emperor's only hope, so he has been transferred to defend against the Manchu invasion."

Chuǎng Wang threw back his head and laughed wildly. "Hahahaha. Heaven is helping me. It seems I truly am destined by Heaven."

Chapter 1033 Tong Pass

Chuǎng Wáng quickly led his men to the outer edge of the Dabie Mountains to scout the situation, and sure enough, the Tianxiong Army under Lu Xiangheng, which had once wrapped around them like an iron hoop, had already withdrawn in full.

Inside the temporary camps hastily erected by the Ming forces, only Zuo Liangyu remained, still lingering and dragging his feet. Even generals such as Zu Kuan and Luo Dai had already pulled their troops back.

"Only Zuo Liangyu is left," Chuǎng Wáng exclaimed with unconcealed joy. "Heaven truly favors us. We can finally come out of these cursed mountains. Zuo Liangyu is famous for bullying the weak and

avoiding strong opponents. We still have tens of thousands of men. He will never dare fight us seriously. At most, he will make a show of force and then let us pass."

Chuǎng Jiāng nodded in agreement. "That is exactly how he is."

The Eight Great Kings laughed among themselves. "Heh. We've clawed our way back from the gates of death this time."

Cao Cao let out a long breath. "Let's get out of here quickly. I am completely sick of the Dabie Mountains."

With consensus reached, the next question became which direction they should take once they emerged.

Chuǎng Jiāng frowned slightly as he weighed the options, then spoke. "I intend to remain in Henan. With Lu Xiangheng gone, the central plains will be thinly defended. Military administration will be lax, and Henan is suffering from a severe drought. Recruiting new soldiers there will be far easier for us."

Several of the other leaders found his reasoning persuasive and immediately decided to follow Chuǎng Jiāng.

The Eight Great Kings, however, spoke with confidence. "I am heading to Sichuan. The land there is full of towering mountains, dense forests, and tangled terrain. Once I enter the Shu Mountains, no Ming army will be able to deal with me."

A few more leaders chose to follow the Eight Great Kings.

At that moment, Chuǎng Wáng, who had always been more of a symbolic leader and rarely expressed firm opinions, unexpectedly spoke up. "I want to return to Shaanxi."

Everyone froze.

"What?" voices rang out in disbelief.

This was the first time their mascot-like leader had expressed such a clear and decisive stance. In the past, had he not always followed Chuǎng Jiāng's lead without question?

Everyone stared at Chuǎng Wáng in astonishment. Even Chuǎng Jiāng himself felt a flicker of surprise. Normally, the elder brother listened to me and followed my decisions. What has gotten into him today?

Chuǎng Wáng spoke with growing intensity. "The Battle of Lu Prefecture cast me down from the clouds straight into the abyss. I truly thought it was all over for me. But then the Manchus invaded the passes and saved us. That was when I finally understood. I am a man destined by Heaven. Whenever I meet calamity, Heaven intervenes to help me."

The crowd sucked in a collective breath, stunned.

Chuǎng Wáng continued, his eyes bright. "I no longer wish to hide or flee. I will act openly and uprightly. I have decided to return to Shaanxi, strike Xi'an first, establish Guanzhong as my base, and seize the realm."

An uproar exploded around him. "You've gone mad. How could we possibly take Xi'an?"

Chuǎng Wáng shot back without hesitation. "I am a man aided by Heaven. With the Manchus invading the passes, the main Ming forces have all been transferred to confront them. Xi'an's defenses will naturally be weakened. Taking it may be as easy as turning one's hand over. Once Xi'an is mine, I will follow the example of Big Brother Wang Jiayin from back then, proclaim myself king, establish a royal court, and set up government offices."

Everyone drew in a sharp breath.

Chuǎng Jiāng desperately wanted to shout, Wake up, wake up at once. Do not talk nonsense while fully awake.

But this was his elder brother. He could not say anything that would strip him of face in front of everyone. He could only stand stiffly, his expression painfully awkward.

Chuǎng Wáng looked around and asked, "Who will come with me?"

Everyone instinctively took half a step backward.

Some retreated behind Chuǎng Jiāng, others slipped behind the Eight Great Kings. In the end, not a single person stood at Chuǎng Wáng's side.

Only Cao Cao remained in place, trying desperately to salvage the situation. "Big Brother Chuǎng Wáng," he pleaded, "please do not act on impulse. It is true that you are destined by Heaven, but Heaven's will sometimes toys with men. Even if the main Ming forces have withdrawn, Xi'an still has towering walls and formidable defenses. Even a small number of garrison troops and local militia could hold us off. It is far too difficult for us right now. We should begin with smaller prefectural cities first."

Chuǎng Wáng shook his head firmly. "My mind is made up. Who will come with me?"

Everyone retreated another half step.

Seeing this, Chuǎng Wáng stopped trying to persuade them. "If none of you will go, then I will go alone."

He immediately gathered his own men, the largest faction among the roaming bandits, a full twenty thousand strong, and separated from the other leaders.

Chuǎng Wáng led his army westward out of the Dabie Mountains and plunged into the rugged terrain of Yunyang.

Meanwhile, the other bandit forces, under the leadership of Chuǎng Jiāng, the Eight Great Kings, Cao Cao, and the rest, exited the Dabie Mountains through several different routes.

The Eight Great Kings headed straight for Sichuan.

Chuǎng Jiāng, on the other hand, marched north after leaving the mountains, preparing to advance toward Kaifeng.

As soon as Chuǎng Jiāng emerged from the Dabie Mountains, he discovered that Zuo Liangyu was still stationed there.

He reassured himself silently. Do not be afraid. Zuo Liangyu will not dare attack us.

This time, however, he was wrong.

Although Zuo Liangyu was known for his many eccentricities, he was not completely useless. From time to time, he could still fight a hard battle. More importantly, his troops were mostly recruited from Zhongzhou, all local men.

Local soldiers, after all, had homes and families to defend.

With a thunderous roar, the Zhongzhou troops launched a sudden and ferocious assault on Chuǎng Jiāng's forces.

Chuǎng Jiāng hastily organized a response. The two sides fought from morning until afternoon, but he was unable to hold his ground. Forced back across the Tang River, he fled toward Tianjiaying. Zuo Liangyu pressed the advantage unexpectedly, even crossing the river in pursuit, completely routing Chuǎng Jiāng's army and sending his men scattering in panic.

Having won a rare victory, Zuo Liangyu was filled with pride and quickly sent a report of his achievements to the imperial court.

Unexpectedly, at that very moment, Yang Shengwu submitted a memorial impeaching Zuo Liangyu for deliberately avoiding battle against the bandit forces. Emperor Zhu Youjian ordered Zuo Liangyu to redeem himself through meritorious service.

Zuo Liangyu flew into a rage. "Damn it all," he roared. "I fight a real battle for once, and not only do they withhold rewards, they accuse me of avoiding battle. Is there no justice left? No law? If this is how they want to play, then I am done fighting. Whoever wants to fight can go fight."

From that point on, Zuo Liangyu completely gave up.

Meanwhile...

Chuǎng Wáng Gao Yixian led his main force of ten thousand men westward after leaving the Dabie Mountains. Soon, they entered the Pingding Mountains, followed the winding mountain paths for some distance, and plunged into the Yunyang region.

The most formidable presence in Yunyang was, without question, Luo Xi.

Gao Yixian had no desire to bite into that hardest of bones. He crossed ridges and valleys, threaded his way through forests, and continued north through the mountains, marching toward Tong Pass.

Tong Pass.

To its north lay the Wei River and the Yellow River. To its south rose the Qinling Mountains. It stood at the junction of rivers and mountains, the eastern gateway into Guanzhong.

Since ancient times, this place had been a critical military stronghold.

The Ming court, of course, had stationed troops here.

However, this region had long since fallen within the field of view of Li Daoxuan's diorama box. Several years earlier, he had already begun managing the area. By now, the entire Tong Pass garrison had become devoted followers of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Although they still bore the formal title of Ming government troops, in truth every soldier had undergone ideological training, studied the Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention, and wore the image of Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidered over their hearts.

Today, the Tong Pass garrison was welcoming a visitor.

This visitor was none other than Sun Chuanting.

Because of the Manchu invasion, all veteran students of the Yellow Pole Military Academy had urgently returned to their units, ready to respond at any moment to the call to confront the Manchus. Left behind at the academy were only a large group of new recruits, along with Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi, two veterans whose allocation of skills seemed, at times, profoundly questionable.

After careful consideration, Sun Chuanting decided to bring the new recruits out for a large-scale exercise, allowing them to familiarize themselves with mountain warfare.

Thus, Sun Chuanting, Flat Rabbit, and Zheng Gouzi led several hundred military academy recruits and two thousand newly enlisted militia greenhorns out of Puzhou. They crossed the Yellow River at Fenglingdu and arrived at Tong Pass.

Chapter 1034 An Encounter in the Mountains

The moment the Tongguan commander caught sight of Sun Chuanting, his face split into an enthusiastic smile, and he stepped forward at once. "Principal Sun, your arrival truly brings glory to our humble Tongguan."

Sun Chuanting waved a hand, his expression calm and restrained. "I am no great person. There is no need for such ceremony."

The commander laughed, his tone still warm and flattering. "Principal, you are too modest. You preside over the Yellow Pole Military Academy. Every student you train will become an officer, a general, a backbone of the militia. If you were to speak a single word, countless men would willingly follow you into battle."

Sun Chuanting's brow creased slightly, and he replied with measured seriousness. "They are not my soldiers. They are soldiers of Dao Xuan Tianzun. Only Dao Xuan Tianzun has the right to command them.

Do not speak of me as though I were some local warlord. My only wish is that the students I teach can win more victories when they face the Manchus."

The commander was momentarily at a loss for words and could only let out a dry, somewhat embarrassed laugh.

Sun Chuanting continued evenly, "I intend to use the mountain forests south of Tongguan Pass for a live exercise. There may be loud noises, shouting, even mock battle cries. Please inform the garrison and any merchants passing through in advance, so they are not frightened."

The commander straightened and saluted. "Understood. I will see to it personally."

Sun Chuanting nodded, said nothing more, and led the students and the newly recruited militia deep into the mountain forests.

Soon after, the forces were divided.

Flat Rabbit took command of a hundred new academy students and a thousand freshly enlisted militia recruits, forming what was designated the Red Army.

Zheng Gouzi, likewise leading a hundred students and a thousand raw recruits, formed the Blue Army.

Both groups entered the mountain forest from different directions. Their objective was simple: eliminate the opposing force and seize the designated "dog head" markers.

The winners would be rewarded with an extra meal. The losers would run fifty laps around the training ground.

Sun Chuanting climbed to the highest peak nearby, from where he could overlook the entire exercise area, quietly observing.

At the same time, Chuǎng Wang was moving steadily through the narrow mountain paths of the Lushi region, advancing northwest step by step.

Years ago, when the imperial court had driven them into Yunyang and sealed every exit, it had been guides sent by Jin merchants who led them through these very Lushi mountain paths, allowing them to break free from the encirclement and escape with their lives.

Now, treading these familiar roads once again, Chuǎng Wang felt a complicated surge of emotion rise in his chest, a mixture of bitterness, memory, and something close to longing.

A subordinate came forward to report, "Brother Chuǎng Wang, we've crossed Laojun Mountain. This is Miaogou, Temple Ravine. To the north lies Tongguan Pass, to the west is Mount Hua. Once we pass through this ravine, we will enter the Guanzhong Plains."

Chuǎng Wang nodded slowly. "Good. We are finally returning to Shaanxi. After so many years away, I truly miss my homeland..."

The words had barely left his mouth when, several hundred meters ahead, from a patch of dense mountain forest, Flat Rabbit raised his binoculars and stared straight toward the ravine.

"By the ancestors..." Flat Rabbit nearly jumped in place. "What am I seeing? A 'Chuang' banner? The character 'Chuang' flying openly... Damn it all, is that Chuǎng Wang himself?"

The new students around him froze.

As cadets of the Yellow Pole Military Academy, each of them had been trained to officer standards, and every one carried binoculars. Almost simultaneously, a hundred hands lifted their lenses, focusing on the ravine below.

The moment they saw it clearly, their faces drained of all color.

"It really is the Chuang Army."

"Does anyone even believe this? I came out for a military exercise and ended up running straight into the most infamous bandit chief in the entire realm."

The voices grew frantic, overlapping with one another. These were new students, after all, not veterans tempered by blood and fire.

Their panic spread like wildfire to the thousand militia recruits behind them. These men had only recently enlisted, inspired by patriotic films and stirring speeches. Some of them had not yet even learned how to fold their bedding properly.

This was their very first field exercise, and they had collided head-on with Chuǎng Wang.

The formation fell into complete disorder.

Flat Rabbit rolled his eyes hard. "Damn it. I was planning to ambush Gouzi here, and instead I ambushed Chuǎng Wang. Hah. Compared to this, what kind of exercise even matters? Brothers, prepare for battle."

One of the cadets stepped forward hesitantly. "Lord Rabbit, we can't possibly engage them ourselves, can we? We should notify the Principal at once, and also call in the Tongguan garrison."

Flat Rabbit nodded. "Of course we will notify them. But we cannot simply send word and stand idle. If we let them pass now, they will sweep through Miaogou and reach the foot of Mount Hua. There are countless villages there. The common people would be completely at their mercy."

At these words, the expressions of the cadets and recruits changed.

He was right.

This ravine was desolate, but only a short march west lay the foothills of Mount Hua, and beneath those foothills were villages scattered like stars. If the Chuang Army broke through, the consequences were unthinkable.

Flat Rabbit continued, his voice firm. "The bandit army survives by speed. If we let them pass and chase from behind, we will never catch them. They will ravage villages ahead of us, and all we will find are corpses and ashes when we arrive."

He paused, then spoke with unwavering resolve. "Gentlemen, I know you are new. None of you have seen real combat. But the moment you put on this uniform, you became soldiers. Your duty is to stand in front of the common people. Otherwise, how can you accept your military pay with a clear conscience?"

The fear in their eyes slowly gave way to determination.

"Yes, sir," they answered in unison.

Flat Rabbit pointed sharply. "You three. The fastest runners. Go immediately and inform the Principal, Zheng Gouzi, and the Tongguan garrison. Tell them to bring reinforcements at once."

Then he turned to the rest. "The rest of you stay with me. We will block the Chuang Army here. We do not let them advance another step. Even if it costs our lives, we hold this ravine."

"Understood," the cadets and recruits roared.

Just then, one of the new students raised his hand weakly. "Lord Rabbit... our flintlock rifles are training props. They have no bullets, only paper cartridges with powder for noise."

Flat Rabbit blinked, momentarily stunned.

Another cadet added carefully, "Our hand grenades only make a sound as well."

Only then did everyone realize that the grenades they carried were training models, with no shrapnel and almost no explosive force, little more than oversized firecrackers that produced a puff of white smoke.

It was, after all, only an exercise. No one had expected live weapons.

Flat Rabbit clenched his teeth. "Damn it. No ammunition, a mountain full of greenhorns. This really is a life-or-death stand."

A cadet muttered, "Lord Rabbit, technically speaking, we're not short on ammunition. We have none at all."

Flat Rabbit stared at him in silence.

The air fell deathly quiet.

After several breaths, Flat Rabbit suddenly drew his ancestral treasured sword with a dramatic sweep. "Very well," he announced loudly. "Then you shall witness the true power of this Lord Rabbit's Heaven-Rending Overlord Sword."

His face shone with confidence as he boasted, "With one strike, my blade chills forty prefectures. When my sword-qi erupts, the realm trembles. I, Flat Rabbit, will go down into the ravine alone and hold them back."

Everyone stared at him, dumbfounded.

Flat Rabbit waved dismissively. "When I strike a handsome pose in the ravine, you stay on the slopes, wave your flags, shout loudly, and fire a few blanks for atmosphere. Understood?"

Without waiting for an answer, he slid down the slope, his figure vanishing swiftly into the ravine below.

After a moment of stunned silence, realization dawned on the group all at once.

So Lord Rabbit was not entirely reckless after all. He knew how to use momentum and bluff as weapons too.

Chapter 1035 A Single Sword's Radiance Chills Forty States

Gao Yingxiang led what remained of his Chuǎng Army, ten thousand men trudging forward through the winding ravine of Miaogou, their footsteps echoing dully between the steep mountain walls.

In his days of true splendor, seventy-two rebel factions had flown his banners, and more than three hundred thousand men had answered his call. Now, only these ten thousand followed behind him. They had no cannons at all, their flintlock rifles had long since run dry of ammunition, and even their once-feared repeating crossbows were nothing more than dead weight slung across their backs.

Of the seventy-two bandit leaders who had once sworn loyalty to him, only Liu Zhe and Huang Long still remained at his side. All the others had scattered to the winds, drifting away to join the Dashing General or the Eight Great Kings.

Even the Jin merchants, who had once supplied him faithfully with grain, weapons, and silver, had quietly vanished without a trace.

Only now did Gao Yingxiang fully understand the truth. The rebels had not followed him. They had followed the Dashing General and the Eight Great Kings. The Jin merchants had not traded with him either. They had traded with those same men.

Yet at this moment, none of that mattered anymore.

In his heart, he felt certain that Heaven itself favored him.

As long as he seized this rare opportunity, while the main Ming forces were dragged away to face the Manchu invaders, and successfully took Xi'an, plundering the immense, nation-rivalling wealth stored within the Prince of Qin's mansion, he would be able to rebuild a powerful army. When that happened, those who had deserted him would surely return, crawling back of their own accord.

Lost in these pleasant thoughts, Liu Zhe, who was riding nearby, spoke up in a low voice. "Big Brother Chuǎng Wang, this subordinate feels uneasy. The slopes ahead would make an excellent ambush site. We should advance with caution."

Gao Yingxiang lifted his gaze and looked ahead. Miaogou lay squeezed tightly between two mountain peaks, forming a narrow, treacherous gorge. If troops were hidden on both slopes and attacked simultaneously, the Chuǎng Army would find itself in a deadly trap, with little room to maneuver.

"It does look somewhat dangerous," Gao Yingxiang admitted slowly. "But the imperial troops have never truly garrisoned this place. Now that the Manchu invasion has drawn their main forces away, they will be even less capable of guarding such a remote ravine."

"That is true," Liu Zhe replied, though his unease did not fully fade.

Almost as soon as the words left their mouths, a figure suddenly slid down from the slope ahead. With surprising agility, he landed squarely in the center of the ravine, a polished longsword gleaming coldly in his hand.

The man raised the sword with one arm, its tip leveled straight at Gao Yingxiang. His voice rang out, loud and unrestrained. "Chuǎng rebel, you had a road to heaven but refused to take it, choosing instead to smash headfirst into the gates of hell. Hahahaha. This very place shall be your burial ground."

Gao Yingxiang startled. Liu Zhe and Huang Long were equally taken aback.

Behind them, the ten thousand rebels tensed, countless pairs of eyes sweeping instinctively toward the slopes on both sides of the ravine.

"This is bad," Liu Zhe muttered. "For someone to reveal himself so openly, they must be fully prepared. Otherwise, he would never dare act like this. We may already be surrounded."

Gao Yingxiang steadied himself. After so many years of rebellion, after so many defeats and near-deaths, what was there left to fear. He raised his voice and shouted back, "Who are you? And what nonsense are you spouting?"

The swordsman threw his head back and laughed. "I am Flat Rabbit," he declared proudly. "Known in the martial world as Master Rabbit."

For a moment, no one spoke.

No one among the Chuǎng Army had ever heard of such a person.

Seeing their blank expressions, Flat Rabbit snorted. "There is no need to strain your memories. You have not heard my name because I walk the righteous path. I am not like you lot. Your bandit dens and nests of vermin are not worthy of bearing Master Rabbit's name."

Angry murmurs rippled through the rebel ranks. "What kind of garbage talk is this?"

Under normal circumstances, the Chuǎng Army would have already surged forward and hacked this strange swordsman to pieces. But the terrain of Miaogou was too peculiar, and Flat Rabbit's sudden, theatrical appearance was too bizarre. Uncertainty held them in place.

Gao Yingxiang spoke in a deep, steady voice. "We rose in rebellion to kill corrupt officials and rob the rich to aid the poor. We are an army of righteousness."

Flat Rabbit burst into loud laughter. "Hahahaha. Do you even believe that yourself? Among those who rebel, how many are true heroes, and how many are nothing but scum? You know the answer in your own heart. From the Tianqi era until today, the only rebel hero I truly admire is Wang Er of Baishui."

Gao Yingxiang fell silent.

Flat Rabbit pointed his sword forward once more. "In short, today, right here, is your day of death."

Gao Yingxiang felt a trace of bewilderment rise within him. This man stood alone in the middle of the ravine, boasting without restraint. There had to be an ambush hidden on the slopes. There was no doubt about it.

Liu Zhe leaned closer and whispered, "Big Brother Chuǎng Wang, this fellow is definitely not alone. We must be careful."

Huang Long, however, frowned and said, "Is it possible he is using an empty fort stratagem, deliberately bluffing us?"

"Once we pass through this ravine, we will reach the foot of Mount Hua, where we can resupply," Gao Yingxiang replied calmly. "Whether it is a bluff or a real ambush, we have no choice but to push through."

"In that case," Huang Long said firmly, "this subordinate will go ahead and test them."

"Good," Gao Yingxiang agreed at once.

The main Chuǎng Army halted in place, guarding the slopes on both sides with extreme vigilance. Huang Long advanced alone with five hundred men, moving forward step by careful step.

All five hundred were fully prepared for a sudden ambush. Huang Long himself drew his broadsword, his eyes locked tightly on the longsword in Flat Rabbit's hand, ready to clash with this inexplicable swordsman at any moment.

At that instant, Flat Rabbit's palms were slick with sweat.

Watching five hundred armed men advance toward him, it was impossible not to feel fear. Yet fear alone would not make him retreat.

After all, he was Master Rabbit.

No matter how frantic his heart was, his face showed nothing. He lifted his chin, nostrils tilted arrogantly toward the sky, and laughed loudly. "Foolish rebels, you dare challenge Master Rabbit with a mere five hundred men?"

"My single sword's radiance chills forty states, its might sweeping across countless miles. No hero under heaven dares stand against me. You think five hundred men can take my life? Perhaps if ten thousand charged together, you might stand a chance."

Huang Long roared in fury. "Enough of your boasting. I am Huang Long. Let me see what you are truly capable of."

He stopped advancing slowly and instead raised his broadsword high, letting out a thunderous shout as he charged forward. The five hundred men behind him roared in unison and surged ahead.

The scene was genuinely terrifying.

Flat Rabbit's legs trembled slightly, yet he did not retreat. With a fierce roar of his own, he lifted his treasured sword high above his head with both hands and bellowed at the top of his lungs, "My Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord Sword."

He took a great step forward and swung his blade violently into empty air.

At that moment, Huang Long was still more than five meters away. The strike hit nothing at all. For an instant, confusion flashed through Huang Long's mind. Why was this man striking the air? Did he truly believe sword-qi could harm someone?

Then it happened.

The moment Flat Rabbit completed his swing, a sharp bang rang out from the slope. One quick-thinking military academy freshman pulled the trigger of his flintlock rifle, firing the very first blank round.

The others instantly understood. One after another, flintlock rifles discharged, and the slopes erupted in a continuous chorus of bangs, the echoes crashing back and forth through the ravine.

One cadet even hurled an exercise hand grenade. It bounced down the slope and exploded beside the rebel formation with a loud boom. No shrapnel flew, but the sound was deafening, and thick white smoke billowed outward, creating a terrifying illusion of lethal force.

Already on edge, Huang Long and his five hundred men panicked at once. Like startled birds, their formation collapsed into chaos.

Chapter 1036 The Brave Flat Rabbit

Huang Long's five hundred men collapsed into instant chaos.

The moment the sharp cracks of flintlock fire echoed through Miaogou, the rebel soldiers instinctively clutched their heads and dove for cover. No one wanted to be the unlucky bastard who caught a bullet. Some tried to run left, others bolted right, and in the narrow ravine they smashed straight into one another with heavy thuds, tumbling into heaps.

To those behind them, anyone who fell looked exactly like someone who had been shot dead.

Panic spread like wildfire.

More men crashed together, tripped, fell, and trampled one another. Shouts overlapped, orders vanished, and fear swallowed all sense of formation. In less than a blink, Huang Long's five hundred were no longer a unit at all. They were a scattered mob.

Huang Long himself nearly lost his wits. He yanked his saber free, intending to pull back, when he suddenly saw Flat Rabbit charging straight toward him, boots pounding the ground, longsword already sweeping forward.

"Rebel chieftain, halt," Flat Rabbit roared.

Huang Long's scalp went cold.

This lunatic. Has he lost his mind? With firearms blasting everywhere, he still wants to duel me?

What if one of his own men shoots him by accident and takes me with him?

Damn it. I do not want to die here.

Huang Long instantly sheathed his saber and turned to flee. Flat Rabbit raised his sword and chased after him, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Stop right there."

"I'd be an idiot if I stopped," Huang Long yelled back as he ran.

Flat Rabbit let out a heroic roar and leapt forward.

Then his foot caught on a loose stone.

With a completely unheroic thud, he pitched forward and smashed into the dirt.

Only then did Huang Long truly escape. He sprinted several hundred meters without daring to look back, finally reaching Gao Yingxiang's side. Panting like a bellows, he gasped, "We've been ambushed. Damn it. That Master Rabbit is a monster."

The remaining nine thousand five hundred Chuǎng Army soldiers were just as shaken.

From several hundred meters away, they had watched Huang Long's detachment advance, get blasted by firearm fire, then instantly collapse. Men fell everywhere, formations dissolved, and the remnants came fleeing back in disgrace.

Through drifting gunpowder smoke and dust, a single figure slowly stood up in the ravine.

Flat Rabbit.

His face was pitch black.

Literally black. When he had fallen earlier, his face had smashed straight into the dirt, leaving it smeared with mud and soot like a crude mask.

Flat Rabbit planted one foot on a rebel soldier who had been badly injured by his own comrades during the retreat. He raised his longsword high in his right hand, its tip pointing straight at the sky, while his left hand swept grandly toward the distant Chuǎng Army.

He laughed thunderously.

"Why are you running? Come back. As long as Master Rabbit stands in this Miaogou, you will not take a single step into Shaanxi."

Gao Yingxiang snorted coldly. "There is a limit to your bravado. If we simply bypass this route into Shaanxi, what good does it do for you to stand here alone?"

Flat Rabbit froze.

For a full five seconds, he stood there speechless.

Then he recovered, snorting loudly. "Bypass? What, are you afraid of Master Rabbit? Hahahaha. So the famous Chuǎng Wang is nothing more than an ordinary man after all, trembling before an unknown nobody."

Gao Yingxiang's eyes widened.

Liu Zhe was furious. Huang Long was furious. Yet neither of them dared to advance.

There were clearly firearm troops hidden on the slopes. That was undeniable. Worse still, they were armed with strange explosives.

Many of the rebels had personally experienced those weapons.

In Shaanxi. In Shanxi. In Henan. And most recently, in the disastrous Battle of Lu Prefecture.

Anyone with half a brain knew that such firearm units were impossible to confront head-on, especially when they held the high ground.

Who would be insane enough to charge straight into Miaogou?

"Big Brother Chuǎng Wang, we must avoid them for now," Liu Zhe urged. "We cannot clash directly with those firearm troops."

Huang Long added bitterly, "The moment our men hear gunfire, they scatter. We cannot fight a proper battle like this."

"And they control the high ground," Liu Zhe said grimly.

Gao Yingxiang nodded slowly. "Very well. We withdraw. Pull back two li and reconsider."

At his command, the Chuǎng Army retreated in haste.

Only after they had pulled back far enough did Flat Rabbit finally collapse onto the ground, gasping for breath. He waved weakly toward the slope. "Alright. Someone drag those injured rebels back. Labor reform."

A swarm of fresh recruits and greenhorn militia slid down the hillside, crowding around him.

"Master Rabbit, that was incredible."

"You scared off the entire Chuǎng Army by yourself."

"Master Rabbit, you're my hero."

"We captured fourteen rebels alive. All of them were injured by their own men during the chaos. Collisions and trampling."

One recruit raised his fist at a captive. "What are you staring at? Think you're tough?"

"Stop," Flat Rabbit said.

The recruit froze and immediately lowered his hand.

"Treat captives humanely," Flat Rabbit continued. "Did you not learn that rule?"

The recruit backed away at once.

Flat Rabbit patted the captive on the shoulder. "Reform well. Be a decent person."

Then he turned back to the group. "Everyone stay alert. Scout properly. Watch every ravine and side path. We cannot let the rebels sneak into Shaanxi."

"Yes," the recruits answered in unison, their morale soaring.

An hour later, Zheng Gouzi arrived with the Blue Army. Two hundred academy recruits and two thousand new militia joined up, though all were still equipped only with training weapons.

Another hour passed, and Sun Chuanting arrived.

Soon after, the Tong Pass garrison marched in as well.

With the Tong Pass troops present, proper weapons and true combat readiness were finally in hand.

Sun Chuanting asked calmly, "Where is the Chuǎng Army now?"

"In a valley a little over two li to the east," Flat Rabbit replied. "They cannot figure out our real strength, so they hesitate to advance. Scouts from both sides have met several times in the forest. Our scouts have no weapons, so they do not fight. Their scouts fear our firearms, so they do not dare press forward. Both sides just glare at each other and retreat."

Sun Chuanting nodded, then turned to the Tong Pass commander. "Did you bring the reconnaissance hot air balloons?"

"Yes."

The Tong Pass garrison, already a standard Dao Xuan Tianzun militia force, quickly unfolded a hot air balloon, ignited the burner, and sent it rising into the sky.

An hour and a half later, a detailed terrain map lay spread out before Sun Chuanting. Every mountain, ravine, and path was clearly marked, along with the precise locations of the Chuǎng Army's camps.

Sun Chuanting extended a finger toward the map and addressed the academy recruits. "Gentlemen, you are not merely soldiers. You are being trained as non-commissioned officers. This will be the first real battlefield of your lives."

"For this battle, I want all of you to think. Propose your plans to the Tong Pass garrison. Their general will decide whether to carry them out. If any plan is approved and leads to victory, the proposer will receive substantial academic credit."

The recruits were instantly excited.

Yet excitement quickly gave way to hesitation.

They stared at the map, silent.

They were new students, not veteran cadets.

Even if ideas stirred in their minds, none of them yet dared to speak.

Chapter 1037 My Proposal

"Hahahaha!"

A strange, unrestrained laugh suddenly burst out, shattering the uneasy silence hanging over the group of new students.

Flat Rabbit straightened his back and spoke with great confidence, his voice ringing loudly. "Why do we need to think up plans in advance? This Rabbit Lord possesses unparalleled wisdom and boundless strategy. When the battle begins, I can produce ten thousand brilliant plans on the spot. Now that the Tongguan Pass garrison has arrived and we finally have proper weapons in hand, why waste time racking our brains? Tongguan army, come with this Rabbit Lord. We charge straight in, smash through head-on, storm into the rebel camp, and slaughter them until not a single one is left alive. As for tactics, this Rabbit Lord will think of them while we fight."

For a moment, no one said a word.

The Tongguan Pass commander reacted first, his face stiff as he answered without hesitation, "I must respectfully decline."

Sun Chuanting turned his head toward the cluster of new students and smiled faintly. "You see?" he said calmly. "Senior Flat Rabbit has just given you a live demonstration. Do not restrain yourselves. Speak boldly, whatever ideas you have. Even if you are wrong, it does not matter. The Tongguan commander is perfectly sane and will simply reject any proposal that makes no sense."

Those words immediately loosened the tension among the new students.

If Flat Rabbit could put forward something so wildly reckless without shame, then what were they afraid of? At worst, their ideas would not be adopted, and no matter how poor their thinking might be, it surely could not be more embarrassing than Flat Rabbit's grand charge-and-slaughter plan.

They quickly crowded around the map, voices overlapping as they began to talk all at once, excitement and nervousness mixing together.

At present, Chuǎng Wang's army was camped in Black Pool Ravine, southeast of Zhougou.

This sort of terrain was exactly what rebel forces favored. Rolling hills rose and fell without end, ravines cut across the land like tangled veins, and even someone familiar with the area could easily lose their way. An ordinary person might wander for days without finding a way out.

With rebels hiding in such country, it was nearly impossible for government forces to encircle them completely. Even the fearsome firearm troops from Gao Family Village would find it difficult to sweep such an area clean.

At that moment, Huang Long slipped in from outside and reported in a low voice, "I met a local hunter in the mountains. He told me about a path called Sanyuan Ravine. It can bypass Miaogou and lead directly to the foot of Mount Hua."

Chuǎng Wang let out a soft sound of surprise. "Oh?" He smiled faintly. "To meet a hunter who points out the way in these deep mountains. Indeed, Heaven favors me."

Huang Long continued, "If we go through Sanyuan Ravine, we can avoid Miaogou entirely. But that Flat Rabbit fellow's words are irritating. If we bypass him like this, it will look as though we are afraid of him."

Liu Zhe immediately joined in, a sly smile on his face. "We bypass Miaogou first, then raise our banners and shout insults from afar. He will surely abandon his ambush and come chasing after us. When he enters the valley, we spring our own ambush. Hehehe. Once we wipe him out, who would dare say that we were afraid of him?"

Huang Long's eyes lit up. "Exactly!" he exclaimed. "We are not afraid. We are simply using a superior strategy to defeat him."

Chuǎng Wang nodded in satisfaction. "Well said."

He raised his hand and issued the order. "Very well. The entire army will detour through Sanyuan Ravine. Once we are behind Miaogou, we will wave our banners and shout to provoke that Flat Rabbit. He will certainly come after us. We lure him into the valley and annihilate him there, letting him see the might of the Chuǎng army."

After saying this, he suddenly paused.

A strange realization crept into his mind. Although Chuang Jiang was not present, the decisions of the army were still not truly being made by him. Instead, they had been discussed and settled by Liu Zhe and Huang Long. He was merely repeating the strategy they had already agreed upon.

What was going on?

After a brief moment of confusion, he quickly found an answer that satisfied him. Could it be that I am broad-minded and virtuous, a leader who truly listens to his subordinates? Yes, yes, that must be it. This is exactly the bearing of a Heaven-destined ruler.

What he did not know was that the hunter who had just guided Huang Long had already circled twice around the northwestern slope. Once out of sight, he removed his hunting clothes and put on the uniform of the Tongguan Pass garrison. Returning to the army, he saluted a new student.

"I have done as instructed," he reported. "I told the rebels about the Sanyuan Ravine path. I wonder whether they will take the bait."

The new student was so excited that his face flushed. "It's done," he said eagerly. "They will definitely take it. Order the entire army to move immediately and set up an ambush at the mouth of Sanyuan Ravine."

Sun Chuanting nodded slowly. "Regardless of whether this plan succeeds," he said, "I have already decided to award you extra academic credit. Whether a strategy works depends on the intelligence of the enemy. But for you to conceive of this plan at all, you are already an excellent student."

The new student was overjoyed. "Thank you, Headmaster!"

Soon after, half of the new students split off, each leading half of the new recruits and half of the Tongguan Pass garrison. They arrived at the mouth of Sanyuan Ravine, a perilously narrow passage squeezed between two mountains. Following what they had learned, the students directed the troops to spread out along the slopes, arranging them in layered, staggered positions, orderly and precise.

As the sun sank, dusk slowly enveloped the land.

Far away, Li Daoxuan squatted in front of his diorama box, a bowl of egg-fried rice cradled in his hands.

He was carefully studying the area that had just come into view.

Recently, construction on Zhoushan Island had progressed smoothly, and the livelihoods of the Yinchuan border army in the northwest had finally been secured. Both developments had contributed a large amount of Salvation Index, allowing the box's field of view to expand a little deeper into central Henan.

Naturally, he intended to examine this newly revealed region thoroughly.

Switching on careful observation and focus, he scanned inch by inch, missing nothing. Before long, he discovered a small, impoverished village. Its people were just like the original forty-two villagers of Gao Family Village in its earliest days, poor to the bone and struggling at the edge of survival.

Li Daoxuan happened to be holding a bowl of egg-fried rice. Without any hesitation, he gently picked up a small clump with the tips of his chopsticks and slowly lowered it toward the center of the village.

The villagers below were scavenging for tree bark and wild vegetables when they suddenly saw the clouds above part. A gigantic pair of chopsticks descended from the sky, frightening them into shrill cries of terror. In the next instant, they noticed that the chopsticks held a clump of rice.

Small only in comparison to the chopsticks.

To them, it was unimaginably enormous.

A single cooked grain of pure white rice was as tall as half a person and probably weighed over a hundred jin. Clinging to it were several yellow pieces of egg.

To Li Daoxuan, they were merely fragments. To the villagers, they were massive chunks of golden yolk.

"Is that egg-fried rice?" someone whispered in disbelief.

"Heavens, how could such a huge pile of egg-fried rice descend from the sky?"

"It didn't fall," another murmured, voice trembling. "The Old Man in the Sky placed it here with his chopsticks."

"The Heavens bless us!"

Tears streamed down their faces as they kowtowed fervently toward the sky. Then they swarmed around the mound of rice and began to eat.

The fragrance was overwhelming. Premium white rice, egg, sesame oil, and salt blended together into a taste so rich that they could not stop themselves.

Li Daoxuan did not linger to watch. He shifted his perspective back to Luoyang and gave instructions to Bai Yuan. "Southeast from here, roughly XXX li away, there is a small village. Dozens of people there are barely surviving. I have given them food that should last a few days. Organize a rescue team immediately."

"Understood," Bai Yuan replied.

Li Daoxuan continued, "The main government forces have moved north. As for the rebels remaining in Henan, only our militia can keep watch over them. Bai Yuan, this responsibility rests heavily on your shoulders."

"I understand," Bai Yuan said solemnly.

After a brief pause, Bai Yuan added, "Your subordinate has recently received news. The Chuǎng army has split into several groups, and one of them appears to be preparing to return to Shaanxi."

Li Daoxuan raised his brows slightly. "Oh? Is that so?" He nodded. "Then I will go and take a look."

Chapter 1038 What to Do About This Person?

Li Daoxuan felt relatively at ease when it came to the safety of the major cities within Shaanxi.

Every key city had already organized its own militia, and beyond that, each factory maintained militia units of its own. Their combat strength was anything but weak. Years ago, the battle at the Shanxi Steel Transport Factory had already proven just how terrifying these factory militias could be once they were mobilized.

What truly troubled him were the countless small villages scattered across the countryside.

Rural development had always lagged behind. Even in later ages, small villages often struggled to keep pace with cities, let alone during the Ming Dynasty. Many remote hamlets remained isolated, poor, and defenseless.

The civil officials of Gao Family Village had not yet reached the point where the blessings of Dao Xuan Tianzun could be extended to every distant corner of the land.

If wandering bandits were to raid these villages, the consequences would be unthinkable grim.

With that thought weighing on his mind, Li Daoxuan quickly adjusted the perspective of the diorama box toward the west.

His expanded field of view now covered most of Shaanxi. If bandits truly managed to infiltrate the province and threaten its people, he would be able to intervene directly.

He rapidly pressed the directional controls, north, south, east, and west.

Mountains and rivers of the Great Ming scrolled swiftly across the box, vast landscapes flashing by one after another, until the towering Qinling Mountains filled his vision.

Hmm?

Something was moving inside the box.

Li Daoxuan narrowed his eyes and focused. Nestled among the trees was a Qinling giant panda, clumsily hauling its heavy body up a trunk, limbs awkward yet strangely endearing.

"Good heavens," Li Daoxuan muttered, "a miniature giant panda."

He was instantly enchanted. For a brief, dangerous moment, he was seized by the overwhelming urge to take it out of the box and keep it as a pet. But reason returned just as quickly. Living creatures could not enter or leave the box. Taking it out would kill it, and the thought alone made his chest tighten.

Then another idea struck him.

If it could not come out, then he could go in.

Petting time.

Without hesitation, Li Daoxuan grabbed a mass-produced Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun figurine and gently placed it into the box, right beside the panda. In the next instant, his consciousness linked up, and with a familiar flash, he descended into the miniature world.

The silicone figure came to life, arms spreading wide as he spoke in a coaxing tone. "Come here, little one. Let Uncle give you a nice pat."

The panda froze.

Its instincts screamed danger. Whatever stood before it carried no human scent, only something alien and monstrous. With a sudden burst of ferocity, the panda swung its massive claws.

Swish, swish, swish.

In the blink of an eye, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun was torn cleanly in half.

Li Daoxuan fell silent.

Petting attempt failed.

Resigned, and wisely deciding not to provoke the adorable yet deadly creature any further, he withdrew his focus and continued shifting the perspective westward, scanning the land inch by inch.

Not long after, a dense cluster of tiny figures appeared inside a narrow canyon.

Li Daoxuan squinted.

Banners bearing the character "Chuǎng" fluttered unmistakably.

It was the army of Chuǎng Wang, Gao Yingxiang.

Li Daoxuan recognized him immediately. Back at Gubei Crossing, when the original forty-two people of Gao Family Village had tried to persuade Gao Yingxiang, Li Daoxuan himself had been present, even tossing out a few sarcastic remarks at the time. He had not expected to see Gao Yingxiang reentering Shaanxi so soon.

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly.

Trouble.

What should be done about this man?

If he simply crushed Gao Yingxiang with a divine strike, Gao Yiye would surely be heartbroken. The original forty-two would also be deeply saddened. They would never blame Dao Xuan Tianzun, but they would inevitably blame themselves for failing to persuade Gao Yingxiang back then.

Yet if he did not strike him down, that was equally unacceptable.

As the supreme leader of the roaming rebel armies, Gao Yingxiang bore responsibility for countless atrocities committed by his subordinates. Charging him with war crimes would be entirely justified, and execution would hardly be excessive.

Li Daoxuan felt a rare surge of irritation.

Absolute impartial justice was something humans struggled to achieve. Even the slightest emotional bias could tilt judgment one way or another.

While he was still weighing Gao Yingxiang's fate, his perspective in the box continued to advance. Soon, his view moved ahead of the rebel army, reaching the exit of the mountain gorge.

There, on the slopes overlooking the gorge mouth, countless tiny figures lay in wait.

Li Daoxuan recognized them at once.

They were all his people.

Sun Chuanting, Flat Rabbit, Zheng Gouzi, along with a large number of Yellow Pole Military Academy students and a substantial militia force, were all hidden among the hills.

Seeing this, the tension in Li Daoxuan's chest eased, and the corner of his mouth curved into a faint smile.

"Excellent," he thought. "They are already prepared to intercept Gao Yingxiang. It seems I do not need to agonize over this decision after all. Whether Gao Yingxiang lives or dies, whether he is judged for his crimes, I will leave it to fate."

"Let us see whether he truly is Heaven-destined."

The Chuǎng army, completely unaware of what awaited them, marched out of Sanyuan Gorge.

This path truly lived up to its reputation. The hunter had not lied. Sanyuan Gorge bypassed Miaogou perfectly, slipping around Flat Rabbit's ambush and leading them smoothly to the rear of the ravine.

Of course, although Chuǎng Wang lacked true talent, he was not entirely foolish. He remained wary, sending scouts ahead to carefully search the gorge for any hidden traps.

The result was exactly what the planners intended.

Nothing.

The scouts emerged from the gorge, saw no signs of danger, and rushed back with joyful reports. Only then did Chuǎng Wang confidently lead his main force into Sanyuan Gorge.

Not a single government soldier blocked their path.

"Hahahaha, we're through!" Huang Long shouted in delight. "Brother Chuǎng Wang, we're already behind Miaogou. Order the men to shout toward the ravine."

Chuǎng Wang nodded, and under Huang Long's lead, the rebel troops raised their voices toward Miaogou.

"Hahahaha! Flat Rabbit, your ambush in Miaogou is useless now! We've already circled around behind you! Hahahahaha!"

The laughter and taunts echoed through the mountains.

Chuǎng Wang felt an intense surge of smug satisfaction.

It lasted less than three breaths.

On the hillsides outside the mouth of Sanyuan Gorge, countless heads suddenly rose into view.

The Tongguan Pass defenders revealed themselves.

The sharp, merciless cracks of flintlock rifles erupted at once, and black hand grenades arced down from above like falling stars.

The Chuǎng army had only just emerged from the gorge, their formations loose and disordered, when the ambush struck. Panic exploded instantly. There was no resistance to speak of. The rebel ranks shattered, men scattering in every direction.

Desperate screams filled the air as they tried to retreat back into Sanyuan Gorge, scrambling over one another in blind terror.

But Sun Chuanting would never leave such an obvious escape route unguarded.

The Yellow Pole Military Academy students had anticipated this long ago. Hidden mechanisms were triggered, and massive boulders, prepared in advance, thundered down from both sides of the gorge. With an earth-shaking roar, stone slammed into stone, sealing the gorge completely.

The Chuǎng army was trapped.

Gao Yingxiang drew his blade and spun around, his heart sinking as realization struck. Cries and wails filled the canyon. His men huddled together, unable to even touch an enemy, while gunfire rained down mercilessly from every direction.

"This is impossible!" Gao Yingxiang shouted hoarsely. "Impossible! I am destined by Heaven. Whenever I face hardship, the heavens must aid me. Heaven never seals off all paths. Something different must happen now. It must!"

His words had barely left his mouth when a single gunshot rang out from the distant hillside.

Bang.

A searing pain tore through his shoulder. Gao Yingxiang looked down in disbelief at the shattered armor and the blood pouring out.

He let out a shrill scream and collapsed backward.

As darkness closed in, the final images burned into his fading consciousness were Liu Zhe's body flying through the air, flung by a hand grenade before crashing lifelessly to the ground, and nearby, Huang Long crouching with his head in his hands, shaking uncontrollably in terror.

Chapter 1039 | Refuse to Speak

The battle in the valley ended with startling speed, so fast that the echoes of gunfire had barely faded before everything was already settled.

After suffering casualties of roughly ten percent, the Chuǎng army collapsed completely, not in heroic resistance, nor in a last desperate stand, but in a sudden, overwhelming loss of will. The remaining ninety percent of the soldiers dropped their weapons where they stood, knelt on the blood-soaked ground, and surrendered en masse, their faces pale, their bodies trembling, the fierce momentum they had once boasted dissolving like mist under the morning sun.

The Tongguan garrison descended from the hillside in disciplined formation, boots crunching over gravel and trampled grass, and quickly combed through the mass of surrendered men. Before long, they found Huang Long, shaking uncontrollably, as well as the Chuǎng Wang himself, Gao Yingxiang, lying amid the crowd, grievously wounded and already unconscious.

One of the military school cadets could not help blurting out in excitement, his voice rising despite himself, "Damn, we've captured the Chuǎng Wang. What do we do with him now?"

Another cadet answered without hesitation, his tone calm and almost textbook-like. "Why even ask? If he had been killed outright in battle, that would be one thing. But once an enemy is captured or wounded, we are absolutely forbidden from harming him further. He must be brought back, put on trial, and only then can his fate be decided."

The first cadet rolled his eyes, clearly unconvinced. "This man has committed crimes as numerous as the stars. After the trial, he's almost certainly going to be executed anyway, right? Wouldn't it be simpler to just kill him here and now?"

The second cadet shook his head firmly. "Killing without trial is strictly prohibited. Once you allow that kind of convenience, legal principles will erode bit by bit. A world where everyone decides life and death on impulse is not justice, it's chaos, a lawless place where the strong devour the weak. Didn't they teach you that in ideology class?"

"Holy hell," the first cadet muttered. "Your ideology class was definitely better than mine."

It was precisely because the ones who captured Gao Yingxiang were these new-era intellectuals, young men who had studied the Heavenly Books, that he was still breathing. Had Old Nanfeng been present instead, Gao Yingxiang would already have gone to meet the King of Hell. Falling into the hands of these cadets, however, left him with a narrow but very real chance at survival.

Watching this scene unfold, Li Daoxuan felt a subtle ache rise in his chest.

These youngsters truly had learned well. Yet he also knew that one day, they too would face moments where kinship, friendship, and the cold demands of law collided head-on. When that day arrived, he could only hope they would prove stronger and more resolute than he himself had once been.

The military school cadets carefully lifted the severely wounded Gao Yingxiang onto a stretcher. They even performed basic first aid on him, extracting the lead bullet from his shoulder, stopping the bleeding with practiced movements, before carrying him away to Sun Chuanting.

Sun Chuanting then announced loudly that the mountain warfare exercise had concluded in perfect fashion, and that all units were to return at once, without delay.

Their destination was Gao Family Village, the main village.

A large train chugged its way into the East Train Station of Gao Family Village, steam billowing and wheels screeching as it slowed to a halt.

The original forty-two villagers, led by Gao Yiye, had already gathered at the platform, waiting impatiently, all of them present once more, their expressions tense and restless.

The train doors slid open. A group of militia soldiers jumped down first, surrounding a stretcher as they disembarked. Lying atop it was Gao Yiye's uncle, Gao Yingxiang. His shoulder was wrapped tightly in white cloth, but fresh blood had already seeped through, staining it a dark, unsettling red.

The forty-two villagers immediately crowded around, instinctively closing the distance, their gazes fixed on the man before them, each pair of eyes filled with emotions too complex to name.

Gao Yingxiang looked back at them, his own eyes equally tangled with confusion, shock, and something that resembled regret.

Only now did he finally understand. That so-called "mysterious firearm unit" that had relentlessly humiliated the bandits, crushing their morale again and again, had come from Gao Family Village itself.

As his gaze drifted over the village beyond the station, taking in its bustle, its prosperity, its almost absurd abundance, realization struck him like another bullet. In the years since he had left home, Gao Family Village had transformed into something he could never have imagined.

He let out a weak sigh. "So that's how it is... I truly never thought Gao Family Village would become like this."

"Uncle..." Gao Yiye stood by the stretcher, her face heavy with sorrow. "Your injuries..."

"Heh," Gao Yingxiang chuckled faintly, wincing as he did so. "Good injuries. Excellent injuries. If not for these, how would I ever have come back? And if I hadn't come back, how would I have known Gao Family Village had become this way? Why didn't you tell me back at Gubai Ferry?"

The Village Chief leaned in from the side, poking his head forward. "If we had told you that Gao Family Village was wealthy and aiming to save the world, would you have agreed to come back?"

Gao Yingxiang thought seriously for a full three seconds, then shook his head. "I wouldn't have believed it."

The Village Chief snorted. "Exactly."

Gao Yingxiang released a long, weary sigh.

"I was planning to give you twenty fierce blows after capturing you," the Village Chief continued bluntly, "but seeing you in such a miserable state, I'll spare you. Just wait for Dao Xuan Tianzun's judgment."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun?" Gao Yingxiang asked, bewilderment flickering across his face. "Is that the revered figure who transformed Gao Family Village into this?"

"No," Gao Yiye said quietly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is an immortal deity."

Gao Yingxiang fell silent, words failing him entirely.

By this point, countless villagers had gathered near the train station, drawn by curiosity and whispers, but the militia soldiers immediately spread out, forming a tight cordon and preventing anyone from approaching too closely.

Gao Yingxiang was the chief of the bandits. If too many people learned of his connection to Gao Family Village, the consequences could be catastrophic, even leading to extermination by association. The last time his image had appeared on the television screen, news had nearly leaked. Fortunately, everyone present at that time had been interviewed immediately and sternly warned not to speak a word of it, lest they destroy the hard-won peace and prosperity of their own lives.

That matter had barely been suppressed.

This time, the secrecy needed to be even stricter.

The onlookers only knew that the militia had captured someone important. They did not know who it was. They only saw soldiers surrounding the stretcher so tightly that no one could glimpse the captive, before escorting him straight into the main fort of Gao Family Village.

The gates of the main fort slammed shut soon after. Aside from the original forty-two villagers and a handful of core leaders who rushed in upon hearing the news, no one else was allowed entry.

Gao Yingxiang was carried all the way up to the third floor of the watchtower and placed on the balcony.

This was the closest place to Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Gao Yiye turned toward the silicone effigy of Dao Xuan Tianzun seated quietly in the corner and called out softly, "Dao Xuan Tianzun, Dao Xuan Tianzun, are you there? We wish to ask for your decision regarding how to handle my uncle's matter."

Li Daoxuan was indeed present, but he chose not to speak.

If he spoke now, he knew he would inevitably show favoritism, bending rules for the sake of the forty-two villagers. That could not be allowed. It was better for him not to appear at all, to let Gao Family Village face and resolve this issue on its own.

Gao Yiye turned back, her voice tinged with surprise. "Dao Xuan Tianzun isn't here."

Gao Yiyi suggested, "Then let's ring the bell. It's been a long time since we last rang it to summon Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Gao Yiye hesitated, unease written plainly on her face. "Is it really appropriate to trouble Dao Xuan Tianzun over Uncle's matter? Dao Xuan Tianzun only intervenes in great human suffering. This is just our village's affair. I'm a little afraid."

Gao Chuwu scratched his head and spoke up. "Well... that's true, but if Dao Xuan Tianzun doesn't decide, how are we supposed to make such an important decision ourselves? I'm an idiot. I don't understand these things."

The Village Chief shook his head slowly. "Don't call Dao Xuan Tianzun. This small matter will be handled by us."

After speaking, he turned to the silent villagers of Gao Family Village seated nearby, as well as the core leadership who had rushed in upon hearing the news, and cupped his fists solemnly. "Everyone, I'm an uneducated man, lacking culture and learning compared to all of you. All I know is that this boy, Yingxiang, has committed countless wrongs. We gave him a chance to surrender, and he refused it. Now, if any of you wish to sentence him to death, we old villagers of Gao Family Village will bear no resentment. Please speak freely and say what you truly think."

Silence followed, deep and unsettling, stretching on far longer than anyone expected.

Finally, Tan Liwen cleared his throat and broke it. "Ahem. In my opinion, although Gao Yingxiang held the title of Chuǎng Wang, he did not personally commit any truly major atrocities. Most of the key decisions of the bandit army were made by the Dashing General and had little to do with him. His punishment could be reduced accordingly. I think... a life sentence of Labor Reform would be sufficient."

Chapter 1040 Making a Case

The moment Tan Liwen opened his mouth, everyone present understood at once who his words were meant for.

As he spoke, his tone carried a faint hesitation, and his eyes repeatedly swept over the faces of the original forty-two villagers of Gao Family Village, carefully gauging every flicker of expression, every subtle shift in mood. His phrasing was cautious, evasive at times, leaving himself ample room to retreat. It was obvious that if even one person voiced a dissenting opinion, he would immediately adjust his stance, twisting his reasoning just enough to keep himself standing on safe ground. It was a familiar technique, one perfected by those who lived by words and survived by them.

Even so, what he said happened to strike precisely where it mattered most.

These were exactly the words the people of Gao Family Village wanted to hear.

Gao Yiye's eyes brightened almost instantly, and the Village Chief's weathered face relaxed, relief written plainly across it.

Seeing how quickly Tan Liwen's remarks had taken effect, Cheng Xu, a man long tempered by officialdom and well versed in reading the wind, naturally followed without missing a beat.

"Steward Tan speaks reasonably," Cheng Xu said with a measured nod. "Chuǎng Wang does not seem to have committed anything truly unforgivable. I also believe that sentencing him to Labor Reform would be sufficient."

Once those two had spoken, the tone of the room was set.

The stewards of Gao Family Village exchanged glances, then one after another voiced their agreement, their words forming a smooth, unbroken chorus.

From afar, Li Daoxuan watched all of this unfold, his heart caught in a tangle of conflicting emotions.

On one hand, he could not deny his own inclination to side with the original villagers of Gao Family Village. On the other, he felt a deep unease at how easily the concept of rule of law was being bent.

Gao Family Village was the utopia he had painstakingly nurtured with his own hands. Yet even here, in this place that prided itself on fairness and order, equality before the law proved fragile. When a criminal had connections, when emotions and relationships entered the picture, voices would inevitably rise to shield him. If such a pattern continued unchecked, it would not take long before those in power trampled the law beneath their feet, justifying it with familiarity and sentiment.

Just as the atmosphere seemed ready to settle into an unspoken consensus, a voice cut sharply through the air.

"I object."

The words were firm, clear, and entirely out of place.

For a heartbeat, the room froze.

Then heads turned in unison.

Fang Wushang, Chief Inspector of Gao Family Village, rose to his feet.

His expression carried a hint of embarrassment, as though he were well aware that he was stepping into an uncomfortable position, yet beneath that was unmistakable resolve. He reached into his robes and produced a small booklet, worn from frequent handling.

This was his so called Heavenly Book, a personal compilation of principles and phrases he had painstakingly gathered over time from Li Daoxuan's occasional remarks and fragments of modern legal thought.

He flipped it open, found a marked page, and began to read aloud.

"Murder. Arson. Extremely large scale robbery. Rape. Acts of violence against women and children. Unlawful imprisonment. Torture. Execution by shooting. Mass arrests. Collective punishment. Destruction of homes. Forced displacement, and more."

Each item fell like a stone into still water.

When he finished, Fang Wushang closed the book and turned his gaze toward the stretcher.

"Gao Yingxiang," he asked calmly, "did you ever permit or condone your subordinates to carry out any of these acts?"

Gao Yingxiang lay there in silence for a moment, then released a long, heavy sigh.

"I did."

The answer was quiet, but it echoed loudly in the room.

"Then there is no ambiguity," Fang Wushang said. "You are guilty of war crimes."

He turned back to the assembled villagers, his face stern and unyielding.

"Gao Yingxiang has committed grave crimes, crimes of the most serious kind. In the words of Dao Xuan Tianzun, such offenses could even be classified as crimes against humanity. He did not surrender. He was captured on the battlefield while personally leading his army to attack Xi'an. By law, he merits the death penalty. There is no room for debate."

Silence fell.

The original forty-two villagers of Gao Family Village stood there, lips trembling, unable to bring themselves to speak.

At times like this, it was easier for an outsider to step forward.

Cheng Xu cleared his throat. "Old Fang, you cannot frame it so absolutely. In the later years of the Tianqi Emperor's reign, the empire was ravaged by drought, and officials enforced taxation with extreme brutality. It was a classic case of the government逼ing the people into revolt. Under those circumstances, is it not natural for someone to rise up?"

Fang Wushang's expression did not waver.

"Rebellion itself is not wrong," he replied. "Look at Lao Huihui. Did Dao Xuan Tianzun not spare him? That was a rebellion with justification. But Gao Yingxiang is different."

Cheng Xu hesitated, then tried again. "Rebellion is no child's game. Some degree of violence is inevitable, is it not?"

"Then let me give you an example," Fang Wushang said.

He paused, letting the room quiet completely, then spoke again, his tone measured and deliberate.

"Our Gao Family Village is prosperous now, is it not? All of you original residents, your households are far wealthier than ordinary people."

The villagers nodded instinctively.

Fang Wushang raised his hand and pointed toward Gao Laba.

"Especially you. Your rice noodle shop has brought in considerable profits, and your son, Gao Shan, has even opened the New Village Bookstore. You now possess power comparable to wealthy merchants and local gentry."

A murmur ran through the crowd, uncertainty flickering across their faces as they wondered where this was leading.

Fang Wushang continued.

"Now imagine this. Gao Yingxiang is a poor laborer. He comes to work at one of Gao Laba's businesses as a shop assistant. But Gao Laba withholds his wages, exploits him ruthlessly, and drives him to the brink of starvation. What should he do?"

"Resist Gao Laba," someone answered.

"Correct," Fang Wushang said. "He should resist. But if Gao Laba hires bodyguards and thugs, and Gao Yingxiang, with nothing but his own two fists, cannot fight them, then what happens?"

He gestured to the side, toward Gao San Niang and Gao Sanwa.

"Unable to defeat Gao Laba, Gao Yingxiang turns his fury on Gao San Niang and Gao Sanwa. He breaks into Gao San Niang's home, violates her by force, seizes all her family's possessions, drives her to hang herself, and even boils and eats Gao Sanwa."

Gao San Niang's face flushed faintly, a trace of embarrassment slipping into her voice.

"What nonsense are you saying? How could Brother Yingxiang ever do such a thing to me? Oh dear, you are making me uncomfortable. If it were Brother Yingxiang, I certainly would not hang myself."

The room went completely still.

Gao Sanwa shouted, "Hey, Mother. Did you not hear the part where he boiled and ate me? Did you only listen to the first half and ignore the rest?"

"It is just a hypothetical," Gao San Niang shot back. "He did not actually eat you, so why are you in such a hurry?"

"And the earlier part, where he did that to you, was also hypothetical," Gao Sanwa retorted. "So why are you blushing?"

Gao San Niang froze, blinking in confusion. "Huh?"

Right. It was only a hypothetical. Some fates, once missed, were missed forever. She was already middle aged now, and her son was busy drawing comic books.

The mood in the room darkened.

Stripped of its scale and laid bare, Fang Wushang's example cut straight to the heart of the matter.

Yes, the imperial court had wronged them. That much was undeniable.

But after rising in rebellion, they had turned their blades upon the weak. How many innocent commoners had been slaughtered? Who would speak for those whose lives were crushed beneath that chaos?

Cheng Xu fell silent.

Tan Liwen opened his mouth, then closed it again, swallowing whatever words he had intended to say.

An oppressive quiet lingered for a long while.

At last, Gao Yingxiang spoke.

"I... I never thought... that what what I did... was wrong," he said haltingly. "But just now... listening to this brother speak... I suddenly realized... I am a damned scoundrel."

All eyes turned toward him.

"I never truly cared about the lives of others," Gao Yingxiang continued. "But hearing you say I violated San Niang... and boiled and ate Sanwa... suddenly, my heart aches. If someone did such things to them, I would tear that person to pieces."

No one spoke.

It was true.

The lives and deaths of strangers were nothing more than numbers in a report. So many killed today. So many households looted tomorrow.

But what if those nameless victims were replaced with people you knew?

How would it feel, hearing that your friends and family had been killed, eaten, and made to suffer in every grotesque way imaginable?