

## Great Ming 1051

### Chapter 1051 Come, Have a Taste

Li Daoxuan stood at the dock with a bottle of soy sauce in his hand, looking faintly ridiculous.

Had he been holding a wine gourd while gazing over the river, he might have resembled a wandering immortal, aloof and poetic. But a bottle of soy sauce? That was harder to romanticize.

The people nearby were completely baffled.

What exactly was Dao Xuan Tianzun doing?

Yet the strange thing was that even standing there with a bottle of soy sauce, he somehow still looked imposing. In fact, the more they stared, the more they felt that this must be some fashionable gesture from the celestial realm. Perhaps immortals no longer carried wine gourds. Perhaps they all stood by rivers holding soy sauce bottles with profound expressions.

If that were the case, then it was clearly far more elegant than a gourd. Mortals simply lacked the vision to understand.

While everyone was still lost in speculation, several large river sea vessels appeared upstream. They cut through the water swiftly. On the bow of the leading ship stood a sailor holding a tin megaphone, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Clear the way. Clear the way. This vessel carries Dao Xuan Tianzun's special decree and urgent cargo. Do not obstruct the passage."

The words "special decree" were enough.

Merchant ships immediately shifted aside without hesitation. No one dared to delay anything connected to Dao Xuan Tianzun. As the vessels passed, sailors craned their necks and whispered among themselves.

If it was personally commanded by Dao Xuan Tianzun, it must be extraordinary. Perhaps a new divine weapon. Perhaps some secret celestial treasure. Perhaps a figure of immense importance.

Curiosity burned in every pair of eyes. This was a commercial dock, not a military fortress. A few stolen glances were hardly a crime.

The ships docked swiftly. The sailors, seeing Li Daoxuan already waiting, hurried ashore and knelt in neat formation.

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun. The mission has been completed. We returned at maximum speed."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "Well done. The entire crew is awarded Third Class Merit."

The sailors' eyes lit up at once. Merit meant bonuses. Bonuses meant real silver.

Energy surged through them. Large vats were brought out immediately and filled with seawater from the holds. Once filled, the sailors carefully transferred massive abalones, lobsters, crabs, and other sea creatures into the vats and carried them forward.

"How many died?" Li Daoxuan asked.

"About thirty percent," the transport officer replied, scratching his head. "The ones that were clearly failing, we salvaged and ate on the way. We were afraid their corpses would foul the water and kill the rest."

"Thirty percent is acceptable," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "Select one of each kind. Prepare a table. We will taste them first."

The sailors moved quickly. They had gained experience during the journey and no longer handled seafood like clueless inland peasants. Some items were sliced thin for raw tasting. Others were steamed. Some were boiled, some braised, some roasted.

Before long, a lavish seafood feast was laid out beside the dock.

It was the kind of banquet that, in another era, would cost a small fortune.

Li Daoxuan deliberately had the table placed in full view of the dock traffic. Every merchant could see it clearly. He took Gao Yiye's hand and sat down, then turned to Bai Yuan.

"Come. Sit. Eat with us."

Gao Yiye had eaten fish, shrimp, and crab before, but these strange sea creatures were entirely new to her. When she saw the mantis shrimp, with its segmented body and sharp forelimbs, she instinctively leaned back.

"What are these strange insects? Are they truly edible?"

Li Daoxuan laughed. "They are called mantis shrimp. Some people call them prawn creepers. They are shrimp, not insects."

Even Bai Yuan looked doubtful. "Shrimp? They look nothing like shrimp."

Li Daoxuan picked one up and peeled it with practiced hands. The shell came away cleanly, revealing a firm, white piece of meat. He dipped it lightly into the soy sauce he had brought, then placed it into his mouth.

The flavor spread instantly. Sweetness from the sea. A hint of brine. The deep umami of fermented soy. It was the taste of a coastline condensed into a single bite.

He closed his eyes briefly in satisfaction.

Gao Yiye and Bai Yuan followed his example. They fumbled slightly with the shells, then dipped the meat into the soy sauce and tasted it.

Their expressions changed almost at once.

Gao Yiye's eyes widened. Bai Yuan straightened slightly, as if something had struck him.

Around them, the merchants stared openly now. Their envy was no longer concealed.

"If Dao Xuan Tianzun enjoys it so much," someone muttered under his breath, "it must be extraordinary."

Li Daoxuan looked up and beckoned to the nearest merchant.

"You. Come here."

The merchant froze and pointed at himself. "Me?"

"Yes. You."

The man nearly stumbled in his haste to approach. He bowed deeply.

"To be summoned by Dao Xuan Tianzun is already an honor. How may this humble one serve?"

Li Daoxuan pointed at the mantis shrimp. "Try one."

The merchant hesitated only a moment before picking one up. His peeling technique was clumsy and awkward, but he eventually extracted the meat. He dipped it into the soy sauce, placed it into his mouth, and chewed.

His face transformed.

The smile that spread across it was not polite. It was genuine.

"Well?" Li Daoxuan asked.

"I have never tasted anything like this in my life."

"What price could it fetch?"

The merchant did not hesitate. "At least twice the price of beef. No, that is too conservative. Five times. I am confident I could sell it at five times."

"They die easily," Li Daoxuan warned. "You have no experience keeping them alive. If they perish during transport, your losses will be severe."

The merchant fell silent for a moment, calculating rapidly.

"I will sell them before they die," he said firmly. "If entrusted to me, I will deliver them directly to the Prince of Fu's residence at the fastest speed possible. The Prince of Fu is a large man, well over three hundred catties, and adores delicacies. I am confident I can draw thousands of taels of silver from him."

He grew more animated as he spoke.

"There is also the Prince of Tang in Nanyang. He will certainly pay. And within Luoyang alone, there are countless officials and wealthy families who can afford such luxury."

"If I truly cannot sell them in time," he continued, lowering his voice slightly, "I will use ice blocks to preserve them. That will extend their freshness for several days."

A peculiar glint appeared in his eyes.

"If ice is required, costs will rise. Higher costs justify higher prices."

Li Daoxuan smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

"Excellent. I admire your way of thinking. I will wholesale two vats of mantis shrimp to you at a favorable price, along with a crate of Dao Xuan Seafood Soy Sauce. You determine your profit margin. I will also give you a block of ice."

As his words fell, a colossal golden hand descended from the sky and placed a massive block of ice beside the dock. It stood taller than two men and looked like a small house carved from winter itself.

Gasps erupted from the surrounding crowd.

"You may chip off what you need," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "In the future, I will frequently provide ice. If you run out, come here and collect more."

The merchant nearly prostrated himself on the spot.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has bestowed upon me unimaginable fortune."

He departed in a daze, repeatedly bowing as he went.

After he left, Gao Yiye turned to Li Daoxuan with curiosity.

"Why grant him such an opportunity? Has he rendered any special service?"

Li Daoxuan only smiled.

Bai Yuan, standing nearby, let out a soft chuckle.

"Saintess, Dao Xuan Tianzun is fishing."

"Fishing?" Gao Yiye repeated.

"Yes," Bai Yuan said. "This merchant will earn greatly from these two vats. When they are gone, what will he desire?"

Gao Yiye thought for a moment. Her eyes slowly brightened.

"He will want more."

Bai Yuan nodded.

"And once he wants more, he will not wait for it to be given. He will seek supply himself. He will spread word that such seafood exists. He will create demand in places that have never seen the sea. Others will follow him."

He looked at the bustling dock, at the merchants whispering among themselves, at the vats of seafood gleaming under the morning light.

"A single taste," Bai Yuan said softly, "and the hook is already set."

Chapter 1052 Lian Guoshi's Reassignment

Gao Yiye understood almost immediately. His gaze followed the departing merchant, already calculating the invisible lines of profit stretching toward the horizon.

"That man will definitely find a way to secure more of these shrimp," he said thoughtfully. "If he cannot get them directly from our ships, he will source them from coastal cities. Either way, a new trade route is about to open."

Bai Yuan smiled, clearly pleased by the direction of events. "And once that route forms, porters will have work, fishermen will have steady buyers, and the coastal towns will come alive. Commerce feeds more than just merchants."

Li Daoxuan gave a soft chuckle and gestured toward the neatly arranged slices of tuna laid over crushed ice. The flesh was a deep red, glistening faintly under the afternoon light.

"Enough theorizing. Try this. Raw fish slices. Incredibly good."

"Raw?" Gao Yiye hesitated, brows knitting together. "That sounds a little..."

Bai Yuan, far less burdened by culinary caution, had already picked up a slice with his chopsticks. He dipped it lightly into the seafood soy sauce, examined it for a brief second, and then placed it into his mouth.

His expression shifted.

One eyebrow lifted.

"Oh?" he murmured. "This is unexpectedly excellent."

Only after seeing Bai Yuan remain upright and breathing did Gao Yiye gather the courage to try a piece himself. The thick-cut tuna had a texture both tender and resilient, rich without being greasy, and when paired with the savory depth of the soy sauce, it carried a clean sweetness that lingered.

He blinked in surprise. "I never imagined raw fish could taste like this."

Li Daoxuan smiled with obvious satisfaction and waved over another merchant who had been hovering nearby, torn between curiosity and restraint.

"You there. Come taste this."

The merchant hurried over, bowed quickly, and accepted a slice. The moment it touched his tongue, his eyes widened as though someone had just whispered a secret about silver hidden beneath his own floorboards.

Li Daoxuan laughed at the transformation. "I will sell you several large fish like this at a low price. I will also provide a large block of ice and a box of seafood soy sauce. The rest is up to you. Figure out how to sell them."

The merchant nearly trembled with excitement. "Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

At those words, the surrounding merchants finally understood what was happening. This was not mere indulgence. This was distribution of opportunity. Dao Xuan Tianzun was assigning tasks in the most delicious way imaginable. Order replaced the earlier chaos as everyone lined up properly, waiting their turn to receive their share.

Before long, one merchant departed with two tubs of massive lobsters.

Another left with two tubs filled with large abalones.

Yet another staggered away under the weight of a basket packed with enormous crabs.

One by one, the seafood from the Zheng family's five great ships was distributed, each transaction planting the seed of a new livelihood somewhere along the coast.

That very evening, the dining hall of the Prince of Fu's manor displayed a spectacle worthy of a painting. The long table groaned under the weight of lobster, abalone, crab, and thick slices of tuna served over carefully preserved ice.

The Prince of Fu, Zhu Changxun, whose generous figure tipped the scales at three hundred catties, sat proudly at the head of the table. He wore his "Warm and Sleepy" branded wool sweater, the napkin tucked securely into his collar to shield all two hundred and fifty taels' worth of fine wool from stray drips.

He looked at his concubines with deep satisfaction. "This table of delicacies did not come cheap. This prince spent over five thousand three hundred taels of silver on this feast."

The concubines exchanged subtle glances. Over five thousand taels for a single meal sounded suspiciously like being thoroughly fleeced, but none dared voice such heresy. They simply smiled and admired the spread as instructed.

Zhu Changxun grabbed a large blue lobster with both hands and twisted. The shell cracked sharply, and he pulled out a thick, pristine piece of white meat with obvious delight.

"Look at the size of this," he declared. "I only ever ate shrimp this large in the imperial palace before I was enfeoffed. Since coming to Henan, I have not enjoyed such a delicacy."

There was genuine nostalgia in his voice, the kind reserved for lost privileges and former glory.

He dipped the meat generously into soy sauce before placing it into his mouth, chewing slowly as his eyes half-closed in bliss.

"This miraculous soy sauce," he said after swallowing, "even in the imperial palace, I never tasted anything like it."

The Princess Consort quickly seized the moment. "Then we should purchase more for the manor in the future."

"Of course we shall," Zhu Changxun declared grandly.

And so the silver from the Prince of Fu's manor began flowing outward in steady streams, nourishing fishermen, dockworkers, ice handlers, and soy sauce bottlers in the days that followed. Wealth, once locked in a treasury, had found its way into circulation through appetite.

While Li Daoxuan was busy turning seafood into industry at Xiaolangdi Pier, a train whistled as it rolled into Xiaolangdi Station, trailing steam behind it like a dragon reluctant to rest.

An old man in his fifties stepped down from one of the carriages.

It was Lian Guoshi.

Or rather, the former Governor of Shaanxi, Lian Guoshi.

By the time he reached the pier, he found Dao Xuan Tianzun, Gao Yiye, and Bai Yuan seated by the water, enjoying what remained of the seafood feast.

Li Daoxuan spotted him first and waved. "Governor Lian, come join us. How did you end up in Henan?"

Lian Guoshi approached swiftly, bowed respectfully, and took a seat beside Bai Yuan. "Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun, this subordinate has served as Governor of Shaanxi for six years. Tax revenue has been meager, and it seems His Majesty is dissatisfied. I have been reassigned to Nanjing as Left Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue, a comparatively quiet post."

Bai Yuan tilted his head slightly. "So you came to Xiaolangdi to take a boat to Nanjing?"

"Precisely," Lian Guoshi replied with an easy smile.

Bai Yuan studied him with faint admiration. "To move from a powerful provincial office to a sidelined post in Nanjing and remain so cheerful is no small feat."

Lian Guoshi laughed heartily, and there was no bitterness in it. "In the past, I would have felt frustration. This time, I feel none. During my years in Shaanxi, had it not been for Dao Xuan Tianzun's assistance, I would never have managed the chaos of rebellion. A peaceful reassignment is already a blessing. I could have ended like Yang He, imprisoned, exiled, or dead in some distant land. That I sit here speaking freely is fortune enough. I was unworthy of the post to begin with."

He turned toward Li Daoxuan and cupped his hands. "After I arrive in Nanjing, I wish to continue serving Dao Xuan Tianzun. If there is any task I can undertake, I will devote myself fully."

Nanjing.

Li Daoxuan found the idea intriguing. A capable man stationed in the south, quietly building strength, might prove invaluable when the winds shifted.

Gao Yiye asked with curiosity, "Minister Lian, what does a Left Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue oversee?"

Lian Guoshi explained with patient clarity. "The Ministry of Revenue handles land taxes, customs duties, likin, public bonds, currency, immigration, land reclamation, refugee resettlement, prevention of land seizures by powerful gentry, commodity weights and measures, price assessments, and more. It touches nearly every artery of the empire's economy."

Gao Yiye nodded slowly. "Then many of Gao Family Village's factories would fall under that jurisdiction."

"Indeed," Lian Guoshi replied. "As soon as I received the reassignment, I began planning. Once in Nanjing, I intend to replicate the factories and industries we established in Xi'an and develop them thoroughly in the Jiangnan region. It will greatly benefit the people there."

Li Daoxuan smiled approvingly. "Very good. Take up your post first. Yiye, arrange for a group of our people, along with technical knowledge and supplies, to assist Minister Lian once he is settled."

Gao Yiye inclined his head gracefully. "As Dao Xuan Tianzun commands."

With that, Gao Family Village's influence prepared to extend once more, this time toward Nanjing.

Bai Yuan suddenly remembered something. "After you leave, who will become Governor of Shaanxi? If it is someone troublesome, we may need to prepare."

A curious smile tugged at Lian Guoshi's lips. "There is no need to prepare against him. He is one of us."

Bai Yuan stared. "Who?"

"His Majesty has appointed Sun Chuanting as Governor of Shaanxi."

Bai Yuan inhaled sharply.

Gao Yiye's composure wavered just slightly. "Principal Sun of the Yellow Pole Military Academy?"

"The very same," Lian Guoshi confirmed. "At this very moment, he is probably not in high spirits."

Far away, atop the teaching building of the Yellow Pole Military Academy, Sun Chuanting stood facing the wind, staring down at the institution he had personally nurtured into existence. His fingers tightened in his hair as frustration overcame him.

"This is troublesome," he muttered to the empty air. "I cannot be in two places at once."

And for a man who believed both places desperately needed him, that was no small dilemma.

Chapter 1053 This Kid's Sharp

Sun Chuanting was in no mood for subtlety.

He stood atop the training building of the Yellow Pole Military Academy, staring down at the grounds he had carved out of nothing but stubbornness and faith. Every brick, every drill formation, every young cadet barking commands in the yard below carried his imprint. To leave it behind now felt like cutting off a limb.

And yet he understood the situation too clearly to pretend otherwise.

Shaanxi was no ordinary province. It was the cradle of everything Dao Xuan Tianzun had quietly built, the ideological hearth of a new age. If he refused the appointment, Emperor Chongzhen might very well send some clueless bureaucrat to take over. That would invite friction, interference, and a thousand petty struggles with the court. The resulting mess would benefit no one.

Still, knowing the right choice did not make it pleasant.

As he brooded, movement at the edge of the training ground caught his eye. A familiar figure was sneaking along the wall with exaggerated caution, shoulders hunched, steps light, as if the fate of the empire depended on not being seen.

"Flat Rabbit," Sun Chuanting called out coolly. "What are you plotting now?"

Flat Rabbit jumped as though struck by lightning. He spun around and snapped to attention, both hands immediately flying behind his back.

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing."

"Hands in front."

Flat Rabbit coughed theatrically. "I suffer from a rare ailment. If I put my hands in front of me, I will perish on the spot."

"Then turn around and face the other direction."

Flat Rabbit froze. After a long pause that contained all the dignity of a caught thief, he sighed and brought his hands forward.

Sun Chuanting leaned in and looked.

In Flat Rabbit's grip was a book. On the cover, in bold, dramatic characters, were the words: Huashan Sword Techniques.

Sun Chuanting blinked. "There is such a thing in this world?"

Flat Rabbit puffed out his chest, pride radiating from him. "This rabbit searched far and wide. I combed through bookstores across the city. I finally found it hidden in a dusty corner of a tiny, crumbling shop. Just from how carefully it was concealed, you can tell it must be a supreme secret manual. Once I master it, I will sweep the martial world. My sword will split the heavens."

Sun Chuanting held out his hand. "Let me see."

Flat Rabbit passed it over with great ceremony.

Sun Chuanting flipped it open casually, his eyes first landing on the author's name.

Gao Sanwa.

A strange silence descended.

"Did you even open it before buying it?" Sun Chuanting exploded. "This is not a sword manual. It is a comic story about a Huashan swordsman's heroic adventures. It has nothing to do with actual sword techniques."

Flat Rabbit stared. "What?"

He grabbed the book back and flipped through it frantically. The more he read, the more his ears drooped.

With a soft thud, he collapsed onto the ground and curled into a tight ball of misery.

Sun Chuanting exhaled slowly. "Everyone has their illusions, I suppose."

Flat Rabbit peeked up at him from his miserable knot. "Principal, you sound troubled yourself. What happened?"

Sun Chuanting hesitated only briefly. "The court has appointed me Governor of Shaanxi. If I take office, the Yellow Pole Military Academy will be left without its head."

Flat Rabbit rolled onto his back and stared at the sky for a moment, as though considering the structure of the cosmos.

"Is that all?" he said finally. "Then open another Yellow Pole Military Academy in Xi'an. As for the Puzhou campus, appoint a new sub-principal later."

The words were so simple they felt almost insulting.

Sun Chuanting stood still.

Then he laughed, a wry and self-aware sound. "When it is your own dilemma, you cannot see the path forward. Yet from the outside, the answer appears obvious."

Flat Rabbit sprang up immediately, as though his earlier despair had never existed. "Then I will go to Xi'an with you. I quite like Xi'an."

Sun Chuanting looked at him skeptically.

Flat Rabbit placed his hands on his hips. "I am not exaggerating. I once served as Grand Steward of Xi'an, personally appointed by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Sun Chuanting felt as if a cool breeze had blown across his face. "You?"

He studied Flat Rabbit carefully, as though trying to reconcile this chaotic creature with the idea of administrative responsibility.

"You were capable of being a steward?"

Not long after, Sun Chuanting set out for Xi'an to assume his new post, accompanied by Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi. It did not take long for his skepticism to soften.

As they walked through the streets of Xi'an, poor townsfolk bowed to Flat Rabbit with genuine warmth. Some even called out greetings as if welcoming back an old benefactor.

A richly dressed merchant approached and bowed deeply. "Flat Rabbit, you have returned to Xi'an. It has been far too long. I have missed you greatly."

Flat Rabbit squinted at him, then burst into laughter. "You have prospered well. Back then you were begging for scraps. Now look at you."

The merchant straightened, emotion evident in his voice. "It was thanks to you. Those three copper coins you gave me allowed me to fill my stomach and regain my strength. I found work, saved what I could, and eventually opened a small business. Bit by bit it grew. Everything I have today began with those three coins. Since fate has allowed me to meet you again, I must treat you to a proper meal."

Without waiting for refusal, he ushered Flat Rabbit, Sun Chuanting, and Zheng Gouzi to the top floor of Xi'an's finest restaurant.

As soon as they sat down, he declared, "Bring us your newest seafood set."

Sun Chuanting frowned. "Seafood? In Xi'an?"

The merchant smiled. "Recently introduced. Dao Xuan Tianzun arranged for it to be transported from the coast by great ships. It is extraordinary. Even a modest meal for four would cost no less than a hundred taels of silver."

Flat Rabbit nearly fell off his chair. "A hundred taels? I gave you three copper coins. How can I let you spend a hundred taels on me?"

"If not for those three coins," the merchant replied earnestly, "I would have died. What is a hundred taels compared to my life? Please do not refuse."

The waiter acknowledged the order and hurried away.

Sun Chuanting watched all of this with quiet astonishment. Who would have imagined that Flat Rabbit, of all people, had left behind so many threads of goodwill? How many struggling souls had he nudged forward with some careless act of kindness? This prosperous merchant was clearly not the only one.

His thoughts were interrupted by movement at the stairwell. Another group was ascending to the top floor.

Three children.

The eldest was nearly a young man, Han Chinese, dressed simply but in fine cloth that spoke of wealth without ostentation. The two younger ones wore traditional Mongolian attire, marking them immediately as non-Han.

Sun Chuanting murmured softly to himself.

The eldest boy spotted Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi at once and approached with an easy smile. "Uncle Tu, Uncle Gouzi, you are dining here as well?"

Flat Rabbit blinked. "Who are you?"

"It is me," the boy replied brightly. "The son of the 'Rich as Oil' man. Handsome Enough to Bubble."

Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi exchanged a look. They were not particularly close to Liu You, yet this boy addressed them as if they were family elders.

Liu Maopao slid into familiarity without hesitation. "What fortune to encounter Uncle Tu and Uncle Gouzi here. Shall we share a table? And who might these two gentlemen be?"

"I am Sun Chuanting," Sun replied evenly.

Liu Maopao's eyes widened instantly. "Principal Sun of the Yellow Pole Military Academy?"

He bowed properly this time. "Uncle Sun, this junior did not expect to meet you here today and came unprepared with a proper gift. That is truly disrespectful. I will visit your residence another day to make amends, and I will personally deliver the finest wool sweater from our factory."

Sun Chuanting regarded the boy carefully.

He had attached himself within moments, addressed everyone appropriately, and offered a calculated but polite gesture of goodwill.

This kid truly was sharp.

Chapter 1054 A Divine Reward, Egg Yolk Pie

By the time the dishes were halfway gone, Liu Maopao had already worked his way into the good graces of three out of the four adults at the table.

Only the merchant who had invited them remained.

Unfortunately for that poor man, he had recognized Liu Maopao the moment the boy walked in.

As a fellow businessman, how could he not admire the endlessly replayed advertisements of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory? The wool sweaters had flooded Xi'an, and the marketing style had become a legend in its own right. To meet the factory owner's son in person felt less like coincidence and more like a stroke of commercial destiny.

The two merchants began talking at once, each praising the other with the ease of seasoned traders. Before long they were clasping hands and laughing like distant cousins reunited after years apart.

Naturally, the two tables were pushed together.

The merchant declared with great enthusiasm that he would cover the entire bill. His joy was so obvious that refusing him would have seemed rude.

Soon the seafood began arriving in waves. Lobster shells cracked, steam rose from platters, and the scent of soy sauce drifted through the air. Conversation mingled with the clatter of chopsticks. Even Sun Chuanting, who had arrived burdened with official troubles, found himself relaxing.

The two Mongolian boys, E'zhe and Zhebu, were utterly captivated.

"These strange fish and shrimp are unbelievably good," E'zhe said between bites, his eyes wide. "Are they really all from the sea?"

"Yes," Liu Maopao replied cheerfully. "Fishermen sail out, cast their nets, and bring them back."

"I heard the ocean is vast and wild," E'zhe continued. "Does that mean you can just take whatever you want from it?"

Liu Maopao nodded, then added with calculated casualness, "In theory, yes. But there are pirates. You have seen Battle of Liaoluo Bay, haven't you?"

E'zhe's face lit up immediately. "That is my favorite film. Naval battles are the best."

"If you like them so much," Liu Maopao said, gesturing lightly with his chopsticks, "you could study naval tactics. Imagine forming a Mongolian navy one day. Sweep away every pirate on the seas. Then you could harvest all the seafood you wish."

Sun Chuanting nearly choked on his tea.

A Mongolian navy.

Only Liu Maopao could plant such an idea so smoothly, like slipping a seed into fertile soil.

E'zhe turned eagerly toward Sun Chuanting. "How do I learn that?"

Liu Maopao smiled as though he had merely remembered something trivial. "Principal Sun is right here. Why not ask him?"

Sun Chuanting cursed inwardly but maintained a composed expression. The child before him was no ordinary boy. He was a descendant of Genghis Khan, heir to the Heavenly Khan. Mocking the suggestion outright would serve no purpose.

"If you are interested in maritime studies," Sun Chuanting said gently, "my academy recently established a specialized naval program. You would be welcome."

E'zhe clapped his hands in delight. "Then I will become a naval officer."

The adults exchanged glances.

If this Mongolian prince continued spending time around Liu Maopao, heaven knew what he might become.

The meal lasted nearly an hour. By the time the last shells were cleared, dusk had fallen over Xi'an. From the restaurant's upper floor, they could see Caishikou Plaza below, already filling with people.

It was time for Gaojia News.

The Kulinan carriage from the Prince of Qin's residence rolled into view. Zhu Cunji and his consort stepped down and made their way to their usual viewing platform. Since Lian Guoshi had been reassigned, no one crowded the stand anymore. The prince and his wife had regained their privacy, though both secretly missed the lively company they once kept.

As they settled in, Flat Rabbit and the others emerged from the restaurant next door.

Zhu Cunji's face brightened. "Brother Rabbit, come over. Join this heir in watching the news."

Flat Rabbit responded with enthusiasm and led the entire group up. Even the children squeezed in without ceremony.

Sun Chuanting observed all this in quiet disbelief. Flat Rabbit's network seemed to extend everywhere, from beggars to wealthy merchants to princely heirs.

Liu Maopao wasted no time.

"Uncle Zhu," he greeted warmly, then turned to the consort with a respectful bow. "Auntie, you are wearing one of our wool sweaters. Tomorrow I will send you a new design."

The consort beamed.

Just like that, the boy secured his place.

Sun Chuanting could not help thinking that this child's future would be formidable.

The broadcast began.

International news opened the program. The Mongolian tribes, led by the Wushen Tribe under orders from E'zhe, descendant of Genghis Khan, had launched a punitive expedition against the Khorchin Tribe. Victories had been secured, and most of the Khorchin had already submitted.

Every adult present slowly turned to look at E'zhe.

The boy grinned proudly. "I gave the order myself. Sister Gao Yiye even stamped the agreement with the Imperial Seal."

No one quite knew how to respond.

At that moment, the small cotton figure of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Flat Rabbit's chest suddenly spoke.

"E'zhe, you have done well. I have decided to grant you a reward."

E'zhe nearly leapt out of his skin with joy. "Dao Xuan Tianzun has manifested!"

The surrounding nobles and commoners alike hurriedly performed their salutes.

The cotton figure smiled mischievously. "It will arrive at once."

The night sky above Caishikou Plaza tore open as though a curtain had been pulled aside. A colossal golden hand descended, holding a round object so enormous that it resembled a building.

The crowd scattered in alarm and awe.

Gently, the hand placed the object in the center of the plaza.

It was a gigantic golden pastry, soft and gleaming under lantern light.

The cotton figure announced with satisfaction, "This is your reward. It is called Egg Yolk Pie."

The plaza fell into stunned silence.

"It is delicious," Dao Xuan Tianzun continued. "You may enjoy it freely. You may also cut it into pieces and send it back to the grasslands to share with your brothers and sisters."

E'zhe ran forward without hesitation. He broke off a chunk from the massive pie and stuffed it into his mouth.

Sweetness exploded across his tongue. The rich fragrance of egg yolk and pastry melted together in perfect harmony.

His eyes widened.

"This is incredible."

He turned to the crowd. "I will give half of it as payment. Which capable merchant is willing to help me cut it into portions, package it, and send it to the Mongolian grasslands?"

There was no shortage of volunteers.

As long as the profit margin was generous, merchants could accomplish anything under heaven.

Before long, an experienced trader stepped forward. He organized laborers, claimed half the pie for himself as agreed, and carefully cut and packaged the remaining half. Crates were sealed, wagons prepared, and shipments dispatched toward the steppe.

Days later, across the vast Mongolian grasslands, warriors and herders alike tasted Egg Yolk Pie.

The fierce nomads, descendants of wolves and riders of the open sky, chewed thoughtfully.

It was soft. Sweet. Pleasant.

One piece led to another.

Soon, a curious change occurred.

Bellies grew rounder. Cheeks filled out. Coats of hair became glossy and well fed. Mounting a horse required just a little more effort than before.

Minor inconveniences.

The pie was delicious.

Surely that was what mattered most.

#### Chapter 1055 A Pottery Factory is Needed

The wind that swept across Henan that season carried a knife's edge to it, the kind that sliced through cotton robes and scraped against bone, and yet the greater chill did not come from the weather but from the chaos spreading across the land.

Ten miles beyond Xuzhou, in the forests outside the city, an army that called itself righteous had gathered in such numbers that the earth seemed to vibrate beneath their boots. More than a hundred thousand men filled the woods, their campfires flickering like a second, restless constellation fallen to the ground.

And yet, for all their numbers, they could not agree on a single direction.

Inside a large command tent patched together from looted cloth and military canvas, several rebel leaders were locked in fierce argument.

"Xuzhou cannot be taken," Zhang Miaoshou declared, slamming his palm against the rough wooden table. A former bandit chief, he had the blunt instincts of a man who had survived by sensing danger early. "It's a famous metropolis, heavily defended by imperial generals. Do you think it's some countryside granary you can torch at will? Have you already forgotten how Brother Chuang Wang died? His arrogance drove him to attack Xi'an, and that was the end of him."

Across from him, Zhang Xianzhong, known among the rebels as the Eight Great Kings, leaned back with a smile that carried no warmth whatsoever. He spoke not loudly, but with the sort of confidence that suggested he had already decided the matter.

"Xi'an was Xi'an," he replied. "Xuzhou is Xuzhou. The current garrison there is soft. Rotten. Nothing like the iron wall that guarded Xi'an. If we dare to strike, we will take it."

Zhang Miaoshou shook his head in disbelief, as though staring at a man who had willingly stepped off a cliff. "Even if the garrison is weak, Zuo Liangyu is stationed in Runing Prefecture, in Zhumadian, just to the south. If we touch Xuzhou, he will move."

The Eight Great Kings laughed then, a sharp, almost gleeful sound that cut through the tent.

"Afraid?" he asked lightly. "If fear rules your bones, then leave. I have no interest in fighting alongside cowards."

Zhang Miaoshou gave a snort of contempt, sweeping his sleeve wide. "And I have no interest in following a madman into his grave."

He left with his men soon after, the forest swallowing their retreating figures.

The Eight Great Kings watched them go, then chuckled again, softer this time, like someone who had just removed an inconvenience.

"Full army advance," he ordered. "We take Xuzhou."

Not long afterward, the battle began.

To the south, in Zhumadian of Runing Prefecture, Zuo Liangyu received word that a rebel army one hundred thousand strong was marching toward Xuzhou under the banner of the Eight Great Kings.

When he heard the number, a flicker of unease crossed his face.

"One hundred thousand?" he muttered. "Xuzhou is no small town. What madness drives them to attack it? At best they are passing by, making noise beneath the walls. If we refrain from provoking them, they will withdraw on their own."

His officers exchanged glances but did not argue.

And so he waited.

Days later, the news arrived like a thunderclap.

Xuzhou had fallen.

The rebels had broken through the city defenses and descended upon it like wolves among sheep. Fires consumed streets. Officials were dragged out and slaughtered. Wealthy families were wiped out. Commoners fared no better. Blood did not discriminate between ranks.

Among the dead was Zuo Liangyu's own household.

His ancestral home had stood in Xuzhou. Every member of his family there was killed, not a single life spared. Only his son, Zuo Menggeng, survived, and that was because he had been campaigning alongside him.

When the report finished, Zuo Liangyu did not speak for a long time.

From that day onward, there remained no clan left for him to protect. The fear of extermination, which had once restrained many of his decisions, dissolved like mist beneath a rising sun. A man with nothing left to lose moves differently through the world.

West of Luoyang City, in Xinan County, lay a village known as Ganquan, though most people simply called it Gu Tao Village. For a thousand years it had shaped clay into vessels, firing pottery in kilns that seemed older than memory itself. Because of this heritage, it had earned a simple, affectionate nickname: the Village of Ancient Pottery.

These days, however, it no longer felt ancient at all.

The entire settlement buzzed with energy. Kilns burned day and night, flames licking through their mouths while villagers moved in ceaseless rhythm, shaping and firing ceramic bottles as though racing against an invisible clock.

Ever since Dao Xuan Tianzun had bestowed upon Luoyang two colossal soy sauce bottles towering thirty meters high, the task of repackaging that heavenly bounty had begun in earnest. The sauce had to be transferred into manageable containers before it could be sold or distributed, and that meant bottles, endless bottles.

At first, Gu Tao Village had emptied its storage houses, sending years of accumulated inventory to Luoyang in a single sweeping wave. The profits had been unprecedented. Now, however, the shelves stood bare, and every kiln roared with desperate urgency to produce more.

In the center of the village, Gao Yiye stood speaking with the Xinan County Magistrate.

Her tone remained gentle, yet there was unmistakable pressure beneath it.

"Magistrate," she said, "are there truly no more bottles to be found? The repackaging of soy sauce is a task entrusted by Dao Xuan Tianzun. The workers in Luoyang grow anxious. When there is no work, they feel uneasy receiving wages. They fear losing their livelihoods."

What laborers fear most is not hardship, nor even low pay.

It is idleness.

A factory that stops running is a beast that may never wake again. A conscientious employer might still provide minimal wages during a pause, but many would simply shut the gates and dismiss their workers without ceremony. Though everyone knew that their benefactor was Dao Xuan Tianzun, the insecurity carved by generations of instability did not vanish overnight.

The magistrate, who had personally witnessed Dao Xuan Tianzun tear away the mud-crusted devastation left by the Yellow River floods, had long since become a devout believer. Before Gao Yiye, he adopted an attitude of utmost humility.

"It is not that Xinan County refuses to try," he said earnestly. "Gu Tao Village emptied every storehouse. Years of inventory were sold in days. Now there is not a single spare ceramic bottle in the entire village. They fire new ones without rest, but the manpower is insufficient. Truly insufficient."

Gao Yiye had, over time, gained a modest understanding of economic principles, though she would never describe it in such grand terms.

Gu Tao Village had always been small, with only around a hundred households engaged in pottery. In the past, the surrounding population's purchasing power had been weak, and their output had exceeded demand, leaving artisans poor despite their skill. Now the situation had reversed overnight. With trade routes opened and the massive soy sauce supply descending from above, demand had exploded far beyond the village's traditional capacity.

"It seems," she said thoughtfully, "that we must increase the workforce."

The magistrate nodded but looked troubled.

"That is easier said than done. Since Dao Xuan Tianzun's blessings arrived, industries everywhere have surged forward. Coal mines, iron mines, smelting workshops, road construction projects. Every new venture demands hands. Even with the refugees who have arrived, there are still not enough people."

Gao Yiye considered the matter in silence for a moment.

"There are many refugees in Luoyang," she said at last. "I will speak with Bai Yuan and arrange for some to be transferred here. Even if they lack technical skill, they can assist with manual labor. And beyond that, I propose something larger. We should establish a centralized ceramic factory here, reorganizing production into a unified system. Gu Tao Village will become Gu Tao Factory. The elderly artisans can join as senior technicians, passing on their craft while overseeing scale production."

The magistrate's eyes brightened with cautious hope.

"That may indeed be the only path forward."

"Then I will return to Luoyang and make the arrangements," Gao Yiye replied.

She climbed into her automobile, a symbol of the new era taking root beneath heaven, while her hundred-strong escort mounted troop transport trucks and followed behind in disciplined formation.

The distance between Gu Tao Village and Luoyang was only a few dozen li, and with the newly built concrete highway, the journey passed swiftly.

Yet as they approached the western outskirts of Luoyang, Gao Yiye sensed at once that something was wrong.

The west gate stood closed.

Militia members, many of them newly recruited, lined the walls in tense formation. Their grips on their weapons were tight, eyes scanning the horizon as though expecting trouble at any moment.

When her vehicle came into view, a guard on the ramparts shouted down urgently, ordering the gates opened at once for the Saintess.

The heavy doors creaked apart just wide enough for her convoy to pass through. No sooner had they entered than the gates slammed shut again with a resounding clang that echoed across the stone.

Inside the city, the atmosphere felt strained, like a drum pulled too tight.

Gao Yiye frowned slightly.

"What has happened," she wondered aloud, "to put Luoyang on such alert?"

Chapter 1056 In That Case, I Surrender

"A rebel army is approaching Luoyang at speed."

The guard at the gate straightened sharply when Gao Yiye asked what had happened. His voice carried both urgency and discipline.

"General Cao Wenzhao and General He Renlong are not in the city. Mr. Bai Yuan has taken part of the militia to Nanyang for disaster relief. Only General Gao Jie remains. He has ordered all four gates sealed to prevent a sudden assault."

Gao Yiye absorbed this calmly. "From which direction?"

"The south. The Governor, the Prefect, General Gao Jie, and the others are already stationed at the South Gate."

She gave a small nod and drove directly there.

By the time she arrived, the southern wall had become the center of the city's tension. Officials clustered along the battlements, staring into the distance as if willing the horizon to remain empty.

Henan's Governor, Fan Shangzheng, stood with tight lips. The Luoyang Prefect hovered nearby. Prince of Fu, Zhu Changxun, was present as well, wrapped in layered robes despite the wind, his personal guards surrounding him like a living wall. Beside them stood Gao Jie, rustic in bearing yet standing tall, armor strapped on with casual familiarity.

It was an unlikely assembly. Scholar, prince, general, saintess. All staring south.

When Gao Yiye stepped onto the wall, everyone bowed.

"The rebels will arrive at any moment," Gao Jie said, lowering his voice slightly. "Saintess, the wall is not entirely safe. Arrows can travel farther than men expect. It may be better if you withdraw."

She gave him a look that was almost amused. "I have witnessed battles far greater than this."

That ended the discussion. Gao Jie bowed and moved to the front, resting one hand lightly on the hilt of his blade.

Below them, the southern plain trembled faintly as shapes began to gather at the edge of sight. At first it was dust, then movement within dust, then a dark tide of men advancing in uneven lines. The sheer number of them made the air feel heavier.

Prince Zhu Changxun wiped sweat from his brow and leaned toward Gao Jie.

"General Gao," he asked in a strained whisper, "you are capable in battle... are you not?"

Gao Jie considered the question with surprising seriousness. "Capable enough to fight."

"That is not what I asked," the prince pressed. "Have you won battles? Real ones?"

"I have fought Cao Wenzhao in Hequ County," Gao Jie replied.

The prince's eyes lit up with hope. "You held your ground against General Cao?"

"I was defeated," Gao Jie said plainly. "Quite badly."

Zhu Changxun's mouth fell open.

"I also clashed with He Renlong in northern Shaanxi," Gao Jie continued thoughtfully. "Another heavy defeat. And once I encountered the army under Dao Xuan Tianzun's banner in Pingyang Prefecture. That, too, ended poorly for me."

The prince stared at him as if he were witnessing a public execution of his own confidence. "Then surely you must have victories to speak of?"

Gao Jie reflected for a long moment, genuinely searching his memory, before shaking his head.

"Not yet."

Zhu Changxun let out a strangled cry and immediately waved for his guards to close ranks. They swarmed him so tightly that he nearly vanished within a cocoon of armor and fabric.

Governor Fan Shangzheng shot Gao Jie an exasperated glare. "General, this is not the moment for such humor. His Highness is already distressed."

Gao Jie chuckled once, then let the jest fall away. His expression sharpened as the rebel vanguard approached the foot of the city wall.

A banner unfurled among them, snapping in the wind. Three bold characters could be seen clearly even from above.

Zhang Miaoshou.

Gao Jie exhaled through his nose. "So it is him. I had feared someone more troublesome."

Then, without hesitation, he turned and called out, "Open the gates."

The prince shrieked in disbelief. "Open them? Have you lost your senses? Are you inviting them inside?"

"We open them so I can go out," Gao Jie replied irritably. "I have no intention of hosting them for tea."

The guards at the gate froze. Their eyes darted between the prince and the governor.

Fan Shangzheng finally barked, "Follow the general's command. Open the gates."

Even then, hesitation lingered. It was one thing to obey the governor. It was another to risk the prince's resentment afterward.

At that moment, Gao Yiye spoke, her voice calm yet impossible to ignore.

"Open the gates. There is no cause for fear."

That settled it. When Dao Xuan Tianzun did not personally descend, the Saintess' authority carried the weight of heaven itself. The gates creaked open.

Gao Jie mounted his horse and rode out with only a small escort. On the opposite side, Zhang Miaoshou also advanced with a handful of riders, meeting him in the open field between city and army.

They stopped a short distance apart.

Gao Jie tilted his head slightly. "Zhang Miaoshou. Have you come to test your fate at Luoyang?"

Zhang Miaoshou's face carried none of the arrogance expected of a rebel leader. Instead, there was an odd mixture of embarrassment and stubborn pride.

"The Eight Great Kings and I quarreled," he said bluntly. "He insisted on attacking Xuzhou. I told him it was impossible. We parted ways. Then he took the city. Now I cannot return to him without losing face, and wandering alone with my men has left us hungry. I came to see an old acquaintance in Luoyang and perhaps... obtain some grain."

"Obtain?" Gao Jie echoed dryly. "By persuasion or by threat?"

Zhang Miaoshou spread his hands. "Must we pretend we do not understand each other? You now serve the court and sit atop granaries. Would it truly harm you to spare a little for an old brother?"

Gao Jie's expression shifted, becoming unexpectedly serious.

"Zhang Miaoshou. Surrender."

The rebel leader blinked. "You jest."

"I do not."

"You think I rode here to lay down my sword?"

"I think you rode here because you know what stands behind these walls," Gao Jie replied quietly. He gestured toward the battlements, where musketeers stood in disciplined rows. "Do you know under whose banner I now serve? If you surrender now, it will be recorded as voluntary submission. Your life will be spared. Your sentence reduced. Your men will be fed."

Zhang Miaoshou's throat tightened. The memory surfaced unbidden. The thunder of unfamiliar weapons. The way men fell before they could even close distance. The terror that had spread through seasoned fighters like plague.

"Chuang Wang," he whispered. "It was them?"

Gao Jie did not claim credit. "Not by my hand. But yes. You and I both know what those weapons can do."

Silence stretched between them, heavy as the sky before a storm.

Finally, Zhang Miaoshou swallowed. "If I surrender... my life will truly be spared?"

"I stake my own head on it," Gao Jie said. "And your men will not starve."

For a long moment, the rebel leader stared at the city walls, at the musketeers, at the gates that had opened not in fear but in confidence.

Then he threw up both hands in exasperation.

"Well then," he said, voice cracking between frustration and relief, "in that case, I surrender."

Chapter 1057 We Have Two Paths

Prince of Fu, Zhu Changxun, stood trembling inside the tight circle of his personal guards, peeking out now and then from behind a wall of armored shoulders. From his angle he could barely make out the

figures below the city wall, only two men on horseback speaking in the open field while thousands waited in silence.

Time dragged.

Then at last Gao Jie turned his horse and began riding back toward the gate.

Behind him, astonishingly, came Zhang Miaoshou.

The prince let out a shrill cry. "Disaster! Gao Jie has brought the bandit chief back to storm the city! Protect this prince at once!"

The guards looked at one another with exhausted expressions.

"Your Highness," one of them ventured carefully, "the bandit chief has not brought a single soldier with him. He returned alone. That usually means surrender."

The prince froze. "Surrender?"

His face brightened at once. "He surrendered? Hahaha! We are safe, safe!"

He suddenly pushed his way out from the cluster of guards and stood tall, puffing out his chest.

"This prince personally presided over Luoyang. My mere presence frightened the rebels into kneeling in submission!"

The silence that followed was profound.

The captain of his personal guard coughed and leaned closer. "Your Highness... when boasting, please take note of who is standing nearby. The Saintess is present."

The prince visibly jolted, then hurriedly adjusted his declaration.

"Of course, of course. With the Saintess residing in Luoyang, revered under heaven and across the four seas, how could mere bandits dare to resist? Upon beholding her divine majesty, they immediately cast down their weapons. Naturally."

The collective restraint required to avoid sighing aloud nearly strained the entire wall.

By then Gao Jie had already returned, leading Zhang Miaoshou up the steps.

Zhang Miaoshou's gaze swept across the assembled officials before settling on Governor Fan Shangzheng. Without hesitation he dropped into a deep bow.

"This commoner Zhang Miaoshou, whose true name is Zhang Wenyao, was blinded by ignorance and committed grave rebellion. I have come of my own will to surrender and beg forgiveness."

Declaring his real name immediately was no small matter. It meant placing his entire lineage on record. There was no path back after that.

Fan Shangzheng studied him for a long moment before speaking.

"It is never too late to turn away from error. Since you have surrendered voluntarily, the law will show leniency. You will not face execution. However, punishment cannot be entirely avoided. You and your followers must undergo Labor Reform. Do you accept?"

Zhang Miaoshou blinked. "Labor Reform?"

Gao Jie leaned closer and explained quietly what that meant under Dao Xuan Tianzun's order: structured labor, supervision, political instruction, food guaranteed, no arbitrary slaughter.

A strange expression crept across Zhang Miaoshou's face.

"When you surrendered," he asked Gao Jie under his breath, "did you also go through this Labor Reform?"

"Not exactly," Gao Jie replied. "I was stripped of my former command and attend ideological lectures every day. To be honest, I would rather carry bricks than sit through another round of lessons."

Zhang Miaoshou considered this carefully.

Before rebellion, he had labored at kilns for decades. He feared hunger more than hardship. If the choice lay between starvation and structured work with full meals, there was no choice at all.

"Labor Reform is excellent," he declared quickly. "We welcome it wholeheartedly. As long as my men are fed, there will be no complaints."

And so the matter was settled.

His tens of thousands had been starving for months. Henan's devastation meant that without looting a major city, grain was nearly impossible to secure. Yet such targets were beyond the reach of a fragmented force like his. Pride had already eroded into desperation.

Ensuring his men could eat was the last act of responsibility left to him.

Governor Fan began discussing arrangements for the new arrivals.

At that moment, Gao Yiye stepped forward.

"Zhang Miaoshou," she said gently, "your nickname, 'Wondrous Hand,' what does it signify? Medical skill?"

He shook his head immediately. "No, not healing. It means skill with craft. I was a potter."

"A potter?"

"There were days," he continued with faint pride, "when the ceramics I made were well known across northern Shaanxi. Many of my closest brothers worked the kilns with me. When we could no longer survive, that was when we turned to rebellion."

A subtle smile touched Gao Yiye's lips.

"That simplifies matters greatly."

She gestured, and an attendant handed her a ceramic bottle. She passed it to Zhang Miaoshou.

"Can you produce this?"

He weighed it in his hands, examining the glaze and shape. "This is simple. A hundred men among us can make such bottles with ease."

"Very good," she replied. "Then your Labor Reform will be quite productive."

She turned and stepped into her dedicated automobile.

The strange iron carriage drew stares from the former rebels. Even after months of rumors about Dao Xuan Tianzun's miracles, the sight of a self-moving vehicle remained unsettling.

Her hundred-strong escort boarded transport trucks in disciplined formation.

Zhang Miaoshou hurriedly gathered his men and followed.

Gao Jie, after a moment's thought, brought along part of the militia to maintain order during the march.

The journey to Gutao Village took the entire day. Normally such a large, half-starved group would have dissolved into disorder along the road, but the presence of armed escorts and Gao Yiye's composed authority kept them restrained.

When they finally arrived, ancient kilns dotted the landscape like relics from another age.

Zhang Miaoshou's eyes lit up.

The scent of clay and ash stirred memories long buried beneath years of flight and bloodshed.

Gao Yiye addressed them.

"Here we will establish a large ceramic factory to supply bottles to Xi'an and beyond. Those with skill will take charge of firing. Those without will assist in construction first, then learn the trade."

Relief spread visibly through the crowd. The men who had once burned villages would now burn kilns instead.

Yet while one rebel leader laid down arms, another was rising.

Zhang Xianzhong, the Eight Great Kings, had taken Xuzhou and was boasting of his triumph.

Elsewhere, the new Chuang Wang convened his commanders around a rough wooden table.

Du Hu reported, "Zhang Miaoshou fled to Luoyang and surrendered. The Eight Great Kings have seized Xuzhou and now command more than a hundred thousand men."

Chuang Wang stared at the map in silence.

"Where will he move next?" he asked at last.

"East," Du Hu replied. "Toward Anqing. He suggests we join him."

Chuang Wang shook his head slowly.

"Anqing is under Shi Kefa. He possesses those same peculiar firearms units. If the Eight Great Kings presses east, he will likely meet disaster."

His finger tapped Luoyang on the map.

"Gao Jie is there. And those firearms."

Then he moved north, toward Shanxi.

"Wu Shen commands them as well."

He lowered his voice.

"We cannot advance blindly into walls lined with thunder."

The room fell silent.

"At present," Chuang Wang concluded, "we have only two viable paths."

His finger slid southward.

"One leads to Liangguang."

Then west.

"The other leads into Sichuan."

The choice would decide not only their survival, but the shape of the rebellion itself.

Chapter 1058 Cash Crops

The New Xinan Ancient Pottery Factory officially broke ground.

On a hillside not far from the designated construction site, Zhang Miaoshou sat with his ten thousand subordinates, all of them staring as though their souls had temporarily left their bodies. Below them, Gao Family Village's transport convoy moved back and forth without pause, giant iron vehicles roaring across the earth like mechanical beasts hauling tribute to some industrial deity.

Each iron vehicle carried several thousand pounds with insulting ease, as though weight itself had become negotiable. And the things they transported were not limited to bricks and timber. Tents for ten thousand people. Food supplies stacked in disciplined abundance. Daily necessities bundled neatly. Tools of all shapes and sizes. And that peculiar gray sand piled like small hills.

Zhang Miaoshou narrowed his eyes at it.

He had never seen sand that looked so... confident.

Under the watchful supervision of soldiers carrying flintlock rifles, a young man in scholar's robes stepped forward. He looked refined, composed, the kind of person who probably quoted classics before breakfast. Raising his voice, he called out clearly:

"Form long lines. Step forward in order. Each of you will receive your personal supplies."

Zhang Miaoshou did not dare delay. He barked the command, and the ten thousand labor reform prisoners shuffled into formation with surprising discipline. The line stretched long across the slope, winding like a reluctant dragon.

The first prisoner stepped forward.

The scholar handed him a small bundle.

"Here. Your labor reform gift package."

The prisoner blinked.

Gift package?

For labor reform?

For a moment he wondered if this was some sophisticated method of psychological torment. Still, hands moved faster than suspicion. He accepted the bundle and stepped aside.

Curiosity won.

He crouched down, untied the cloth, and opened it.

Then he froze.

Inside lay a set of thick cotton clothes, well-stitched, padded properly, the fabric sturdy and warm. He reached out as though touching something fragile.

"These... are for me?"

"Of course," a militia soldier nearby replied flatly. "Clothes like that have a large circle on the back with the character 'Reform' written inside. Ordinary people would not dare wear them."

The prisoner hurriedly flipped the garment over.

Sure enough, there on the back was a bold circle, and within it a large, unmistakable character: Reform.

It was impossible to ignore.

The militia soldier continued, maintaining a serious expression, "This identifies you as a labor reform prisoner. Your treatment is inferior to that of ordinary citizens."

The prisoner stared at the cotton clothes again, then at his own patched rags.

"Inferior?" he muttered. "With cotton clothes like these, how much lower can it be? Back in my village, even the wealthiest landlord did not own two sets this fine."

The militia soldier opened his mouth.

Closed it.

There were moments when ideology collided awkwardly with reality.

The prisoner dug further into the bundle and pulled out a pair of cloth shoes. The soles were made of rubber supplied by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself, soft yet resilient. He slipped them on.

The transformation was immediate.

His entire face brightened as though someone had lit a lantern inside him.

"These shoes... they are far more comfortable than straw sandals."

The militia soldier felt an urge to scold him for lacking ambition, for being moved by something so basic. Yet when he saw the prisoner's eyes glistening, that urge dissolved into something heavier.

He looked up at the sky.

Back then, his entire family had hovered on the edge of starvation. His father had dragged them across dusty roads to seek refuge with Gao Family Village. On the day they arrived, thin as shadows, desperate and ashamed, they too had been issued work clothes and work shoes.

His father had clutched them exactly like this.

Crying without restraint.

Later, when his father received his first month's wages, he had bought two ounces of meat. Just two ounces. That night, the entire family ate premium wheat flour, each bowl crowned with a spoonful of minced meat sauce.

At the time, it felt like a miracle too large to be real.

After he grew up, he joined the militia without hesitation.

He had not joined for glory.

He had joined to protect that bowl of wheat flour.

The soldier lowered his gaze and patted the prisoner's shoulder.

"Reform yourself properly," he said quietly. "Perhaps one day your son will wear the same uniform as I do."

The prisoner looked up at him, stunned.

For the first time, the word reform did not feel like a brand burned into his back.

It felt like a door.

Far away in the Qinling Mountains, a soft silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun waddled forward with cautious determination.

Ever since discovering the first Qinling panda, Li Daoxuan had been completely captivated. In the modern world, he had long dreamed of personally petting a panda. Chongqing Zoo would not allow it. The Chengdu Giant Panda Research Base would not allow it. Ordinary tourists were meant to observe from a respectful distance, as though pandas were sacred relics.

But inside the diorama box, rules were flexible.

At least, in theory.

"Good boy... my sweet little darling," the soft silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun coaxed gently, holding a bamboo shoot in each hand like an offering. "I am a good person. I brought snacks."

The Qinling panda lifted its head.

It let out a deep roar.

Then its claws flashed inward.

The silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun was cleanly torn in two.

Attempt number one hundred and one to pet a panda: failed.

Li Daoxuan stared at the split remains of his avatar and fell into serious contemplation.

Was this a problem of technique? Of timing? Of insufficient cuteness?

Perhaps he needed professional guidance.

He suddenly remembered that Zhao Sheng, also known as Dian Dengzi, was currently on a business trip in Sichuan.

Sichuan.

Home of pandas.

A brilliant idea formed.

Let us check on Zhao Sheng.

Co-sensing activated.

The world shifted.

The first thing that appeared before Li Daoxuan's vision was a towering stone pillar, rising steep and proud against the sky.

He blinked, then understood immediately.

Stone Pillar. Mount Wanshou. Wanshou Stronghold. Stronghold of the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers.

The terrain was treacherous beyond exaggeration, cliffs layered upon cliffs, narrow paths coiling upward like reluctant serpents. Easy to defend. Nightmarish to assault.

In the original historical timeline, after the Great Ming fell, the White Pole Soldiers retreated here. Qing forces could not conquer the mountain by force. The dynasty collapsed, yet this stronghold endured.

Only in the sixteenth year of Shunzhi, more than a decade after the Ming Dynasty's demise, did this mountain fortress finally withdraw from history when Ma Wannian surrendered.

History had long memories.

Zhao Sheng stood before a group of honest farmers, smiling with the confidence of a man about to disrupt several thousand years of agricultural philosophy.

"Today," he announced, "we will discuss scientific cultivation methods for various cash crops."

From his sleeve, he produced a carefully compiled book. The knowledge inside came from materials Li Daoxuan had gathered from a friend at an agricultural science and technology university. He flipped to a marked page.

"Let us begin here."

The farmers listened attentively, though their expressions carried polite skepticism.

Standing at the edge of the field were Qin Liangyu, Ma Xianglin, Zhang Fengyi, and others. They had no intention of studying farming techniques. Their presence was political, not agricultural. Authority radiated from them, and that authority transferred to Zhao Sheng.

Even so, one old farmer raised his hand.

"Mr. Zhao," he said cautiously, "we already grow excellent potatoes, sweet potatoes, and corn. Our bellies are full. Why must we learn about these strange so-called cash crops?"

Zhao Sheng laughed, not mockingly but firmly.

"If you only grow staple crops, you will only avoid starvation. That is survival, not prosperity. Do you know why they are called cash crops? Because you grow them to sell, to earn money, to become wealthy."

The farmers exchanged looks.

"Farming... can make people rich?"

For thousands of years, feudal systems had taught them a single truth. Farming prevented death by hunger. It did not produce wealth.

Zhao Sheng reached into his pocket and took out a piece of Coptis.

"Do you recognize this? And do you know its price?"

The farmers nodded.

"That is Coptis from Shizhu Huangshui. A precious medicinal herb. City merchants buy it at very high prices. Dozens of times more expensive than rice. But it is extremely difficult to cultivate."

Zhao Sheng smiled.

"Exactly."

And in that single word, the old order of farming quietly began to tremble.

Chapter 1059 Rebels Enter Sichuan

Zhao Sheng nodded with satisfaction.

"Good. Since you understand that Coptis is valuable, then you already grasp the key point. This crop has never been easy to grow. In the past, when your grain harvests were barely enough to keep hunger at

bay, you would never have dared to waste precious land on something so difficult. But now things are different."

He gestured toward the terraced fields below.

"With scientifically cultivated potatoes, sweet potatoes, and corn, and with the assistance of Celestial Fertilizer bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun, your staple yields are stable. Your bellies are full. That is precisely when you must begin reclaiming more barren hillsides and planting profitable cash crops like Coptis."

He lifted the agricultural manual in his hand with great ceremony.

"This is the Heavenly Book granted by Dao Xuan Tianzun. With it, you can cultivate Coptis, chili peppers, water shield, and other high-value crops with far greater ease. Prosperity is no longer a distant dream."

The old farmers scratched their heads.

They did not fully understand the technical explanations, and Zhao Sheng's enthusiasm moved faster than their comprehension. Still, they caught the general meaning. After ensuring enough food to survive, they could open new land and plant special crops to earn silver.

Whether this truly led to wealth remained uncertain, but the idea itself was intoxicating.

For men who had spent their entire lives measuring success by the fullness of a rice bowl, the thought of farming for profit felt almost rebellious.

They listened carefully, nodding at intervals, absorbing perhaps half of what was said and trusting the rest on faith.

After a long stretch of instruction, Zhao Sheng finally paused to drink water.

Only then did Li Daoxuan speak.

"Oh, Zhao Sheng. You are doing very well."

Zhao Sheng nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has descended!"

Li Daoxuan laughed softly. "You have traveled all the way to Wanshou Stronghold in Sichuan. Are you exhausted?"

Zhao Sheng straightened instinctively.

"I am quite alright. My asthma has improved significantly. Even with some activity, I no longer become terribly breathless."

Li Daoxuan felt genuinely pleased. Progress, even in small matters, was worth celebrating.

"That is good to hear. By the way, could you ask Qin Liangyu and Ma Xianglin whether they know of any extraordinary individuals in Sichuan who can communicate with giant pandas?"

Zhao Sheng blinked.

"Giant pandas?"

Li Daoxuan corrected himself, "The Iron-Eating Beast."

Zhao Sheng stared in disbelief. "Communicate with an Iron-Eating Beast? What sort of mystical art would that be? Unless one summons the ancient demon god Chiyou, I fear it cannot be done."

Li Daoxuan spread his hands helplessly.

"It is certainly a specialized skill. However, pandas have lived in Sichuan since ancient times. Perhaps someone keeps one as a pet. One never knows until one investigates. Qin Liangyu and Ma Xianglin hold official authority. Even if their posts are not grand, they possess connections. Ask them to inquire."

It was a decree from Dao Xuan Tianzun. Whether absurd or not, it had to be executed swiftly.

Zhao Sheng immediately broke into a run.

The moment he did so, Li Daoxuan sensed impending disaster.

"Why are you running? Walk slowly."

Zhao Sheng gasped between steps. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... issued... a decree... I must... hurry..."

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow. "Did you not just claim your asthma had improved?"

"It has... improved... somewhat... but not entirely..."

Li Daoxuan fell silent.

Meanwhile, Qin Liangyu and Ma Xianglin were speaking cheerfully.

"In recent years," Qin Liangyu said with satisfaction, "Shizhu has enjoyed consecutive bumper harvests. Our granaries are full, the soldiers are well supplied, and the common people no longer starve. It is a rare and precious sight."

Ma Xianglin laughed. "All thanks to Gao Family Village. New crops, Celestial Fertilizer, improved methods. We owe them greatly. I must find time to visit personally."

At that moment, Zhao Sheng arrived, slightly winded, and conveyed the request regarding the Iron-Eating Beast.

He expected ridicule.

Instead, Ma Xianglin nodded thoughtfully.

"I have indeed heard of someone attempting to keep such a beast. Unfortunately, the fool fed it iron, believing the name literally. The creature refused to eat and eventually starved. Perhaps it simply refused captivity. A proud animal."

Li Daoxuan nearly exploded.

"Introduce me to that person. I will personally educate him."

Qin Liangyu interjected calmly. "The name Iron-Eating Beast is likely a misunderstanding. In my youth, elders told me they eat bamboo."

Li Daoxuan felt as though sunlight had burst through heavy clouds.

General Qin was truly a woman of insight.

Qin Liangyu continued, "Since this request comes from Gao Family Village, we shall spare no effort. I will dispatch men to Chengdu to inquire whether anyone keeps such a creature. If so, we shall attempt to acquire it."

Li Daoxuan was overjoyed.

At last, the dream of petting a panda seemed attainable.

Yet a troubling thought struck him. If Qin Liangyu's people searched too aggressively, hunters might capture wild pandas simply to curry favor. That would be unacceptable.

He quickly gave additional instructions through Zhao Sheng.

"The Iron-Eating Beast is an auspicious creature," Zhao Sheng relayed solemnly. "It must never be hunted for our amusement. If someone already keeps one, we may borrow it gently. But under no circumstances are we to capture one from the wild."

Qin Liangyu cupped her fist respectfully.

"Mister Zhao's benevolence does him credit."

At that precise moment, the thunder of hooves shattered the calm.

A rider galloped up the mountain path on a small Sichuan horse, compact and sturdy. It lacked the height and speed of northern steeds, yet on treacherous mountain trails it moved with uncanny confidence.

The rider dismounted hastily and reported, panic written across his face.

"Urgent military intelligence!"

Qin Liangyu's expression sharpened. "Speak."

"The Chuang King has led his forces into Jingxiang, bypassed Yunxiang, crossed through the Shennongjia mountains, and suddenly entered Sichuan!"

Qin Liangyu inhaled sharply.

Zhao Sheng did the same.

Li Daoxuan frowned.

The rider continued breathlessly, "Sichuan Regional Commander Hou Liangzhu engaged the rebels but fell into an ambush at Baiqingba. He has been killed."

"The Regional Commander is dead?" Qin Liangyu asked.

"Yes. The army is leaderless and in chaos. Governor Wang Weizhang and Censor Chen Tingmo are in panic. At present, only General Qin can stabilize the situation."

Silence fell for a few heavy seconds.

Then Qin Liangyu's voice became steel.

"Xianglin. Fengyi. Muster the troops immediately. We intercept the rebels."

Ma Xianglin and Zhang Fengyi saluted.

"As you command."

They departed at once. Moments later, the urgent assembly bell rang across Wanshou Stronghold.

Its sound rolled down the mountain slopes like a summons from fate itself.

Young men laboring in terraced fields dropped their tools without hesitation. They ran home, and when they emerged again, they were transformed. Hemp sandals bound tightly. Uniforms secured. White-shafted spears gripped firmly in hand.

These were the White Pole Soldiers.

They converged along every mountain path, small and large, flowing toward the stronghold like converging streams.

In an astonishingly short span of time, a formidable army stood assembled.

One-Eyed Ma Xianglin positioned himself at the front, white pole spear raised high.

"The rebels have entered Sichuan! We march to battle now. Enough talk. Advance!"

He spurred his horse and vanished down the mountain trail in a flash.

Behind him, the White Pole Soldiers shouted helplessly, "General, wait for us! We do not have horses!"

From the rear, Zhang Fengyi emerged, exasperated yet composed.

"He has gone ahead alone again. Ignore him. Follow me."

The soldiers roared in unison.

The mountains trembled with their answer.

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The White Pole Soldiers moved with astonishing speed once the order was given. What had been farmland moments ago transformed into a mobilization ground. Spears were lifted, sandals tightened, banners unfurled. The mountain itself seemed to awaken.

Zhao Sheng let out a long sigh.

"This does not look promising."

He lowered his head slightly. The embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun stitched onto his chest seemed to gaze forward in silent contemplation, and Zhao Sheng could not help wondering whether fate itself had chosen this moment to test Sichuan.

So the rebels had finally entered.

Of all places.

Sichuan was never simple.

Mountains folded upon mountains, ethnic groups interwoven like tangled threads, valleys that could hide armies for months, minor factions sprouting like bamboo after rain. Governing such a land required more than strength. It required patience, and even then success was never guaranteed.

There was an old saying.

When chaos spreads across the realm, Sichuan falls first. When peace returns, Sichuan settles last.

Li Daoxuan spoke quietly to Zhao Sheng.

"Watch the situation closely. I will check in frequently over the next few days."

Zhao Sheng immediately bowed his head. "Understood, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan's mood, which only moments ago had revolved around the innocent ambition of petting a panda, dissolved like mist.

He shifted his vision.

Luoyang appeared calm by comparison. Gao Yiye stood amidst thousands of labor reform prisoners, supervising the construction of the New An Ancient Pottery Factory. Tents rose in neat rows. Supplies were distributed with efficiency. Order had replaced chaos.

He moved again.

Anqing Prefecture.

Shi Kefa stood at the front lines, directing the Gao Family Village Militia against Zhang Xianzhong's advancing forces. After looting Xuzhou, Zhang Xianzhong had pushed toward Anqing, hoping to ride momentum into further conquest.

He had not expected resistance this disciplined.

Shi Kefa repelled wave after wave of assault. The militia formations held firm. Flintlocks fired in steady rhythm. The rebels failed to breach the defenses. Anqing still stood.

Li Daoxuan shifted north.

Near Changping, Wang Er, Bai Mao, and Ma Shouying were locked in fierce combat against a Qing detachment. Civilian evacuation took priority. Wang Er and Bai Mao coordinated flintlock volleys while shielding retreating families.

The Qing forces advanced behind massive shield carts, thick wooden barriers reinforced to absorb musket fire. They endured the barrage and pressed forward with grim determination.

Then Ma Shouying's Iron Cavalry Battalion burst from the flank.

At their appearance, the Gao Family Village flintlock troops ceased fire instantly. The cavalry thundered forward, slamming into the shield cart formation. Wood splintered. Formation collapsed. Confusion erupted.

Once the cavalry completed their charge and broke through, Wang Er and Bai Mao resumed firing.

Without shield protection, the Qing soldiers faltered. Musket balls tore through exposed ranks. The line disintegrated.

After surveying these fronts, Li Daoxuan felt a heaviness settle into his chest.

The empire was cracking everywhere at once. Rebellion here. Invasion there. Defense after defense stretched thin.

With the realm in such disarray, frustration coiled inside him.

He needed an outlet.

They said eating was the simplest cure for melancholy.

Perhaps a grand seafood feast would help.

His perspective leaped toward his water combat specialized Dao Xuan Tianzun avatar.

The moment the view shifted, a thunderous shout pierced his ears.

"Level One Combat Readiness!"

Li Daoxuan paused.

The avatar stood on a rolling deck.

Cannons were loaded.

Sails strained.

This was no peaceful seaside indulgence.

A colossal naval engagement was about to erupt.

At the center of the sea stood Liu Xiang's pirate fleet, more than a hundred ships packed densely together, masts crowding the horizon.

To the south, Zheng Zhilong commanded over two hundred warships. Among them loomed a massive Western three masted galleon, roughly forty meters long, likely seized from European pirates.

To the north, over forty warships of Gao Family Village formed a disciplined line under Jiang Cheng and Shi Lang.

The sea held its breath.

Li Daoxuan had arrived at the precise instant before chaos.

He felt something stir inside him.

"Well. This will do."

He leaped onto the bow and shouted at full volume.

"Do not conserve ammunition. Full firepower. Blast them!"

The sailors froze for a heartbeat.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived!"

Excitement rippled through the fleet.

"The Lord commands personally!"

"Brothers, give it everything!"

"Full firepower!"

The Gao Family Village ships rotated in unison, presenting their broadsides. Wooden gunport covers flipped open one after another, revealing rows of polished stainless steel cannon barrels gleaming under the sun.

"Fire!"

Fuses were lit. Gunners covered their ears and braced.

The sea exploded.

Cannonballs roared across the water. Solid shot smashed through hulls. Explosive shells burst into splinters and flame. Planks shattered. Water columns shot skyward. Pirates screamed as decks disintegrated beneath them.

Smoke rolled across the waves.

Li Daoxuan exhaled slowly.

"There is truly nothing like a broadside to clear the mind."

Liu Xiang needed only a single volley to understand the disparity. Charging Gao Family Village head on would be suicide.

He roared, "Break through to Zheng Zhilong's fleet! Engage at close quarters! If those Zhoushan ships fear hitting allies, they will not fire!"

The pirate fleet surged forward.

Zheng Zhilong did not retreat. His ships moved to meet them.

Hull struck hull. Grappling hooks flew. Boarding planks slammed into place. Swords rang. Muskets fired at near point blank range. The sea battle dissolved into savage melee.

Li Daoxuan frowned.

"This ruins my artillery therapy."

Without hesitation, he dove overboard.

The splash disappeared beneath cannon smoke.

From the deck, Gao sailors leaned over the railing and saw Dao Xuan Tianzun slicing through the water like a silver fish, propellers on his feet spinning at high speed.

He darted beneath the battlefield.

Ahead, a pirate who had fallen overboard swam stealthily toward the underside of a Zheng ship, dagger clenched between his teeth, intending sabotage.

The pirate sensed something and turned.

What he saw defied comprehension.

A figure moved underwater with mechanical precision, utterly unlike any human swimmer.

He inhaled sharply and swallowed seawater.

Before he could react, Li Daoxuan raised his right arm.

With a sharp mechanical whir, a harpoon shot forward and embedded in the pirate's back.

Blood blossomed red in blue water. The body convulsed twice, then drifted.

The harpoon retracted.

Li Daoxuan pushed the corpse aside and continued forward.

Above him, chaos raged. Flintlock shots cracked. Arrows pierced the surface. Men screamed and fell into the sea.

Whenever a pirate splashed down, Li Daoxuan hunted them.

Whenever a sailor from Zheng's fleet fell and still struggled to breathe, Li Daoxuan surfaced beneath them and thrust them upward toward safety.

The sea churned with violence.

His limbs stretched. His mind sharpened.

In this brutal dance of steel and saltwater, frustration finally found release.