

Great Ming 1071

Chapter 1071 So Formidable

The roar arrived before the men.

It rolled over the fields beyond the village like a physical force, a unified bellow from more than ten thousand throats, crashing against rooftops and picket fences until even the dust seemed to tremble.

Meng Hu and Du Hu had returned with everything they had.

This time there would be no probing, no testing the waters. Over ten thousand rebels surged forward in a single mass, and their first strike was not steel, but sound. The thunderous war cry was meant to break morale before blades ever crossed.

It worked.

The Prince of Tang's guards had not yet glimpsed the enemy's banners, yet the sheer magnitude of the roar had already unsettled them. They numbered little more than a thousand in total, and among them barely two hundred were properly trained personal guards. The rest were hired swords, men of varying quality who had followed coin more faithfully than command.

At the first echo of that immense cry, discipline began to fray.

The commander, who had only just regained his composure after the earlier humiliation, rushed to Zhu Yujian in visible alarm. "Your Highness, the rebel force is overwhelming. We cannot withstand this. We must retreat to Nanyang at once."

Zhu Yujian's expression hardened. "We have only just left Nanyang. We have not even laid eyes upon the Manchu invaders, and you speak of retreat?"

"To face the Manchus," the commander replied urgently, "we must first survive this."

Even as they spoke, the weaknesses in their formation began to show. A handful of mercenaries slipped away toward the ditches behind the village. Others edged toward the tree line as if drawn by invisible strings. Panic spread in ripples. Orders were shouted, then contradicted. No one quite knew who should be obeyed.

Zhu Yujian stared in disbelief. "How can this be happening?"

Then he noticed something that froze him in place.

Bai Yuan's men had not moved in confusion.

They stood in quiet formation, faces composed, eyes fixed on their commander. There was no shouting, no frantic glances, no scrambling for escape. They simply waited.

Bai Yuan raised his hand.

"Prepare for battle."

The words were calm, almost conversational.

The effect was immediate.

The militia dispersed with astonishing precision. Men ran to abandoned huts and retrieved flintlock rifles concealed beneath loose floorboards. Others reached into thick brush where weapons had been hidden in oilcloth bundles. A few pulled long rifles from hollows in old trees as if drawing water from a well.

Within moments, every militiaman held a flintlock rifle.

They moved again, each to a predetermined position. Some climbed the small hill overlooking the village and lay prone behind natural cover. Others mounted rooftops, flattening themselves against tiles, barrels already aligned toward the approaching tide. Several crouched behind the village fence, adjusting angles of fire with measured care.

No one hesitated.

Voices carried across the field, crisp and orderly.

"Xiaolangdi Militia, Fifth Battalion, in position."

"Sixth Battalion, ready."

"Seventh Battalion, deployed."

"Eighth Battalion, ready."

The roll call ended. Silence followed.

The Prince of Tang's guards were still milling about in anxious clusters, while the militia had already become something else entirely. They were no longer villagers with weapons. They were a machine waiting for the correct moment to move.

Zhu Yujian felt a chill travel down his spine.

Who are these men?

Even the guard commander, moments ago eager to retreat, stared in awe. "Thank Heaven we did not clash with them earlier," he murmured. "We would not have survived it."

Bai Yuan turned slightly toward Zhu Yujian. "Your Highness, allow your men to secure the center of the village. Watch how this round unfolds."

Zhu Yujian could only nod.

A shout rose from the hill. "The rebel vanguard is within range."

"Not yet," came the calm reply from a battalion commander. "Let them come closer."

"They believe we are the Prince's guards," another voice added evenly. "They do not expect flintlocks. Hold."

The rebel mass surged forward, a living wave of bodies and crude weapons. They expected panic. They expected arrows loosed too early. They expected disorder.

Instead, they met silence.

Zhu Yujian found himself holding his breath. Had these been his own troops, someone would have fired prematurely out of fear or impatience. Yet here, even with ten thousand men charging, not a single shot rang out without command.

Only when the rebels were dangerously close did the frontline commander suddenly roar, "Open fire."

The order rippled down the line.

A deafening volley erupted.

The village exploded with thunder.

Moments earlier the militia had been as still as carved stone. Now the flintlocks cracked in relentless succession, smoke billowing across rooftops and fences, the sound like beans bursting in a blazing pan, rapid and merciless.

The front ranks of the rebels collapsed almost instantly.

Meng Hu's eyes widened in horror. "We've been trapped!"

Du Hu spat a curse. "We thought it was the Prince's rabble. It's that flintlock unit again."

"Retreat!" Meng Hu bellowed.

The charge reversed as quickly as it had begun. The rebel force, which had surged forward like a rising tide, now receded in chaos.

But they had come too close.

The earlier restraint of the militia now revealed its full brilliance. The rebels were well within effective range, and turning their backs only made them easier targets. Shots struck men mid-stride. Others stumbled and fell while scrambling over one another. Panic magnified casualties.

Some rebels dropped flat and refused to move, shouting for mercy. Others crawled desperately, unwilling to risk standing upright beneath that disciplined storm of lead.

It did not take long.

Meng Hu and Du Hu fled once more, abandoning hundreds of bodies and hundreds more who lay trembling with hands raised in surrender.

When the firing ceased, smoke drifted lazily over the field.

Bai Yuan lowered his hand.

"Count the casualties. Clear the field. Take the surrendered for labor reform."

His tone was steady, without triumph.

The militia moved at once, efficient even in aftermath.

Zhu Yujian stood speechless. His guards were equally stunned, watching as the Gao Family Village Militia handled prisoners, secured weapons, and reorganized positions with the same composure they had shown before the battle.

Villagers began emerging cautiously from their homes. Refugees who had once hesitated to leave now stared at the fallen rebels scattered beyond the fences, fear etched across their faces.

"They attacked again?" one refugee asked in disbelief.

"They did," a militiaman replied calmly. "And they may return yet again."

That was enough.

"Please take us with you," several refugees pleaded. "We will go to Luoyang. We dare not remain here."

The militiaman laughed lightly. "Do not call me 'honorable soldier.' That sounds ancient. Call me 'young man' or 'handsome lad.'"

Faced with such options, no one chose poorly.

"Handsome lad, please take us to Luoyang."

He grinned. "Ah, so my distinguished features have finally been recognized."

Fear eased into nervous laughter.

Before long, there was not a single villager willing to remain behind.

With prisoners secured and refugees assembled, Bai Yuan clasped his hands toward Zhu Yujian. "Your Highness, this village's matter is settled. I must proceed to the next."

Zhu Yujian looked at him with open admiration now, the earlier doubts replaced by something deeper.

"Master Bai," he said slowly, "your militia is truly formidable. If such men marched to the capital to support the emperor, where would the Manchu invaders find the arrogance to boast?"

The question lingered in the smoky air, heavier than any war cry.

Chapter 1072: This Movie Is Good

Bai Yuan's smile carried a trace of something difficult to decipher.

"Your Highness," he said gently, "going to the capital to serve the emperor is not a matter for just anyone. The Prefect of Nanyang advised you against it, and you did not listen. I will not repeat his words. I can only offer a single piece of advice."

Zhu Yujian inclined his head. "Please."

"When a weapon rests in the emperor's hand," Bai Yuan said, "the sharper it is, the better. But when that same weapon is held by someone who might threaten imperial authority, the duller it is, the safer."

Zhu Yujian stood silent, clearly struggling to grasp the deeper implication.

Bai Yuan did not press him. "Given who we are, and where we stand, marching to the capital with soldiers at our backs is not a simple act of loyalty. Your Highness would do well to exercise caution."

He clasped his hands in farewell, gathered the militia, and led them north without another word.

Zhu Yujian watched his departing figure for a long time, thoughts turning over in his mind like stones in a riverbed.

The guard commander, misreading that silence as hesitation, hurried forward with renewed hope. "Your Highness, perhaps we should reconsider. Returning to Nanyang would still be wise."

Zhu Yujian lifted his head. The doubt in his eyes had settled into resolve.

"We continue," he said quietly. "Do good deeds and do not ask about the future. Someone must stand before the Jiannu. Someone must defend the capital. I may not possess great strength, but what I have, I will offer."

The commander sighed, recognizing that no argument would sway him now. "Very well. We march."

And so the Prince of Tang pressed northeast.

The road was not smooth. They encountered scattered bands of bandits along the way, some fleeing at the first clash, others fighting with desperate ferocity. Victories alternated with setbacks. It was no glorious march, merely a stubborn advance marked by dust, fatigue, and uncertainty.

Far away in Puzhou, within the bustling compound of the Flower World Star Agency, the atmosphere could not have been more different.

Lao Nanfeng entered side by side with Cai Lin.

Cai Lin's hair was now arranged in a married woman's bun. Only days earlier, the two had completed their wedding rites and officially become husband and wife. It was precisely because of this recent marriage that Lao Nanfeng had not been allowed to accompany Wang Er, Bai Mao, and Ma Shouying on their expedition to the capital. Sending a newlywed into battle carried an obvious risk, and Li Daoxuan had no desire to create widows among his own people.

The couple slipped cheerfully into the backstage dressing room.

Chen Yuanyuan sat before a bronze mirror, carefully removing the elaborate makeup from her most recent performance. She had just stepped off the grand stage, where applause and scattered silver had rained down upon her as usual.

Though only thirteen, she was already the undeniable star of the agency. Each appearance drew thunderous cheers, and the silver coins tossed onto the stage could hardly be gathered fast enough. She had quietly accumulated several hundred taels in savings, a fortune for someone her age.

Lao Nanfeng sat down beside her and produced a thick stack of papers.

"Yuanyuan," he said with a grin, "we're preparing a new film. We want you to play the lead."

Chen Yuanyuan's eyes brightened. "What kind of film?"

She glanced at the title.

Student Years.

The story unfolded within Gao Family Village's Thirty-Two Middle School, following a group of students through their diligent studies and into the diverse paths they pursued after graduation. The central character was Gao Yiye. Gao Yiye herself would portray her adult self, while Chen Yuanyuan would play the younger version.

The supporting cast read like a who's who of Gao Family Village. Young Master Bai. The Third Young Lady. Gao Sanwa. Chen Yuanbo. Gao Shan. Wang Tang. Liu Maopao.

Each would appear as their adult selves, while child actors would portray their earlier school days. Even San Shier, Principal Wang, Song Yingxing, and others were listed for brief appearances. At the bottom of the page, in smaller characters, was an even more astonishing note.

Dao Xuan Tianzun and the Saintess would make cameo appearances.

Chen Yuanyuan's fingers tightened around the script.

"So many prominent figures?" she murmured. "Even Dao Xuan Tianzun and the Saintess? Is this film directed personally by Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

Lao Nanfeng coughed lightly. "Not exactly. It's planned and produced by our agency."

Her expression shifted at once.

"So all these illustrious people are gathering... to make one of your terrible films?"

Lao Nanfeng nearly choked.

It was not entirely unfair. Aside from a handful of war epics personally overseen by Dao Xuan Tianzun for educational purposes, most productions funded by Lao Nanfeng had been, in polite terms, uneven.

He cleared his throat. "This time is different. The script was written by the most renowned popular author."

"Who?"

"Gao Sanwa."

Chen Yuanyuan froze.

Her lips parted slightly. If the man before her had not been her patron, she might have burst into unrestrained commentary.

"Would Dao Xuan Tianzun truly appear in such a film?" she asked softly.

"Of course."

The golden-threaded figure embroidered upon Lao Nanfeng's chest shimmered faintly, and a familiar voice emerged.

"Such an entertaining project would be a delight to join."

All three immediately bowed.

"Greetings to Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan laughed. "I have read the script. It carries Gao Sanwa's mischievous flair, but beneath that is a warmth that lingers. The final act, where the students leave school and step into their respective professions, is particularly meaningful. This is not merely entertainment. It is instruction disguised as storytelling."

Lao Nanfeng's face lit up. "Your praise honors us."

Li Daoxuan continued, "Education in Gao Family Village has always been free. Yet even so, many families hesitate to send their children. A child of ten can plow fields, transplant rice, tend livestock. To them, school appears as lost labor. If the child cannot pass the imperial examinations, what is the point?"

He paused, then added thoughtfully, "This film offers an answer. It shows that learning is not solely for officialdom. A child who studies may become an engineer, a merchant, an inventor, a leader in countless fields. Through characters like Young Master Bai, the Third Young Lady, Gao Sanwa, and Chen Yuanbo, we can show that knowledge illuminates every path."

Chen Yuanyuan felt the earlier pressure transform into determination.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun himself endorsed the project, then it was no mere vanity production.

It was a statement.

"Very well," she said with renewed energy. "I will play young Gao Yiye properly."

Lao Nanfeng immediately set about contacting the various luminaries of Gao Family Village, persuading them to lend their faces and names to the film.

Behind the laughter and bustle of preparation, something larger was quietly taking shape.

While princes marched toward uncertain battlefields, another kind of campaign was being prepared in Puzhou.

One fought with muskets and steel.

The other with stories.

Chapter 1073 This Idea Isn't Quite Right

While the youngsters of Gao Family Village were laughing themselves breathless over camera angles and exaggerated death scenes, Beijing was living in a completely different world.

Outside Xizhimen Gate, beyond the cold stretch of winter earth, Ajige had planted the Qing main force like a nail driven into the heart of the capital. Banner camps stretched across the plain, smoke rising in disciplined columns. Horses stamped. Armor glinted. Cannons sat silent, but not harmless.

In a small cluster of trees north of the encampment, three figures crouched low among the shadows.

Wang Er lowered his spyglass first.

Beside him, Bai Mao squinted through his lens, while Ma Shouying shifted impatiently, his breath forming faint mist in the cold air.

"Their main force really is here," Ma Shouying muttered. "Tens of thousands. Siege gear, artillery, Mongol riders everywhere."

He paused, then said the thing that had clearly been sitting in his chest for a while.

"So why are we even trying? Why not just pull back and let them take the capital? Let them chop off that old emperor's head for us. Wouldn't that solve everything cleanly?"

The suggestion did not shock Wang Er.

In fact, the corner of his mouth curved slightly.

"I would enjoy watching that," he admitted honestly. "More than enjoy it."

Ma Shouying raised an eyebrow. "Then what's the problem?"

Wang Er did not answer immediately. He continued staring through the trees at the distant Qing formations, rows upon rows of soldiers who were not here for justice, not here for reform, but for plunder.

"If they entered the capital and killed only the emperor and those corrupt officials," Wang Er said slowly, "I would clap for them with both hands."

His voice lowered.

"But they won't stop there."

Silence settled.

Ma Shouying frowned. "You think they'll massacre civilians?"

"I don't think," Wang Er replied. "I know."

His gaze grew distant.

"In the seventh year of Tianqi, when Zhong Guangdao, Zheng Yanfu, and I rose up, what did we say? We said we would kill Zhang Yaocai. Just him. Just the corrupt officials who squeezed the villagers dry."

Bai Mao shifted uncomfortably.

"We stormed the county seat," Wang Er continued. "I went straight to the yamen. I found Zhang Yaocai. I cut him down myself."

His jaw tightened.

"But outside, things did not go the way we imagined."

Bai Mao exhaled heavily.

"I saw it," he said quietly. "The wealthy district. The houses with carved beams and painted doors. Our men rushed in. They told themselves they were seizing spoils from the rich."

He swallowed.

"There was a maidservant. Young. Maybe fifteen. She had been sold into that house because her family couldn't survive the famine. She was poor, just like us. But that did not save her."

Ma Shouying's eyes widened, horror creeping into them.

No one spoke for a while.

The Qing banners fluttered in the distance, indifferent to their memories.

Finally, Wang Er clenched his fist.

"We can tear the emperor and his corrupt officials apart," he said. "That I do not hesitate about."

He looked at Ma Shouying directly.

"But if we allow foreign soldiers to flood the capital, they will not distinguish between emperor and beggar. They will not ask who deserved punishment. They will take grain, silver, women, children. If we stand aside and let that happen, then what are we?"

His voice hardened.

"Not rebels with a cause. Not men correcting injustice. Just bandits waiting for someone else to dirty their hands."

Ma Shouying lowered his head.

"Righteous uprising," he murmured.

There was a character for righteousness in that phrase. Yi.

And that single character was heavier than any banner.

The decision settled between them without further debate.

They withdrew deeper into the woods where several horses waited. A few Qing scouts lay motionless on the ground, silent proof of the effort it had taken just to approach this close for reconnaissance.

Mounting up, they spurred northward.

After several li of hard riding, they rejoined their forces. Wang Pu, Regional Commander of Datong, stood with the Datong border army, his armor dusty, his expression tense.

"Well?" Wang Pu demanded.

Bai Mao answered first. "The Qing are fully prepared. Siege weapons. Cannons. Shield-wagon formations thick as walls. Mongol cavalry in large numbers. Even with our flintlocks, charging them head-on with a few thousand men would be suicide."

Wang Pu's jaw flexed. "But they are already pressing against Xizhimen. If the capital falls..."

He did not finish.

Ma Shouying spoke instead. "We do not attack the center. We harass the flank. Wave banners. Stir dust. Strike their scouting parties. Make them believe their rear is unstable."

Wang Pu's eyes lit up. "Force them to choose between siege and security."

"Exactly."

Days passed.

The harassment grew bolder. Qing scouts disappeared. Small patrols were wiped out. Captured civilians were rescued. Looted livestock was reclaimed. Fires appeared unexpectedly along the Qing right flank.

Ajige stood over his map, frowning.

This campaign had already yielded abundant plunder. Grain, silk, livestock, silver. Yet the longer they remained, the more unstable their position became. Ming territory was hostile ground. Guerrilla tactics flourished here like weeds.

After long consideration, Ajige made his decision.

"Enough," he said. "We withdraw."

The officers bowed.

"But," Ajige added, a faint smirk touching his lips, "we do not leave quietly."

Orders spread through the camp.

The Eight Banners soldiers dressed themselves in the most flamboyant garments they had looted. Multicolored silks became cloaks. Emerald cloth wrapped around helmets. Flowing sleeves trailed from armored shoulders. What should have been an army looked more like an opera troupe performing a mocking farce.

Drums and gongs thundered not as signals, but as jeers directed toward the capital walls.

Only after parading in full view did they finally turn northeast toward the passes beyond the Great Wall.

From atop Xizhimen Gate, eunuch Gao Qiqian watched them depart.

Instead of anger, relief flooded him.

"They are retreating," he breathed. "Inform His Majesty immediately."

Inside the palace, Zhu Youjian felt a surge of vindication.

"Is my Great Ming a place where barbarians come and go at will?" he declared. "Their morale is broken. This is the moment to pursue."

He ordered Minister of War Zhang Fengyi to lead the chase.

Zhang Fengyi received the command in silence.

Unlike the emperor, he did not observe war from within palace walls. Unlike Gao Qiqian, he did not survive by pleasing imperial ears. He understood numbers. He understood terrain. He understood traps.

We barely survived, he thought. And now you want pursuit?

Still, he bowed and obeyed.

The army marched out.

Not far beyond the gate, they found a large signboard planted beside the road where the Qing camp had stood.

One line was written upon it.

"All officials, no need to see us off."

The commanding general's face paled.

"Minister, this is a provocation. They dressed in gaudy robes, made noise deliberately, and left this sign. They want us angry. They want us reckless."

Zhang Fengyi stared at the words for a long moment.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Which is why we will not give them what they want."

He turned to his officers.

"We advance cautiously. Scouts wide and frequent. We show pursuit, but we do not gamble the capital's final army on wounded pride."

Behind him, Beijing's walls stood silent.

War was not only fought with swords and cannons.

Sometimes it was fought against one's own impulse to prove something.

And that, Zhang Fengyi knew, was far more difficult.

Chapter 1074 I Am Absolutely Fuming

"Report! Minister of War Zhang Fengyi has led the capital's gentry army out of Xizhimen. They are pursuing the Manchu forces!"

The scout knelt, still breathing hard from the ride.

Wang Pu, Wang Er, Bai Mao, and Ma Shouying exchanged looks.

Ma Shouying snorted first. "Pursuing them? Pursuing that army?"

Wang Er's expression twisted, half disbelief, half irritation. "Is the Minister of War trying to perform for someone? The Manchus made such an exaggerated display when they retreated. They dressed like opera performers, beat drums, left insulting signboards. That was not humiliation. That was bait."

Wang Pu let out a long breath. "Zhang Fengyi is not a reckless man. If he marched out, he was forced. Either by the Emperor or by certain palace voices who care more about appearances than survival."

Everyone understood what he meant.

No matter how much they might mock Zhang Fengyi, he was still Minister of War. He knew the difference between tactical withdrawal and a trap laid in plain sight.

Ma Shouying suddenly laughed, though there was no warmth in it. "That Emperor. He still owes me military pay. Months overdue."

He had meant it as a joke.

Instead, Wang Pu looked embarrassed.

"They owe you as well?" Wang Pu asked quietly.

Ma Shouying stared. "Don't tell me they owe you too."

"Nine months," Wang Pu admitted, scratching his head awkwardly. "I have personal funds, so I can manage. My soldiers cannot. They are beginning to struggle."

A strange silence fell over the group.

It was almost comical.

The Empire was demanding loyalty, demanding pursuit, demanding blood.

It could not even pay wages.

Bai Mao cleared his throat. "Commander Wang, I know several reliable Jin merchants. I will speak to them. We can arrange grain and silver on credit to stabilize your men."

Wang Pu's relief was genuine. "Brother, I will not forget this."

Ma Shouying waved his hand. "Enough sentiment. The Manchus are moving north. Do we chase or not?"

"Of course we chase," Wang Er replied without hesitation. "But not to trade lives for pride. Our purpose is clear. We rescue captives. We reclaim stolen goods. We do not fight for the Emperor's vanity."

That distinction mattered.

"Launch the Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon."

The militia moved with practiced coordination. Within minutes, the balloon rose steadily into the winter sky. A soldier above adjusted his binoculars, tracking the long snake-like movement of the Qing column. He sketched their formation and direction carefully, rolled the paper, placed it inside a bamboo tube, and lowered it down.

Below, decisions were already forming.

Meanwhile, far ahead, Zhang Fengyi advanced cautiously. His gentry army maintained distance, sending scouts forward but never committing the main body. Skirmishes broke out in wooded patches and along small hills, violent and brief, yet the two main forces never truly met.

Ajige soon realized the problem.

"The Ming commander refuses to bite," he muttered.

His officers waited.

"Then we give him something irresistible."

Ajige ordered the elite units to move ahead, visibly separating from the baggage train. The supply column would trail conspicuously behind.

"Zhang Fengyi cannot resist striking at our supplies," Ajige said calmly. "The logistics force will delay him. I will return swiftly with the elite and crush him completely. Then we march back and tear Yanjing apart."

It was a neat plan.

Too neat.

Zhang Fengyi did not take the bait.

Instead, after a symbolic pursuit, he withdrew. Three Manchu scout heads were presented as proof of action. The report declared, "Enemy scouts eliminated. Mission accomplished."

Inside the palace, the Chongzhen Emperor was furious.

"Cowardice," he declared.

Censors rushed forward with memorials condemning Zhang Fengyi.

Zhang Fengyi did not argue.

He returned home quietly.

That night, he drank poison.

The capital lost another man who understood war better than those who judged him.

Ajige waited for the trap to spring.

It never did.

"Report," a subordinate said, kneeling. "The Ming Minister of War has returned to the capital."

Ajige frowned. "Even when I exposed the supplies so openly, he did not attack. Is he timid, or perceptive?"

He exhaled.

"Enough. We go home."

With that order, discipline loosened. Soldiers relaxed. The long march northeast resumed in a lighter mood. Captured civilians trudged under guard. Looted goods rattled in carts.

Victory, they thought.

Then came the sound.

Hoofbeats.

Not distant. Not hesitant.

Explosive.

Ma Shouying's Hui heavy cavalry burst forward like a blade slicing into flesh, slamming directly into the rearmost baggage train. Qing logistics troops were caught completely unprepared.

Before they could form proper ranks, chaos erupted.

"Inform General Ajige!" someone shouted.

But speed was the enemy.

Ma Shouying's riders moved like a storm. Civilians, still bound and confused, suddenly found armed horsemen cutting through their captors.

Ma Shouying raised his scimitar and shouted, his voice cutting through panic.

"Everyone down! Get down immediately! We are here to save you! Bullets do not recognize friend or enemy. Down!"

Fear made obedience swift.

Civilians dropped flat onto the frozen ground.

Then the sharp cracking chorus began.

Flintlock rifles spoke in disciplined volleys. Smoke rolled forward. Qing logistics forces collapsed under concentrated fire before they could even fully understand what was happening.

Ma Shouying did not linger.

"Guns cease! Retreat! Everyone up! Run south! Now!"

Cavalrymen slashed ropes binding ankles. Civilians scrambled upright, driven by survival rather than instruction.

From the flanks, Wang Er and Bai Mao's forces arrived, reinforcing the assault just long enough to ensure the baggage train disintegrated completely.

"Ajige will return within half an hour!" Wang Er shouted. "Move!"

They did not attempt to hold ground. They did not attempt heroics.

They withdrew fast, shielding the rescued civilians as they rode southward. Only when their own city walls came into distant view did breathing slow.

Behind them, Ajige rode hard.

When he arrived at the scene, what he saw froze him.

Bodies of logistics troops lay scattered across trampled earth. Supply carts overturned. Bound captives gone. Plunder vanished.

His carefully arranged bait had been stripped clean.

Ajige's face darkened.

"Who?" he roared. "Which Ming unit?"

A dying logistics soldier, barely conscious, forced out broken words.

"Wang... Datong... Regional Commander... Wang Pu... Shan..."

His head fell.

Ajige's fury surged like a flame meeting oil.

"Write that name down," he snarled. "Wang Pu. I will take his head myself next time. I swear it."

But far to the south, Wang Pu was unaware that he had just earned a place in Ajige's memory.

History often worked that way.

A clever strike won cheers at home.

It also carved one's name onto an enemy's blade.

Chapter 1075 Does He Want to Live Anymore?

In the autumn of the ninth year of Chongzhen, the Qing army finally withdrew beyond the pass.

Their entry had been like a blade cutting through silk. Beacon fires had flared across the north, memorials of disaster arriving daily in the capital, each more desperate than the last. For a time, the Ming court had looked powerless.

Yet their exit was far less glorious.

Ajige's carefully arranged scheme of luring the enemy into reckless pursuit had been calmly dismantled by Datong Regional Commander Wang Pu. Not only had over a hundred thousand enslaved civilians been rescued, but more than half of the looted livestock and valuables had been reclaimed.

Ajige had sworn to personally take Wang Pu's head.

Then he rode back in fury.

Meanwhile, the man whose name now sat on Ajige's blade was blushing.

Wang Pu stood before tens of thousands of rescued civilians who knelt, wept, and hailed him as their benefactor. The cheers rose like thunder rolling across mountains. It was the kind of praise that could intoxicate a man.

Instead, Wang Pu felt his ears burning.

Bai Mao, Wang Er, and Ma Shouying stood nearby, exchanging quiet glances.

"General Wang," Bai Mao said with an easy smile, "our Shanxi relief army will head home first. We are exhausted. As for reporting to the capital and receiving commendations, we leave that to you."

Wang Pu stared at them. "This was your battle. Why push the credit onto me? I did not even strike a proper blow."

Bai Mao laughed. "Did Zhuge Liang personally swing a spear at Xinye? No. Yet whose name carried the credit?"

Wang Pu hesitated. "But Zhuge Liang gave counsel. In this campaign, I merely followed behind you. Each time I arrived somewhere, victory had already happened."

The awkwardness was genuine.

He had marched. He had coordinated. But the decisive blows had belonged to others.

Ma Shouying, the man Wang Pu secretly found most intimidating, showed no interest in claiming glory. He adjusted his saddle casually, as though matters of merit were no more important than dust on his boots.

"We are not suited for the capital," Ma Shouying said. "Too many eyes. Too many tongues. You go."

That was explanation enough.

Wang Pu felt his throat tighten. "Brothers, if I ever rise higher because of this, I will not forget you."

The two forces parted.

The three generals of Gao Family Village passed through the Datong garrison and returned quietly to Shanxi. Wang Pu escorted the rescued civilians toward the capital.

When he arrived in Beijing, he learned that Minister of War Zhang Fengyi had already taken poison.

The charge had been cowardice.

Wang Pu stood still for a long time after hearing it.

The man who had refused to gamble the capital's last army had been condemned.

The man who had done little yet stood before cheering crowds was about to be rewarded.

History, Wang Pu realized, had a peculiar sense of irony.

Before he could dwell on it, a eunuch hurried over.

"General Wang, His Majesty summons you."

Wang Pu straightened his attire and followed.

Inside the Imperial Study, Zhu Youjian was visibly delighted. Upon seeing Wang Pu, he rose almost eagerly.

"My dear Minister Wang, I have awaited you. During this Manchu incursion, I received nothing but grim reports. Only your victories brought me comfort."

Wang Pu bowed deeply. "Your Majesty is too gracious."

"I shall reward you generously," Zhu Youjian continued. "You have restored dignity to the court."

Wang Pu felt a sudden urge to speak honestly.

"Your Majesty, truthfully, the Shanxi relief army accomplished most of this. I merely coordinated..."

Zhu Youjian waved him off.

"To achieve merit and yet refuse to boast of it. That is rare. Your modesty only increases your virtue."

Wang Pu fell silent.

He had tried to deflect praise. Instead, it had doubled.

"I will have the Ministry of War consider your promotion at once," the Emperor declared.

Before Wang Pu could respond further, Cao Huachun interjected gently, "Your Majesty, Minister Zhang Fengyi has just passed away. The Ministry of War is currently in disarray."

Zhu Youjian froze briefly.

"Then," he amended, "once order is restored, your promotion shall be processed."

At that moment, another eunuch rushed in.

"Your Majesty, urgent report from Nanyang. The Prince of Tang, Zhu Yujian, has organized a relief army of over a thousand men and is marching toward the capital."

"What?" Zhu Youjian's voice thundered across the chamber.

Wang Pu instinctively spoke before thinking. "Your Majesty, perhaps he intends to serve the throne. With only a thousand men, rebellion seems unlikely."

Zhu Youjian shot him a sharp glare.

Wang Pu immediately shut his mouth.

Silence stretched.

When the Emperor's anger cooled slightly, reason returned. A thousand men could not overturn the dynasty. The intent was likely loyal.

But a prince leading troops out of his fief was a dangerous precedent.

If one prince could mobilize soldiers under the banner of loyalty, what would stop another from doing so under ambition?

The loophole was intolerable.

"Draft an edict," Zhu Youjian ordered coldly. "Strip Zhu Yujian of his princely title. Reduce him to commoner. Send the Embroidered Uniform Guard to apprehend him and deliver him to Fengyang for proper reeducation. His brother Zhu Yuzhen shall inherit the title."

Ink began to flow across paper.

Wang Pu stood at the side, heart heavy.

Only moments earlier, he had been promised promotion.

Now he was witnessing how swiftly imperial favor could twist into punishment.

When Zhu Youjian finally dismissed him, Wang Pu bowed and withdrew.

As he stepped out of the palace gates, the earlier joy he had felt was gone.

So this is why they refused the credit, he thought.

Serving the throne openly was like walking across thin ice. One misstep, and the water below was cold and merciless.

Some forms of loyalty were safer when unseen.

He returned to Datong that very day.

That evening, in Xi'an, at the Market Square Intersection, Gaojia News flickered across the large public screen.

Zhu Cunji stood in his usual spot.

"Today," Gao Yiye announced calmly, "our war correspondent Zhou Daya reports from Henan."

The image shifted.

Zhou Daya appeared on screen, poised even amid chaos. Behind her, two forces clashed violently.

"One side," she explained, "is the bandit army led by Meng Hu and Du Hu. The other is the relief force organized by the Prince of Tang, Zhu Yujian. He has personally funded and assembled over a thousand guards, intending to march north to resist the Manchus. His courage is admirable."

Zhu Cunji's face drained of color.

He leapt to his feet, pointing at the screen.

"He... he... does he want to live anymore?"

Because anyone who understood the court understood this simple truth.

Fighting bandits was dangerous.

Fighting Manchus was dangerous.

But touching imperial authority without permission was the most dangerous of all.

Chapter 1076 Private Institutions of Higher Learning

Zhu Cunji stared at the giant screen in the market square as if it had personally betrayed him.

A prince... raising troops to serve the emperor?

He, Zhu Cunji, could not even leave Xi'an openly. Every time he wanted to step outside the city walls, he had to arrange a body double to sit properly in his residence, then disguise himself as the wandering swordsman Zhu Piaoling and sneak out like some third-rate Jianghu rogue, only to rush back in a panic before anyone noticed the switch.

And yet Zhu Yujian, Prince of Tang, had openly assembled a thousand men and marched north under the banner of loyalty.

Zhu Cunji suddenly threw his head back and laughed toward the sky.

"If Prince Zhu Yujian dares to do this," he declared grandly, "then I, the heir, shall do the same! To arms! We march to serve the emperor!"

"Sit down."

The voice came from beside him, calm and unimpressed.

Sun Chuanting, newly appointed Governor of Shaanxi, did not even bother turning his head. "Raise an army? With what troops? Will you drag Dao Xuan Tianzun's militia into imperial politics again? There is no need. Bai Mao and Ma Shouying already went north."

Zhu Cunji froze mid-heroic pose.

"Oh."

Right.

If he were to "serve the emperor," he would naturally bring the militia.

But the militia was already gone.

He sat back down heavily.

"This is terribly boring."

Sun Chuanting gave him a sidelong glance. "Affairs of state are not meant to entertain you. If you crave excitement, put on your Zhu Piaoling disguise again and wander the streets. Just do not meddle in war."

Zhu Cunji rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It has been a while since I went out. Perhaps I shall visit Henan."

"Henan is crawling with rebels," Sun Chuanting replied dryly. "What business do you have there?"

"I shall visit my relative, Prince Zhu Yujian of Tang."

Sun Chuanting's brows knitted together. "By the time this news was filmed, edited, sent back to Gao Family Village, and scheduled for broadcast, several days have already passed. By now, the situation may have changed entirely."

Zhu Cunji's smile faded. "Headmaster Sun... you mean..."

"I mean," Sun Chuanting said quietly, "Prince Zhu Yujian is walking into danger."

Zhu Cunji stood abruptly.

For a moment he hesitated, then made up his mind and dashed downstairs.

"Your Highness!" Sun Chuanting called after him. "Where are you going?"

"Certainly not telling you!"

Moments later, the gleaming Kulinan roared to life and shot down the road like a silver arrow.

Sun Chuanting watched it disappear and sighed.

On the screen, the broadcast continued.

Gao Yiye's composed figure reappeared.

"Now," she announced with a faint smile, "a special report delivered by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself. On September eighth of this year, across the vast ocean, a school named Harvard University was established, becoming America's earliest private institution of higher learning."

She paused slightly before continuing.

"Although we have the Thirty-Two Middle School, which rivals such institutions, one school alone cannot sustain a nation's educational needs. Dao Xuan Tianzun hopes that those of vision will establish private institutions of higher learning, expanding our academic resources and elevating national education as a whole."

A young scholar leapt up from the crowd.

"Private higher learning? You mean advanced academies?" he shouted. "That is admirable, but how can any academy rival Thirty-Two Middle School? We lack the Heavenly Books. Without divine artifacts, how could we possibly operate such an institution?"

The surrounding spectators groaned.

"Gu Yanwu, sit down! You block the screen every time!"

Gu Yanwu protested loudly, "Then where else am I supposed to ask? If Dao Xuan Tianzun speaks through the screen, I can only shout back at it!"

At that moment, Wang Tang, Gao Family Village's representative in Xi'an, stepped forward.

"You may submit your proposal directly to Gao Family Village and present it to the Saintess. If she approves, the Heavenly Books and certain teaching tools from Thirty-Two Middle School may be loaned."

Gu Yanwu's eyes widened. "Even the divine artifacts?"

"If the purpose is righteous," Wang Tang replied, "they can be shared."

Gu Yanwu did not hesitate.

"My family owns eight hundred mu of ancestral land. I will sell it all and establish a private academy."

Wang Tang smiled. "Dao Xuan Tianzun will be pleased."

The next morning, Gu Yanwu boarded the train to Gao Family Village.

After the roaring iron beast carried him across the plains, he arrived at the station, adjusted his robes, and walked toward the main fortress.

Before he reached the watchtower, a familiar head peeked from the third-floor balcony.

"Mr. Gu," Gao Yiye called down gently, "please come upstairs. Dao Xuan Tianzun has been waiting for you."

Gu Yanwu nearly stumbled.

"The Heavenly Lord... waiting for me?"

His dignified scholar's pace vanished instantly. He hurried up the stairs with surprising speed.

On the balcony, Li Daoxuan sat at a tea table. Gao Yiye's chair was positioned slightly behind his, a subtle gesture of respect.

Gu Yanwu bowed deeply before taking his seat.

"You wish to establish a school?" Li Daoxuan asked.

"Yes." Gu Yanwu's expression was solemn. "Years ago, I received guidance from you. Since then, I have traveled through Xi'an, Gao Family Village, Puzhou, and much of Shanxi. I have observed carefully, year after year. I have reached a conclusion."

Li Daoxuan lifted his teacup. "Let us hear it."

"For popular governance to succeed, the people must first be educated. If the populace remains ignorant, giving them power is merely chaos in disguise. But if the entire land is literate and informed, then self-governance will arise naturally."

Li Daoxuan set down his cup and clapped lightly.

"Well said. Your thoughts align perfectly with mine."

Gu Yanwu lowered his head modestly, though pride shone in his eyes.

"Since you are willing to sell ancestral property for education," Li Daoxuan continued, "I shall not be stingy. Headmaster Wang will support you fully. You may enter the Thirty-Two Middle School library and select whatever textbooks you require. Take as many as necessary."

"All of them?" Gu Yanwu asked carefully.

"Any of them."

Gu Yanwu hesitated. "Are you not concerned that my institution may be poorly guarded? What if enemy spies infiltrate and steal the Heavenly Books?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"What is there to fear? It is not as though no one has ever tried."

Gu Yanwu blinked.

Li Daoxuan smoothly shifted the topic.

"Knowledge alone is not power. Without industry, infrastructure, and a network of skilled hands, books are merely ink on paper. Even if someone stole every volume, without the foundation beneath them, they could not recreate what we have built."

Gu Yanwu slowly nodded.

He understood.

Education was not about possessing secrets.

It was about building soil where ideas could take root.

And that, far more than any single book, was the true divine artifact.

Chapter 1077 The Truth Does Not Matter

Li Daoxuan did not immediately answer the noise below. Instead, he turned slightly toward Gu Yanwu, his expression calm yet carrying the faintest trace of amusement, as though everything unfolding downstairs was already part of a larger design.

"Furthermore," he continued in an unhurried tone, "human society is not a simple machine that can be paused at will. It is an intricate, living structure. Once a concept appears, once a technology is born, it begins to circulate. You may delay it. You may obstruct it. But you cannot imprison it forever."

Gu Yanwu listened carefully.

Li Daoxuan lifted his cup, studying the steam rising from the tea.

"The Westerners acquired cannons. It did not take long before our own artisans replicated them. A few more years passed, and even the Manchus fielded their own artillery. Did anyone grant them permission? No. Knowledge spreads because necessity compels it."

Gu Yanwu's brows furrowed slightly. "Then Dao Xuan Tianzun means that even the Heavenly Books..."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "The Heavenly Books I grant you may offer advantage. But only temporarily. Sooner or later, others will approach similar truths through their own paths. It may take five years. Ten. Perhaps longer. But inevitability is a patient force."

Gu Yanwu's heartbeat quickened.

"If that is so... then what is the ultimate purpose of founding schools?"

Li Daoxuan's gaze sharpened.

"To learn from the Heavenly Books," he said quietly, "and then surpass them."

The words settled heavily between them.

Gu Yanwu felt something shift inside his chest. Until this moment, the Heavenly Books had seemed like the pinnacle of knowledge, artifacts bestowed from a higher realm. To hear Dao Xuan Tianzun speak of surpassing them felt almost blasphemous. And yet, the calm certainty in Li Daoxuan's voice left no room for doubt.

"Education," Li Daoxuan continued, "is not about preserving secrets. It is about cultivating minds that dare to question even what I have written. If one day your students refine, improve, and overturn what you learn from me, that will not be failure. That will be success."

Gu Yanwu finally understood.

To build a school was not to guard divine scripture.

It was to produce people unafraid of challenging divinity.

A dangerous thought in any era.

He hesitated before asking the question that had been pressing against his conscience.

"Why... me?"

Li Daoxuan looked at him with a trace of warmth.

"Because from the first day I met you, I saw in you the seed of popular governance. In a land shaped by hierarchy and ritual, you still dared to imagine power flowing upward from the people rather than downward from the throne. That courage is rare."

Gu Yanwu lowered his head slowly.

To surpass the Heavenly Books would require someone who did not worship them blindly. Someone who would treat them as foundation rather than ceiling. Across the realm, how many possessed both reverence and defiance in equal measure?

Perhaps very few.

Perhaps only one.

A long silence followed.

Then Gu Yanwu bowed deeply, more resolute than ever before.

"I have already chosen a site," he said. "Luoyang."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "The ancient center of the world. A symbolic choice."

"Symbolism matters," Gu Yanwu replied. "If education is to reshape the realm, it must stand at its heart."

At that very moment, the quiet atmosphere shattered.

"Sister Yiye! Sister Yiye! They are about to start filming at Thirty-Two Middle School! It is about our childhood! Aren't you coming?"

Gao Sanwa's voice rang out from below with the urgency of someone announcing the end of the world.

Gao Yiye leaned over the balcony. "Lower your voice. Dao Xuan Tianzun is here."

A brief pause followed.

"Oh."

The single syllable carried pure panic.

Li Daoxuan stepped forward and looked down, amusement flickering across his face. "It is fine. We have finished discussing state-altering matters. A little cinema will not shake the heavens."

Gu Yanwu's eyes brightened with curiosity. "May I observe as well? If this film concerns the school, it may offer insight into how public perception is shaped."

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly. "Come. Consider it practical research."

They descended together.

Thirty-Two Middle School had transformed into a sea of bodies. Students crowded in thick layers, standing on benches, craning their necks, whispering excitedly. At the center stood Chen Yuanyuan, dressed in white garments identical to the style Mrs. San once tailored for Gao Yiye's youth.

She looked almost unreal beneath the afternoon light.

By now she was the unquestioned star of the Liberation Zone. Her advertisements for woolen sweaters played daily before Gaojia News and during cinema intermissions. Her face had become as familiar to the populace as seasonal harvests. Yet she carried herself without arrogance, greeting even the youngest students with gentle courtesy.

When Gao Yiye saw her, she blinked in disbelief.

"To cast her as my younger self feels excessive," she said honestly. "She is far more refined than I ever was."

Chen Yuanyuan immediately lowered herself in a respectful curtsy. "The Saintess exaggerates. I am anxious that I may fail to capture even a fraction of your presence."

Gao Yiye snatched the script.

Moments later her expression changed.

"Who wrote this?" she demanded. "Why does this make me sound like some ethereal being floating above mortal dust? I stole cotton. I once dragged Gao Sanwa into skipping lessons. I even borrowed the Solar Car No. 1 without permission. Where is that in this script?"

All eyes turned in unison toward Gao Sanwa.

He coughed.

"Sister Yiye," he began cautiously, "a story does not need to be accurate. It needs to be compelling."

Gao Yiye narrowed her eyes.

He pressed on with unexpected boldness. "The truth is secondary. The narrative is primary. If the audience desires a Saintess bathed in celestial light, then that is what we provide. The real you is irrelevant. The legend is what matters."

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd.

Gao Yiye kicked him cleanly.

He flew backward and landed in a dignified sprawl.

She withdrew her foot calmly and smiled at Chen Yuanyuan. "That kick," she said gently, "is authentic."

Even Li Daoxuan could not suppress a faint laugh.

Gu Yanwu, observing the entire exchange, felt a subtle revelation forming.

When the public watched this film and saw that the Saintess and other prominent figures had once been mischievous students within these very walls, something would shift in their perception. Education would no longer appear distant or sacred. It would feel accessible.

He turned to Li Daoxuan.

"This film will influence the common people deeply," he said. "They will send their children here not merely for knowledge, but for possibility."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Yes. The truth of history matters less than the direction it pushes the future."

Below, Gao Yiye had already seized Gao Sanwa by the ear and was dragging him aside to "revise" the script.

Around them, laughter erupted, cameras rolled, and the machinery of narrative quietly began shaping the next generation's imagination.

Chapter 1078 Deploying Forces, Entering Sichuan

Sichuan was in utter chaos.

The province was mountainous, the terrain layered with ridges, ravines, dense forests, and winding paths that twisted like coiled serpents. For regular armies that relied on supply routes and structured formations, such geography was exhausting and restrictive. For rebels, however, it was ideal.

A rebel force could disappear into one mountain range, scatter into the woods, crawl through brush and stone, then emerge from an entirely different direction. They did not fear losing their way.

After all, if one had no fixed destination, one could never truly be lost.

Ever since Chuǎng Wang killed the Sichuan Regional Commander Hou Liangzhu, there were no longer any proper provincial forces capable of holding the line. Aside from the White Pole Soldiers, no legitimate military unit in Sichuan possessed the discipline or mobility to counter the rebels effectively.

Chuǎng Wang quickly divided his army into multiple columns and launched simultaneous offensives.

Zhaohua fell.

Jintang fell.

Jianzhou, Shifang, Pengxian, Pixian, Xindu, Xichong, Suining, Zitong, Mianzhou, Xinfan, Wenjiang, Jiangyou, Zhangming, Luojiang, Deyang, Hanzhou. One after another, prefectures and counties were swallowed.

Throughout the region, messengers rode desperately toward Chengdu. Horses foamed at the mouth, riders half-collapsed in their saddles. Reports piled up like snow in winter.

Inside the governor's office, Wang Weizhang listened from dawn until dusk.

"Report. A rebel faction has appeared in the mountains near Zhaohua. We cannot identify which army."

"Report. Mantianxing attacked Luojiang but was repelled by defenders."

"Report. Guo Tianxing stormed Suining and killed more than three hundred villagers."

"Report. Huntianxing has moved toward..."

"Enough!" Wang Weizhang cried out, his voice strained. "Stop reporting disasters. Tell me where the White Pole Soldiers are. Where are they now?"

A subordinate knelt and replied, "They intercepted rebels at Pengxian and achieved a great victory. Immediately afterward, they rushed to Pixian and forced another withdrawal. Before they could rest, they received urgent news from Xichong and hurried there. Then Luojiang, Deyang, Hanzhou. They are pursuing rebels without pause."

Wang Weizhang's heart tightened.

It felt as though the White Pole Soldiers were touring Sichuan in circles. When they suppressed the west, the east ignited. When they rushed east, trouble flared in the north. The province was too vast, the rebels too scattered.

He swallowed a mouthful of cold noodles. There was no liangpi here. Only plain cold noodles. Even food had lost its comfort.

"What about the Ministry of War?" he demanded. "Have reinforcements been dispatched?"

The subordinate hesitated. "The Minister of War, Zhang Fengyi, has taken poison and died. The ministry is in complete disorder. Officials are competing for the vacant position. At such a time, no one is truly handling military affairs."

Wang Weizhang inhaled sharply. For a moment, he felt as though the entire realm was collapsing from the center outward.

Elsewhere, under filtered sunlight in roadside grass, Ma Xianglin lay flat on his back.

The light flickered across his armor. It should have been a peaceful scene. Instead, it was heavy with exhaustion.

He turned his single eye toward the White Pole Soldiers who had followed him through countless campaigns. Many lay sprawled in the grass, breathing heavily, some staring blankly at the sky.

They were loyal.

They were fierce.

But they were tired.

Zhang Fengyi lay down beside him and sighed deeply. "The soldiers must rest for several days. If we continue running like this and encounter a strong rebel force, we could be wiped out."

Ma Xianglin knew he was right. The White Pole Soldiers had been chasing fires across the province without pause. If they met Chuǎng Wang's elite forces now, the consequences would be unpredictable.

"Find a city we can defend," Ma Xianglin said quietly. "We rest properly. Send someone to inform my mother. Ask if she can gather reinforcements."

In Shizhu, on Wan Shou Mountain, at Wan Shou Zhai, Qin Liangyu stood in silence, gazing into the distance.

Zhao Sheng, known as Dian Dengzi, had just finished teaching farmers improved chili cultivation techniques. When he entered the hall and saw her expression, he immediately sensed something was wrong.

"General Qin," he asked, "what has happened?"

She explained the situation in brief but heavy terms. Rebels everywhere. The White Pole Soldiers overstretched. No aid from the court. The Manchus pressing at the borders. The Ministry of War paralyzed.

"How can the White Pole Soldiers alone hold Sichuan?" she murmured.

Zhao Sheng felt helpless. Such matters were beyond his understanding.

Then he heard a faint voice beside his ear. It came from the embroidered figure of Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest, audible only to him.

"We will send troops to assist her."

Zhao Sheng's eyes lit up.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived," he whispered inwardly.

Li Daoxuan's voice continued calmly, giving instructions.

After listening carefully, Zhao Sheng raised his head and said to Qin Liangyu, "General, there is still one force that can help."

Her eyes sharpened. "Which force?"

"The militia that once fought bandits alongside your son and daughter-in-law in Shanxi."

Qin Liangyu looked surprised. "That formidable militia? Xianglin and Fengyi have mentioned them. They say the militia is disciplined and fierce. However, militia are not regular troops. They defend their own homeland. Why would they travel thousands of miles to fight elsewhere?"

Her concern was realistic. Even regular troops often fought desperately only in their own provinces. Once moved elsewhere, they became lax, sometimes even harming the local population.

Zhao Sheng replied steadily, "This militia is different. They are not restricted by court bureaucracy. They can move freely. More importantly, they possess a strong sense of righteousness. They will not refuse to aid the people of Sichuan."

He added, "Besides, rebels have destroyed checkpoints across the land. The old travel pass system has collapsed. People move without restraint now."

Qin Liangyu nodded slowly. "If they are willing to come, I will treat them generously."

"There is no need for generous gifts," Zhao Sheng answered. "When they arrive, simply declare them to be under your command. That will avoid unnecessary trouble."

"That is easily done," she replied.

Zhao Sheng said he would draft a letter of invitation.

In reality, Li Daoxuan had already shifted his consciousness back to the village.

He turned to Cheng Xu and gave a concise order.

"Deploy forces. Enter Sichuan."

Chapter 1079 Can You Lead an Army?

"We're going to Sichuan! To Sichuan!"

Inside the Gao Family Village barracks, the news detonated like a cannon shot.

Boots pounded against wooden floors. Bedrolls were rolled up at record speed. Weapon racks were opened, inspected, checked again. Men who had just been lounging a moment ago were now running back to their quarters, stuffing spare socks into packs and arguing over whose oilcloth was better at keeping powder dry.

This expedition was different.

For the first time in years, Cheng Xu was leading personally.

As Commander in Chief of Gao Family Village's forces, he had long since become the man who stood behind maps, supply charts, and deployment plans. He oversaw the whole chessboard and rarely stepped onto it. Others marched, others fought, others bled. He managed the flow of grain, bullets, and men.

But this time there was no alternative.

The major armies of Gao Family Village were already committed elsewhere, each entangled in operations that could not be abandoned. If he did not move, no one else could shoulder this particular task.

The moment word spread that he would lead, the entire barracks exploded with excitement.

"Have you heard? Instructor He Jiu is leading us personally!"

"Really? The deputy of General He Kegang is finally taking the field again?"

"You still do not understand?" someone whispered dramatically. "The films hid his real name. Think about it. The He in He Jiu and the He in He Kegang sound exactly the same. He Jiu is He Kegang. One of

the Three Heroes of Liaodong. Zu Dashou could not kill him. He faked his death and crawled out from a mountain of corpses."

A collective gasp followed.

"That makes sense."

"Of course it does."

"Back then he fought the Manchus with cold steel and old muskets. Now we have bolt action rifles and artillery. If the Manchus show their faces, they will not even know how they died."

"To march with General He is our fortune."

The energy in the barracks rose higher and higher, spreading from squad to squad like fire racing through dry grass.

Cheng Xu stepped out of his office and walked along the corridor, hands clasped behind his back. He could feel the atmosphere before he fully understood it. Something electric was coursing through the ranks.

He smiled faintly.

Excellent morale.

He had actually been worried. The road into Sichuan was notoriously dangerous. The old saying claimed that the path into Shu was harder than ascending to heaven. Narrow mountain roads, sudden ambush points, unpredictable weather. This was not a simple march across flat plains.

Yet no one looked reluctant.

The soldiers he passed snapped upright.

"Fighting alongside General He, we fear nothing!"

Cheng Xu blinked.

General He?

He cleared his throat. "Instructor He Jiu. Not General."

"Understood, Instructor He!"

The answer came like thunder.

Still, something felt wrong.

It sounded correct. It was his name. Yet somehow it felt as though they were not speaking to him but to someone larger than him, someone forged out of rumor and cinema and legend.

He rubbed his forehead and stepped onto the training ground.

Five thousand militia soldiers were already assembled.

This was the main force of Gao Family Village. Not a branch detachment. Not a temporary levy. These were the core troops.

The front two thousand five hundred formed the First Regiment. Every man carried the newest bolt action rifle produced in Gao Family Village. Eight paper cartridges sat within the magazine, spring fed into the chamber. A single pull of the bolt chambered the next round with swift mechanical precision.

Behind them stood the Second Regiment, two thousand five hundred strong, armed with finely forged breech loading rifled muskets. Reliable, accurate, and deadly in disciplined volleys.

Each regiment possessed its own artillery battalion, engineering units, and field kitchens. This was a self contained war machine.

Cheng Xu climbed onto the rostrum.

He had not yet spoken when five thousand voices roared in unison.

"Greetings, Instructor He!"

The shout rolled across the yard and struck him in the chest.

Again that strange feeling.

He lifted a hand. Silence fell almost instantly.

"Gentlemen," he began, his voice steady, "the campaign before us will not be simple. We march into Sichuan."

"To Sichuan! To Sichuan! To Sichuan!"

"With Instructor He, we fear nothing!"

Cheng Xu stared at them.

From scalp to soles, something felt off.

Was this some kind of omen? A warning from instinct?

He quickly swept his gaze across the field. No unease. No internal alarm. His senses were calm. There was no danger here.

"Reporting in," came a straightforward voice. "Gao Chuwu, returning from Hedong, rejoining ranks."

"Reporting in," came another, more sheepish tone. "Zheng Daniu, from the cavalry battalion, rejoining ranks."

The moment Cheng Xu saw those two, realization dawned.

Ah.

That was the source of the unease.

"You two are coming?" he said, pressing his fingers to his temple. "No wonder I felt something was wrong. Taking you along will cost me five years of my life. Five full years."

Before he could continue, another voice rang out.

"Reporting. Flat Rabbit, returned from the Yellow Pole Military Academy Xi'an campus, rejoining ranks."

"Zheng Gouzi, same."

Cheng Xu turned slowly.

Flat Rabbit stood there with hands on hips, chin lifted, radiating boundless confidence.

All three of them.

The trio that once specialized in chaos.

"Someone save me," Cheng Xu muttered.

At that moment, a Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun walked over calmly.

"I called them," Li Daoxuan said. "And I am going as well."

Cheng Xu stiffened. "You are going personally?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

He had been born by the Jialing River in Shuangqing. How could he not go when Sichuan was in flames? Even if this world was a box beneath his gaze, it was still a land that stirred his heart.

"Instructor He Jiu," Li Daoxuan continued, "Sichuan's terrain is fragmented. Five thousand men cannot move as a single block everywhere. The rebels are scattered. We will likely divide into multiple detachments for pursuit. I need capable officers to lead independently."

Cheng Xu understood the logic.

He looked at Gao Chuwu. "You can lead troops now?"

Gao Chuwu nodded earnestly. "Of course. You just walk at the front and everyone follows."

Cheng Xu covered his face.

He looked at Zheng Daniu.

Zheng Daniu grinned foolishly.

Flat Rabbit laughed loudly. "Instructor He Jiu, leave it to this Rabbit Lord. I am invincible now."

Cheng Xu felt a vein pulse at his temple.

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly. "Do not underestimate them. Even men like Guo Tianxing and Waguanwang became formidable after years of fighting. These three are no longer naive boys. They trained at the Yellow Pole Military Academy. Give them some trust."

If Dao Xuan Tianzun himself vouched for them, there was nothing more to argue.

Cheng Xu inhaled deeply.

Very well.

"To arms," he said quietly.

The order rippled outward.

The troops marched toward the train station in disciplined lines, boots striking earth in steady rhythm.

Destination: Shanyang County.

From there, through Yunyang.

And then, into Sichuan.

Chapter 1080 The Power of Popular Support

When the main regiment of Gao Family Village mobilized, the entire village responded as though a great festival had been declared, except this festival carried rifles, artillery, and five thousand determined men.

The Chang'an Automobile Factory ran at full capacity. Long columns of troop transport trucks rolled out from its gates, engines rumbling in disciplined succession. Solar powered buses were pressed into service. The railway lines were fully utilized, freight cars converted, schedules rewritten overnight. Grain, ammunition, medical kits, spare boots, engineering tools, everything moved with astonishing coordination.

What had once been a scattered settlement was now a war capable industrial system.

Five thousand men departed with such speed that observers could only shake their heads and say it was as though the army had sprouted wings.

They reached Shanyang County in record time.

But once there, the convenience of modernized infrastructure ended.

Southward lay Sichuan.

And beyond that lay mountains.

There were no smooth concrete roads stretching obediently into the distance. No neatly graded highways cutting through valleys. From this point onward, the earth rose and folded into itself in endless ridges, tangled forests, and narrow passes that could swallow an army whole.

This was where the true trial began.

Both the main regiment and the logistical units adjusted their pace. Soldiers crouched to tighten rope bindings around their calves to stabilize muscles during steep climbs. They checked boot soles for wear, tested the seals on their waterskins, adjusted ration packs, and slung their long flintlock rifles across their shoulders. Engineers redistributed load weight. Scouts were reassigned in rotating shifts.

No one complained.

At some point during the preparations, a voice rose in song.

"At the sound of the order, we pack and march..."

The tune carried lightly at first, almost playful.

Nearby soldiers picked it up instinctively.

"Advancing on the path to defend our land..."

More voices joined.

"Across forests, mountains, rivers, and plains we go, ever onward..."

The mountains echoed faintly with the rhythm of marching boots and rising song.

Before long, the army reached Zhuxi County, territory once under the Yunyang Pacification Commissioner.

The moment the forward elements appeared outside a mountain village, chaos erupted.

Doors slammed shut. Chickens scattered. Children vanished like startled rabbits. Within seconds the entire village emptied as though it had never been inhabited.

Cheng Xu blinked slowly.

"Huh."

Flat Rabbit burst into laughter.

"Instructor He, no need to trouble yourself. Leave this to your Rabbit Lord."

He bounded forward with theatrical flair, climbed onto a stone platform near the entrance, spread his arms wide, and shouted with all the confidence of someone who had never doubted his own popularity.

"Folks, do not be frightened. Your Rabbit Lord has arrived."

The effect was immediate and almost comical.

Heads popped out from behind doors. Windows creaked open. A few brave elders squinted toward the road.

Then recognition dawned.

"It is Rabbit Lord."

"It really is him."

"We thought it was bandits or some new tax collectors."

"It is the militia from Gao Family Village."

In moments the village flowed back into the open. Fear melted into relieved smiles.

Cheng Xu watched the transformation with quiet astonishment.

So this was influence.

Years earlier, when Lu Xiangheng had served as Yunyang Pacification Commissioner, Gao Family Village had provided both open and discreet assistance to Zhuxi County. Supplies had been delivered. Relief grain distributed. Tools, medicine, cloth, even livestock had been provided to struggling families.

Flat Rabbit had been among the most enthusiastic participants in those relief efforts.

Unlike many officials who saw disaster as opportunity, he truly treated wealth like dirt. Bribes slid off him like rainwater. When Li Daoxuan saw this, Dao Xuan Tianzun had granted him a Hero's Mandate, authorizing him to mobilize relief resources whenever necessary.

Flat Rabbit had traveled tirelessly across Yunyang. Flood, drought, landslide, it did not matter. If people suffered, he appeared.

He had even ventured deep into the Shennongjia mountains.

Popularity like this was not purchased.

It was earned.

An old villager clasped Flat Rabbit's hands tightly.

"Rabbit Lord, it is a blessing you have returned. After you left, Commissioner Lu also departed. The new commissioner is like a wooden puppet, useless in every matter. Not long ago, a large bandit force swept through here. We fled into the hills and barely survived. The commissioner never came. Only General Luo Xi arrived afterward to clear remnants."

Flat Rabbit's expression darkened.

"That fool Luo Xi only appears after the damage is done. Why not defend before they arrive?"

Several villagers hurriedly shook their heads.

"Rabbit Lord, you truly cannot blame General Luo. These mountains twist and fork endlessly. There are countless hidden paths. Even if he had three heads and six arms, he could not guard every village. All he can do is chase wherever the bandits surface."

Zheng Gouzi leaned in with a grin.

"Rabbit Lord, you are scolding Luo Xi for arriving after the fact, but did you not also arrive after the fact?"

Flat Rabbit froze.

For several seconds he maintained a dignified silence.

"Yes," he admitted finally. "That is... unfortunately accurate."

He coughed, recovering authority.

"Which direction did the bandits flee?"

Villagers pointed south toward dense forest ridges.

"They crossed those mountains, likely heading toward Daning County in Sichuan."

Daning County, what would later become Wuxi of Chongqing.

Chongqing was infamous for its mountains. Even in a future age of satellites and digital maps, travelers became lost in its layered streets. In these times, without modern navigation, the land was a labyrinth.

Cheng Xu stared at the jagged horizon and felt unease crawl up his spine.

At that moment, a faint spectral figure drifted beside him.

"Little one," the apparition said in thick Sichuan dialect, "great grandma lost her way on the road to Fengdu Ghost City and simply settled here in Chongqing. Come visit."

Cheng Xu nearly jumped out of his boots.

"I am your great grandson. Why are you calling me little one and referring to yourself as great grandma?"

The spectral elder laughed softly.

"In Chongqing we call our younger kin little ones. We call grandmother popo. So I am tai popo."

Cheng Xu felt a chill. Even the noodles of Shaanxi seemed to transform in his imagination. Cold skin noodles becoming cold noodles. Linguistic shifts everywhere. The mountains felt even more ominous.

Was this a warning that he would become permanently lost here, wandering forever as a Chongqing ghost?

He was still contemplating existential doom when a villager stepped forward.

"Rabbit Lord, are you pursuing those bandits?"

"Of course."

"Then allow me to guide you. I know every ridge and stream. I will ensure you do not lose your way."

Flat Rabbit's eyes shone.

"That would be most appreciated."

The villager smiled.

"This is nothing compared to what you have done for us. To assist Rabbit Lord is our honor."

Voices rose behind him.

"We all wish to help."

In that moment, Cheng Xu felt the oppressive weight in his chest lighten. A local guide meant survival in these mountains.

The spectral great grandmother's form grew faint. She waved lightly.

"My dear great grandson, great grandma has found her way after all..."

Then she disappeared.

With a structured formation, the army entered the mountains.

A villager led at the front, escorted by Flat Rabbit and a scout detachment. Behind them followed Zheng Gouzi with the vanguard battalion at controlled distance. Further back, hidden from sight, the main force advanced in measured intervals.

This layered formation reduced the risk of catastrophic ambush.

From the rear command position, Cheng Xu observed Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi navigating the terrain with discipline and awareness.

They were not the reckless fools they once had been.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had once said these three had grown.

At the time, Cheng Xu had doubted it.

Now, watching them manage scouts, maintain spacing, and communicate efficiently in complex terrain, he finally admitted the truth.

People change.

Even rabbits.

Even dogs.

He took out his brush and wrote quietly in his field notebook:

"People evolve. So too do rabbits and dogs."

The line would later be included in the Collection of Gao Family Village Aphorisms, Cheng Xu's Volume.

And deep within the mountains of Shu, five thousand soldiers marched forward, not merely with weapons, but with something far more powerful.

Popular support.