

## Great Ming 1081

### Chapter 1081 Gu Tianxing of Lingwu Cave

With villagers guiding them from ridge to ridge, the crossing of the mountains proved far smoother than Cheng Xu had feared. What had seemed like an endless maze of folds and shadows gradually revealed itself as something navigable once one understood which slope concealed a path and which valley merely circled back on itself.

Before long, the militia crossed several mountain chains and arrived in Daning County.

At this boundary, their original guide could go no farther. However, fate was cooperative. In a small village tucked into the mountainside, he found an acquaintance.

"Brother Li," the first guide said earnestly, gesturing toward the soldiers behind him, "these men are good people. They only fight villains and bandits. They do not harm common folk. Could you help lead them a little further south?"

Brother Li examined the formation behind him. The soldiers stood in orderly ranks. Their weapons were well maintained. No one stared greedily at the villagers' livestock. No one barked insults.

He chuckled and nodded. "Of course. I will guide them."

Thus the leadership passed seamlessly from one local to another, like a relay baton handed between runners.

Under Brother Li's direction, the militia continued southward.

The terrain grew harsher with every mile. The slopes steepened. Loose stones shifted underfoot. Narrow ledges forced the columns to compress. Thick forest canopies dimmed the light until even midday felt subdued and uncertain.

Cheng Xu moved cautiously at the rear command position, eyes constantly scanning the tree line and the ground. The forest was too quiet. Even birds seemed reluctant to speak. He studied scattered footprints pressed into the damp soil. Some were recent.

When he lifted his gaze toward a distant peak, he almost saw, for a fleeting moment, the faint shape of his spectral great grandmother floating there, smiling in that ambiguous way that suggested both affection and impending doom.

His instincts tightened.

"Halt," he ordered sharply. "All units hold position."

The command rippled down the mountain path. From Flat Rabbit at the very front to Zheng Daniu at the far rear, the entire formation froze with disciplined efficiency.

"Launch the hot air balloon," Cheng Xu said.

Within minutes, the observation balloon rose above the treetops. Surveyors sketched rapidly. A topographic map of the surrounding ridges and valleys was completed and delivered to Cheng Xu's hands.

He studied it carefully, then pointed to a narrow gorge marked between two peaks.

"Brother Li, is there a place here where people could conceal themselves?"

Brother Li leaned closer.

"That is Scissors Gorge. Inside it lies Lingwu Cave. The cave is enormous. The passages twist everywhere, with strange rock formations and hidden chambers. If someone wanted to hide a large group, that would be ideal."

Cheng Xu nodded slowly.

He pressed a silver ingot into Brother Li's palm.

"You need not guide us further into danger. Stay close behind me."

Brother Li weighed the silver discreetly. Five taels at least. His heart swelled with astonishment. He had never imagined an army that paid guides generously, treated them politely, and even shielded them from risk.

For a fleeting moment, he wondered whether joining such an army might not be a terrible idea.

Cheng Xu turned to his officers.

"Scout company. Reconnoiter Scissors Gorge and Lingwu Cave."

He had barely finished speaking when the mass produced Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, who had been reclining casually on a handcart behind him, suddenly sat upright with surprising enthusiasm.

"Lingwu Cave?" Li Daoxuan said with a faint laugh. "Then I must go personally."

Cheng Xu nearly stumbled.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun... you are here?"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Hearing the name Lingwu Cave, how could I not come?"

Cheng Xu's face paled instantly.

In his mind, Lingwu Cave transformed from a geological formation into the lair of some legendary demon. If Dao Xuan Tianzun himself intended to inspect it personally, then surely some monstrous presence must lurk within.

How terrifying must this creature be?

Even five thousand arquebusiers might not suffice.

Cold sweat trickled down his back.

Meanwhile, Li Daoxuan's thoughts were far more mundane and far more excited.

Lingwu Cave, in later centuries, would be hailed as one of China's great karst wonders and the premier cave attraction of the Three Gorges region. In his previous life, visiting it from Shuangqing required hours of travel and meticulous planning.

Now he could simply project his consciousness and enjoy it directly.

He almost wanted to laugh.

"I will personally lead the scout team," he declared.

Cheng Xu felt as though thunder had struck his skull. If Dao Xuan Tianzun went personally, then this mission had clearly transcended ordinary military reconnaissance.

He began silently preparing himself for the possibility that his great grandmother might soon reappear to invite him on a permanent ghostly relocation.

Soon, Li Daoxuan set off at the head of the reconnaissance team. Twenty elite scouts followed, tense and alert, while Li Daoxuan walked forward with barely concealed anticipation.

Time rewound several days earlier.

Inside Lingwu Cave.

A force of roughly five thousand bandits rested within the cavern's vast chambers.

Their numbers were misleading. Among them were as many elderly, women, and children as able bodied youths. Their weapons consisted largely of farming tools: hoes, sickles, choppers, wooden poles, even manure scoops. True blades were scarce. Firearms rarer still.

This was not a hardened veteran bandit army.

It was a newly formed rebel group, assembled after the severe drought in Nanyang, Henan. They had only recently attached themselves to the larger forces of the Chuang Wang. Their battlefield experience consisted mostly of waving flags at the rear and shouting encouragement. They had scarcely drawn blood.

Their leader was named Gu Tianxing.

Gu Tianxing had been a farmer all his life. Illiterate, practical, stubborn. When he joined the rebellion, he had struggled even to choose a name. Observing generals such as Guo Tianxing, Mantianxing, and Huntianxing, he simply borrowed the pattern and christened himself Gu Tianxing, the Lone Heavenly Star.

He and his contingent had followed the main rebel army through Shennongjia and into Sichuan, always trailing behind like an afterthought. They never fought first. They never looted first. When supplies were distributed, they were last in line.

The main force disdained them as weak. The Jin merchant supplied weapons rarely reached them. Provisions were scarce.

Eventually they were told bluntly to scatter and fend for themselves.

So Gu Tianxing led his people into the Shu mountains.

They promptly became lost.

It was almost inevitable. Outsiders entering these mountains without guidance rarely escaped confusion. The ridges curved deceptively. Valleys folded into one another. A man could swear he walked in a straight line only to emerge beside the same twisted tree hours later.

If not for the sun rising in the east each day, they would not even have maintained a sense of direction.

Exhausted and discouraged, they stumbled upon the massive mouth of Lingwu Cave.

Seeing shelter, they entered.

Inside, the cavern was vast enough to house them all.

"Big Brother," a young bandit complained, "how much longer until Kuizhou? We have walked for days and seen nothing but mountains."

Gu Tianxing sighed heavily.

"I do not know. I walk forward, then circle a tree, cross a ravine, and when I come out I am back where I began. These mountains play tricks."

A younger man threw up his hands.

"These Shu Mountains make no sense."

After a long silence, Gu Tianxing scratched his head thoughtfully.

"If we truly cannot leave, perhaps we should simply settle here. The imperial armies would never chase us this deep. If Cao Wenzhao or Zuo Liangyu dared enter these mountains, they might not find their way out either."

The group considered this.

It was not entirely unreasonable.

One bandit brightened suddenly.

"I brought seeds," he said shyly. "When I first joined the rebellion, I could not bear to eat them."

Another raised his hand.

"I have seeds too."

"So do I."

Soon several small cloth pouches were displayed.

Gu Tianxing stared at them, stunned by the simplicity of the solution.

"If that is so," he said slowly, "then why fear anything? We have land outside the cave. This part of Sichuan has not suffered drought. We clear the ground. We farm. We live."

Inside Lingwu Cave, under dripping stalactites and echoing chambers, five thousand accidental rebels began discussing crop rotation instead of conquest.

And outside, the sound of approaching scouts drew ever closer.

Chapter 1082 Not Roving Bandits, But Displaced Civilians

Gu Tianxing slapped his thigh and laughed loudly.

"My brothers speak wisely. We are already lost and cannot find our way out of these mountains anyway, so why not make this place our home? With this strange mountain shielding us, government troops will never find us. Ha ha ha!"

The idea spread through the cave like fire catching dry straw.

"What are we waiting for? I will go clear a plot right now!"

"I am coming too!"

Nearly a thousand men rushed out in excitement. When they had first joined the rebellion, most of them possessed nothing but hoes and sickles. Now those same tools were raised once again, not for revolt but for survival.

The land outside Lingwu Cave was uneven and stubborn, but human hands are patient when hunger stands behind them.

Large stones were pried loose and rolled aside. Weeds were hacked down. Young trees were chopped and dragged away. Thin layers of soil were scraped together into small patches that might hold seeds. It was not fertile earth, only scattered pockets between limestone ridges, but to men who had wandered starving through mountains, it looked like hope.

When hunger gnawed too fiercely, they chewed bark. They dug up grass roots. As long as no tax collector or officer stood over them with a whip, even bark tasted tolerable.

Days passed like this.

The once wild stretch before the cave slowly transformed into a patchwork of reclaimed fields, small and uneven but clearly shaped by effort.

Returning to the present.

Gu Tianxing stood before the newly cleared land, chest puffed out with pride.

"Land reclamation is complete," he declared grandly. "We can live here peacefully. No more running around like bandits."

His laughter had barely faded when a scout came stumbling toward him, breath ragged.

"Boss. Trouble."

Gu Tianxing's heart lurched.

"What kind of trouble?"

"There is a large army to the north. They stopped at a distance and have not advanced, but they have sent scouts this way."

Gu Tianxing blinked in disbelief.

"They found us? In these mountains?"

One of the slightly more knowledgeable bandits frowned thoughtfully.

"It cannot be the Sichuan local forces. The Chuang Wang killed the Sichuan Grand Commander. The remaining troops are disorganized. Only the White Pole Soldiers still operate properly, and this does not look like them."

Gu Tianxing nodded slowly.

"Then whoever they are, they are not ordinary."

The younger bandits stared at him anxiously.

"Boss, what do we do?"

Gu Tianxing glanced back at Lingwu Cave. Its entrance yawned like a great mouth in the cliffside.

"What is there to fear? This cave is vast and winding. Five thousand of us will be scattered inside. Everyone retreat into the cave and hide. Once they circle around and leave, we come back out and continue farming."

It sounded reasonable.

Within moments, shouts echoed. Hoes were abandoned. Fires were hurriedly covered. People rushed into the cavern's depths.

Inside Lingwu Cave, small campfires flickered weakly before being smothered under dirt. Darkness swallowed the space.

The entire force vanished into the stone labyrinth.

Outside, Li Daoxuan arrived at the foot of the mountain with a team of scouts.

Lingwu Cave's entrance sat halfway up the cliff, a dark hollow against pale stone. From below, it resembled the open mouth of some ancient beast.

A scout crouched to examine the soil.

"Report. Large scale land clearing. At least a thousand people involved."

Li Daoxuan studied the reclaimed fields quietly.

"Someone intends to farm here," he murmured. "To choose such terrain for cultivation, they must be desperate."

He looked toward Scissors Gorge. The Daning River flowed calmly through the valley below, its water clear and steady. Mountain streams descended in silver threads, providing irrigation. Water was not the issue.

The problem was the earth itself.

He walked closer to one of the fields and crouched.

The soil layer was thin, perhaps only a few dozen centimeters before hard limestone emerged beneath.

"These are triangular scraps of land," he said softly. "Thin soil over rock."

A scout leaned closer.

"There must be many people hiding in the cave. It could be roving bandits."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Most likely. Ordinary villagers could not organize such reclamation at this scale in such terrain. Nor would any official plan agricultural expansion in karst rock. The most reasonable assumption is that bandits hide inside."

High above, Gu Tianxing and several loyal men peered cautiously from behind rocks at the cave entrance.

They could not hear what Li Daoxuan was saying. They only saw him pointing at their fields and discussing with his men.

Gu Tianxing's stomach twisted.

If the army camped at the mountain's base, they would be trapped. They could not leave to farm. They could not dig for roots. Hunger would finish what swords had not.

Below, one scout spoke quietly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, there may be nothing inside worth scouting. If we block the foot of the mountain, they will starve."

Li Daoxuan nodded slowly.

"Tactically, that is correct."

He gestured toward the small plots carved into rock.

"But consider this. Would you personally choose to clear land here?"

The scouts shook their heads.

"This terrain is worse than the Loess Plateau."

Li Daoxuan continued.

"Would the new Chuang Wang clear land here?"

The scouts answered almost in unison.

"He would raid instead."

Li Daoxuan straightened.

"If people are forced to cultivate barren rock rather than plunder fertile villages, can they still be called roving bandits?"

The scouts fell silent.

Understanding dawned gradually.

One of them spoke first.

"They are not roving bandits. They are displaced civilians. They have suffered disaster and war. They saw our army and fled into the cave out of fear. Their decision to hide instead of flee far away shows inexperience. If they were seasoned bandits, they would not trap themselves in a cave."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"Good. Then we must treat them according to a different policy."

The scouts nodded firmly.

"For displaced civilians, we send aid, not troops."

Li Daoxuan gave instructions calmly.

"You two return to the main force. Tell them not to dispatch soldiers. Send a rescue team with grain and medical supplies."

He looked up toward the dark entrance of Lingwu Cave.

"As for me, I will go up alone and speak with them."

High above, Gu Tianxing watched the lone figure begin ascending the mountain path.

His heart pounded.

He had prepared to hide from soldiers.

He had not prepared to face someone who walked toward him without armor, without visible hostility, and without fear.

Chapter 1083 Heavenly Immortal, Save Me!

The scouts quickly dispatched several men to notify Cheng Xu.

Li Daoxuan turned to the remaining scouts and said calmly, "Wait for me at the foot of the mountain."

With that, he walked alone toward Lingwu Cave.

The entrance of Lingwu Cave hung halfway up a steep cliff face. In later times, there would be platforms, carved stone steps, even a cable car to bring visitors up effortlessly. But this was the Ming Dynasty. There were no such conveniences. Only a sheer wall of stone stood before them, angled sharply upward. The only indication that it could be climbed at all was the series of worn footprints etched into the rock, marks left behind by Gu Tianxing's men as they went up and down day after day.

Even so, it was a difficult climb. Anyone without skill would slip and fall.

Inside the cave, Gu Tianxing and his subordinates stared in disbelief as Li Daoxuan walked straight to the base of the cliff and looked up.

"He... he wants to come up?" one man whispered in panic. "He found us! Is he coming to capture us?"

"Should we throw rocks at him?" another asked, already half reaching for one.

The entire group began to panic.

"Don't throw anything!" Gu Tianxing hissed. "He's alone. That doesn't look like someone here to fight. Let's just watch first."

So they watched.

Li Daoxuan stepped up to the rock face and extended his hand toward a narrow crack in the stone. The crevice was barely wide enough for fingers, yet when he pushed his hand in, there was a dull cracking sound. Small fragments of rock fell away as though the cliff itself had yielded to him, widening the gap.

Gu Tianxing's eyes went wide.

His subordinates were equally stunned.

Then Li Daoxuan began to climb.

He moved with steady rhythm, hands and feet alternating as he dug into the stone itself. Each time his fingers found a crack, the rock seemed to crumble just enough to grant him purchase. It was not climbing. It looked as though he were carving steps into the cliff as he ascended.

In a short time, he reached the cave entrance.

Gu Tianxing felt his scalp go numb.

"What kind of strange technique is that?" he muttered.

"Boss... he's coming up," a subordinate said in a trembling voice. "What do we do?"

"Retreat. Retreat!" Gu Tianxing ordered at once. "Let's hide deeper inside the cave."

They quickly withdrew into the darkness. The interior of Lingwu Cave was pitch black. Once they moved away from the entrance, they could not even see their own hands. Gu Tianxing struck a piece of tinder, producing a faint red glow. In that dim light, he scurried deeper inside and hid behind a large, oddly shaped rock.

No sooner had they concealed themselves than Li Daoxuan stepped into the cave.

He immediately noticed fresh muddy footprints on the ground. Clearly, many people had rushed inside in a hurry. Yet no one spoke. The silence was thick, almost tangible. Their fear hung in the air.

Seeing how timid they were, Li Daoxuan decided that if they were already frightened, he might as well draw them out completely.

He sat down casually at the cave entrance and chuckled softly. "You people hiding in here... do you know the name of the cave you're in? Let me tell you."

His voice carried deep into the cavern, echoing from wall to wall, reaching even the refugees hiding in the farthest corners.

"This cave is called Lingwu Cave," he continued. "And rumor has it..."

He paused.

Making up a ghost story on the spot was not easy. Storytelling required talent, and he was a designer, not a novelist. Still, he had to improvise.

"A very, very long time ago," he began again, "a monster lived in this cave. His name was the Lich King. He commanded a terrifying army known as the Scourge. With it, he intended to conquer the entire world."

The refugees exchanged nervous glances in the dark.

"But before his army could march far from these mountains, he encountered a divine immortal named Thott. Thott defeated him. Yet the Lich King could never truly die. So Thott sealed him in the deepest part of this cave. That is how Lingwu Cave earned its name."

A chill ran through the refugees.

"The Lich King's lesser monsters were also sealed here," Li Daoxuan continued smoothly. "For example, one of them is imprisoned inside a stalactite."

A refugee who was hiding beside a stalactite stiffened instantly. In the darkness, the rock felt damp and cold under his hands. Suddenly its shape seemed grotesque, almost alive. His legs gave out, and he collapsed onto the ground with a dull thud.

"And another," Li Daoxuan went on, "is trapped above a dripping rock."

What was a dripping rock? One refugee did not know. But water had been steadily dripping from the ceiling above him. He had ignored it before. Now, every drop sounded sinister.

"Drip. Drop."

He slowly tilted his head upward. The darkness above seemed endless.

"The liquid falling from the dripping rock," Li Daoxuan said in an even tone, "is not water at all. It is the monster's saliva."

"Aaaah!"

Someone screamed and bolted toward the entrance.

Once one person ran, others followed instinctively. But in complete darkness, with thousands of people packed together, chaos would only lead to people being trampled.

"Stop! Nobody move!"

Li Daoxuan's voice thundered through the cavern like a clap of thunder. The cave walls vibrated with the force of it.

The refugees froze where they stood.

"Light the fires," he commanded. "With fire burning, the Lich King will not dare move."

His words carried an inexplicable authority. People obeyed almost without thinking. Flint struck. Sparks caught. One fire ignited, then another. Soon, flickering light spread across the cavern.

Lingwu Cave gradually brightened.

Now Li Daoxuan could clearly see the inside. The main chamber was enormous, like the hollowed belly of a mountain. Stalactites of various shapes hung from above. Several smaller passageways branched off into darkness. Fires flickered across the vast space.

And the number of people stunned him.

He had thought there were perhaps a thousand. Instead, there were five thousand refugees crowded inside. If lined up in rows, they would fill at least two high school sports fields.

Gu Tianxing stood at the very front, looking small and nervous.

"You... who are you?" he asked shakily. "What kind of story was that? Please don't scare us like this. This cave is the only place left for us to live. If you frighten us away from here, where else can we go? How are we supposed to survive?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"I came to help you," he said. "Pack your things and come with me. I will take you to a good place. A place suitable for living. A place where you can eat your fill."

Gu Tianxing looked confused and wary. "Why should we trust you?"

Li Daoxuan raised a brow. "You do not believe me? Then let me show you something."

With a sharp snapping sound, he detached his own head from his body and held it in his hands.

"Aaaahhhhhh!"

All five thousand refugees screamed in terror.

Li Daoxuan calmly placed his head back onto his neck.

"If you believe me," he said evenly, "then I am a Heavenly Immortal who has come to save you. If you do not..."

He snapped his head off again and held it in front of him, grinning.

That was the final blow.

The five thousand refugees collapsed to their knees as one. Hoes clattered to the ground. No one dared resist. No one even dared breathe too loudly.

"Heavenly Immortal, save us!"

Chapter 1084 Come With Me

Before long, Flat Rabbit arrived, leading a rescue team.

The five thousand members of the Gao Family Village Militia each contributed one full day of their personal rations. Alone, each portion was modest. Together, they formed a mountain of food. Sacks of dried grain, coarse flatbread, preserved vegetables, and cured meat were piled high onto wooden carts.

Flat Rabbit oversaw everything personally. Soon, cart after cart rolled into the mountain gully beneath Lingwu Cave, spreading out in a wide formation.

Above them, Gu Tianxing and his people began descending from the cave entrance halfway up the cliff.

Going down was no easier than climbing up had been. The elderly were supported on both sides. Children were carried or guided carefully. Some men formed human chains to steady those who slipped. It was slow, tense work.

But when they saw the countless carts below, when they saw real food waiting for them in the open sunlight, something changed.

Even the weakest among them found strength.

Even the children stopped crying.

Once they finally reached the bottom and received the dried rations handed out by the Gao Family Village Militia, the refugees could no longer hold themselves together.

They burst into tears.

"Food... finally, real food..."

"And someone to guide us... to lead us out of these cursed mountains..."

"We can live. We can finally live."

Some knelt while eating. Some cried as they chewed. Others simply held the food in their hands as if afraid it would vanish.

Gu Tianxing followed Li Daoxuan and approached Cheng Xu and the others. The leaders gathered and formed a circle, sitting around Gu Tianxing.

Cheng Xu spoke first. "Tell us your situation. Why were you trapped inside Lingwu Cave?"

Gu Tianxing lowered his head and began recounting everything.

He was from Nanyang. Drought had ravaged the land. Crops failed. Families starved. In desperation, he had been swayed by rebel rhetoric. He joined their swelling ranks, believing perhaps there was hope in numbers.

Instead, he followed them all the way into Sichuan.

They marched, fought, scattered, regrouped. Eventually, what had once been an army became fragments of displaced people trying to survive. When even the rebels abandoned them, they fled into the mountains and stumbled upon Lingwu Cave.

That was how they ended up there.

Flat Rabbit thumped his chest and declared loudly, "So that's what happened. Your suffering truly is tragic. But your hardships end here. With Dao Xuan Tianzun guiding us, you will never starve or freeze again. If you are sharp-minded and hardworking, if you commit yourselves sincerely, I guarantee you will live in abundance."

Gu Tianxing looked up in disbelief.

"From Nanyang, you say?" Zheng Gouzi muttered thoughtfully. "That reminds me... didn't we see something about Nanyang recently in Gaojia News?"

Cheng Xu nodded. "Zhu Yujian, the Prince of Tang from Nanyang, raised troops to aid the Emperor. It was reported."

Zheng Gouzi slapped his forehead. "Right! That's it. These princely names are impossible to keep track of."

Cheng Xu smiled faintly. "Now that the Manchu forces have retreated from the capital, the Prince of Tang must be in an awkward position."

And indeed, he was.

Zhu Yujian had returned to Nanyang.

Halfway through his march toward the capital, news arrived that the Manchu forces had already withdrawn. With no enemy to fight, he had no choice but to pull back.

On his journey north, he had fought scattered rebel forces. He had clashed with Meng Hu and Du Hu's armies in several engagements. Some battles were won, some lost. In his mind, even if he had not truly "rescued the Emperor," he had at least suppressed bandits and rendered service to the dynasty.

Yet shortly after returning to Nanyang, an imperial decree arrived.

He was stripped of his title.

Reduced to commoner status.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard were ordered to arrest him and imprison him for life within the high walls of Fengyang.

Zhu Yujian roared in fury.

"This prince refuses! I refuse! My loyalty to the Great Ming is absolute. I have no selfish ambition. I should not be treated like this!"

The centurion of the Embroidered Uniform Guard showed no expression.

"Save your words for the tomb-guarding eunuchs in Fengyang," he said flatly.

"I demand an audience with the Emperor!"

"You will not see His Majesty," the centurion replied. "And you are no longer a prince. You are a commoner. You may not refer to yourself as 'this prince'."

Rage and disbelief crashed through Zhu Yujian's chest.

He turned to his Guard Commander for support.

The commander avoided his gaze and stepped back.

From that moment onward, he was no longer Zhu Yujian's commander. He would serve the new Prince of Tang, Zhu Yushao, Zhu Yujian's younger brother.

No one spoke for him.

No one defended him.

Zhu Yujian had grown up under confinement, underfed and physically frail. He had neither strength nor soldiers to resist. The centurion seized him easily.

"If you cooperate," the centurion warned, "I will spare you shackles out of respect for imperial blood. If you resist, I will not hesitate."

Zhu Yujian looked up at the sky and whispered, "Heaven is unjust."

"Take him."

He was dragged away.

Within the Prince of Tang's residence, countless eyes watched in silence. No one dared utter a word.

Or perhaps more accurately, everyone had already shifted allegiance to Zhu Yushao.

As he was pushed into the carriage, Zhu Yujian finally abandoned his last naive hopes.

At least, he thought bitterly, he had no wife or children. Otherwise, once imprisoned, they would surely be bullied by his brother's faction.

The carriage began its journey toward Fengyang.

The wheels rumbled on.

Days passed.

They were still within Henan province. Ahead lay a stretch of woodland bordering the official road.

Zhu Yujian stared blankly at birds flying freely among the branches.

Suddenly, the carriage halted.

A lone figure stood in the road ahead.

The person wore the attire of a wandering swordsman. A wide bamboo hat cast a shadow over their face. A fine sword hung at their waist. Their stance radiated exaggerated confidence.

This was not a good sign.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard centurion shouted, "The Embroidered Uniform Guard is on official business. Clear the road immediately!"

"The Embroidered Uniform Guard?" the figure laughed. "Then I have stopped the right people. This mountain is under my command. These trees are mine. Others may pass. Zhu Yujian stays."

Metal rang as Spring-Embroidered Blades were drawn.

The centurion narrowed his eyes. "Bold words. State your name."

"Of course I dare," the figure replied in a singsong voice. "But once I do, every one of you will die here. If I remain unnamed and you flee, I might allow you to live."

The air grew heavy.

The centurion understood. This was deliberate mercy.

He swallowed.

"Then show me your ability."

The bamboo-hatted figure clapped once.

"Come out."

From both sides of the forest, figures emerged. All wore black. Faces covered. Each had a small hand-crossbow strapped to the left arm and a blade in the right hand.

They raised their crossbows in unison.

The bamboo-hatted figure chuckled softly.

"In the past, I would not have warned you. Arrows would have fallen the moment you entered the ambush. But I have been reborn. I offer you a path to live."

Cold sweat ran down the centurion's back.

He cupped his fists respectfully. "My thanks."

He did not hesitate further. He turned his horse and fled.

The rest of the Embroidered Uniform Guard followed in chaotic retreat.

The black-clad figures did not pursue.

The bamboo-hatted figure slowly approached the carriage.

Zhu Yujian stared in stunned confusion.

A soft chuckle came from beneath the bamboo hat.

"Zhu Yujian," the figure said gently.

"Come with me."

Chapter 1085 Who Are You, Exactly?

Zhu Yujian hesitated.

He truly did not know whether he should follow the man in the bamboo hat.

If he went with him, he would become a fugitive. And not just any fugitive, but the most dangerous kind. No emperor would ever tolerate a prince beyond his control, even one who had already been stripped of his title.

The Jinyiwei. The secret agents of the Eastern Depot and the Western Depot. They would hunt him relentlessly.

He remembered the fate of the Jianwen Emperor after the Jingnan Campaign. When the Yongle Emperor seized the throne, the Jianwen Emperor vanished. After that, countless agents were dispatched across the realm to search for him. There were even rumors that Zheng He's voyages to the Western Seas had secretly been ordered to track him down.

A prince who disappeared was a lingering threat.

Zhu Yujian did not want to become such a shadow.

But if he refused to go, he would spend the rest of his life imprisoned behind the high walls of Fengyang.

His childhood had already been swallowed by confinement. The thought of returning to that suffocating existence made his skin crawl. He could not endure it again. He simply could not.

The choice tore at him.

He trembled from head to toe.

Just as he wavered, the bamboo-hatted man stepped forward without another word, seized him by the arm, and pulled him straight out of the carriage.

"Hey, wait—"

Too late.

He was dragged into the nearby woods.

There, a plain carriage waited. It looked completely ordinary, the kind used by traveling merchants.

Zhu Yujian was pushed inside. The curtains were drawn shut.

Moments later, the carriage began to move.

Outside, the black-clad masked men calmly removed their disguises. Black robes were folded away. Face coverings disappeared. Hand crossbows were concealed. In their place were simple jianghu clothes, the sort worn by bodyguards and caravan escorts.

Within minutes, the ambush party had transformed into a perfectly normal merchant convoy.

Guards chatted casually. Laughter drifted through the air. Nothing seemed suspicious.

Only then did Zhu Yujian truly realize what had happened.

I have not even decided, and I have already been dragged onto a pirate ship.

He sighed inwardly.

At this point, what use was regret?

He straightened his posture and looked at the man in the bamboo hat.

"Who exactly are you?" he asked. "You may not wish to tell the Jinyiwei. But surely you can tell... cough... me."

He almost said "this prince." The habit clung stubbornly to him. Calling himself "I" still felt unnatural.

The man chuckled. "There is no harm in telling you. My name is Zhu Piaoling. In the martial world, I am known as the Wandering Hero of the Four Seas."

Zhu Yujian blinked.

"That is obviously a fake name."

Zhu Piaoling stared at him. "Do you not understand basic jianghu etiquette? Even if you know it is fake, you are not supposed to say it out loud. That is how people get killed."

Zhu Yujian was speechless.

After a pause, he said calmly, "Why save someone like me? If you intend to use my former status to raise rebellion against the Great Ming, you are wasting your effort. I will not allow myself to become a blade against the dynasty my ancestors built."

Zhu Piaoling snorted. "What nonsense are you thinking? Do I need your status? A mere Prince of Tang."

Zhu Yujian bristled. The way he said it sounded almost contemptuous.

Zhu Piaoling waved a hand. "I saved you because I like you."

Zhu Yujian's eyes widened. "I do not have that sort of inclination."

Zhu Piaoling nearly choked. "Nor do I!"

Silence filled the carriage.

"Then why?" Zhu Yujian asked cautiously.

Zhu Piaoling's tone softened.

"You were brave. Braver than I am. You dared to openly raise troops to aid the emperor. I could not bear to see a man like that rot behind the walls of Fengyang for the rest of his life. That is all. I will not use you. I only intend to take you somewhere better. A place like paradise. You can live freely there."

Zhu Yujian stared at him.

He was completely baffled.

Zhu Piaoling leaned back. "You have asked many questions. Now it is my turn."

"Ask."

"When you raised your army to aid the emperor... were you happy? When you led troops against bandits... did it feel exhilarating?"

Zhu Yujian drew in a sharp breath.

What kind of question was that?

He replayed everything the other man had said. The fake surname Zhu. The remark about his courage. The dismissive tone when referring to the Prince of Tang. The confidence that he did not need such status.

Pieces clicked into place.

There was only one possibility.

"You... you are also of the imperial clan," Zhu Yujian said slowly. "And your status is higher than mine."

Zhu Piaoling jerked upright. "You figured that out?"

"That Shaanxi accent," Zhu Yujian continued. "You are the heir apparent to the Prince of Qin. Zhu Cunji."

"Stop!" Zhu Piaoling exclaimed. "Did I not just tell you that one does not speak such things aloud? Keep it in your heart! Why must you say everything directly?"

Zhu Yujian asked calmly, "Will you silence me?"

"If I wished to kill you, why save you?" Zhu Piaoling shot back. "Just keep quiet, understood?"

Zhu Yujian almost laughed.

"I will try not to expose you."

Now that he understood who this man truly was, a strange calm settled over him. Zhu Cunji's status far surpassed that of the Prince of Tang. If he wished to rebel, he would not need Zhu Yujian as a banner.

Perhaps he truly had only meant to save him.

"Brother..." Zhu Yujian began, then froze.

He suddenly remembered that by seniority he was of an older generation within the clan. The word felt awkward on his tongue.

After a long pause, he corrected himself. "Zhu Piaoling. Did you also consider raising troops to aid the emperor, but lacked the courage?"

Zhu Cunji did not deny it.

"I did consider it. But I am not as brave as you. I did not dare act openly. And now... it is no longer my place."

"Not your place?" Zhu Yujian frowned. "What does that mean?"

Zhu Cunji only smiled faintly and did not answer.

The carriage continued its journey.

Several days later, they arrived in Luoyang.

It was Zhu Yujian's first visit, despite how close it lay to Nanyang. The bustling streets, the crowds, the lively markets lifted his mood.

He lifted a corner of the curtain slightly, enjoying the sight.

Then his heart nearly stopped.

Riding ahead on a tall and magnificent horse was a military officer clad in shanwen armor, surrounded by an imposing escort.

It was Gao Jie.

Zhu Yujian's breath caught in his throat.

If he were recognized here, everything would be over.

He lowered the curtain slowly.

Please do not come to inspect this carriage.

Chapter 1086 I Chose the Right Side

Zhu Yujian jerked his head back into the carriage as if burned, fingers snapping the curtain shut with more force than necessary.

Had he not reacted like that, the carriage would have blended naturally into the flow of Luoyang's crowded streets. Merchants shouted prices, mule carts creaked forward in uneven lines, hawkers waved skewers of steaming food under passing noses, and soldiers patrolled with lazy authority. In such chaos, a passing carriage meant nothing.

But the instant he ducked back and pulled the curtain tight, the movement cut through the crowd like a stone tossed into still water.

And Gao Jie noticed.

Inept in many things, perhaps. Subtle in courtly matters, certainly not. But he was still a general, and once upon a time he had been a drifting rebel with no stable ground beneath his feet. A man who survived that kind of life learned to distrust shadows, sudden movements, and especially people who tried too hard not to be seen.

His eyes narrowed.

"Hm? That carriage is strange. The moment they saw me, someone inside hurriedly pulled the curtain shut." His tone hardened. "There's a problem. A big one. Lads, stop that carriage. Search it. There's something illicit inside."

Soldiers moved at once, stepping into the road with practiced coordination. Spears lowered. The traffic stuttered to a halt.

The carriage stopped.

Inside, Zhu Yujian felt his limbs turn cold. His heart pounded so loudly he feared it might be heard through the wood panels.

"It's over," he whispered hoarsely. "We're going to be caught."

"What are you panicking for?" Zhu Cunji replied, sounding almost amused. "I'll handle this."

Without waiting for further argument, he lifted the curtain and leaned his straw-hatted head out of the window, his posture relaxed as though this were an accidental street reunion.

"Well now," he said with a lazy smile, "isn't this General Gao? What are you doing blocking my carriage?"

Gao Jie frowned at the unfamiliar face. "Who are you? Do we know each other?"

From inside the carriage, Zhu Piaoling chuckled lightly before answering in a tone that carried just enough theatrical flair to feel deliberate.

"The Roaming Hero of the Four Seas, Zhu Piaoling. Surely you have heard my name echoing through the martial world?"

Gao Jie genuinely had not.

He had met Wang Jiayin in person. He had seen Zijing Liang. He had crossed paths with the Chuang Wang and the Chuang Jiang. Those were names that carried weight, names that shook battlefields and rearranged provinces. But this so-called Roaming Hero of the Four Seas seemed to have risen from some obscure corner of Jianghu he had never bothered to visit.

"I can see from your expression you do not recognize me," Zhu Piaoling continued smoothly. "No matter. Simply ask Mr. Bai Yuan. He will tell you."

That name made Gao Jie hesitate.

Mr. Bai Yuan was not someone to be dismissed lightly. The circles Gao Jie moved in were not necessarily the same as Bai Yuan's. It was entirely possible that different layers of the martial world produced different heroes, and not knowing one did not automatically make him insignificant.

Gao Jie weighed the matter for a moment, then stepped back.

"Very well. Let them pass."

The soldiers withdrew. The road cleared. The carriage resumed its journey.

Only after they had rolled a safe distance away did Zhu Yujian finally exhale, his shoulders sagging as though a blade had been lifted from his neck.

"That was close," he murmured. "You truly have many friends in the martial world. I never expected you to be acquainted with Mr. Bai Yuan. I have seen him fight. He is extraordinary. Even his militia seems stronger than the regular army."

Zhu Cunji's chest swelled with pride.

"Ever since I chose the right side," he said, "the world has felt completely different."

Zhu Yujian caught the phrase immediately.

"The right side? You are on Mr. Bai Yuan's side? And which side is he on? The Donglin Party? The Eunuch Party?"

Zhu Cunji laughed, the sound full and unrestrained.

"Those factions? Forget them. Do not just stare at the street before your eyes. Raise your gaze. Look beyond the rooftops."

Zhu Yujian followed his instruction and lifted his head.

Only then did he truly see them.

In the heart of Luoyang stood two colossal glass bottles, towering more than thirty meters high, rising like transparent pillars toward the sky. Sunlight glinted off their surfaces. They loomed over tiled roofs and wooden beams alike, dwarfing everything around them.

Zhu Yujian sucked in a sharp breath.

"What... are those?"

"Immortal treasures," Zhu Piaoling replied, his tone deliberately grand. "And like Mr. Bai Yuan, I now stand with the immortals. We are under divine protection."

Zhu Yujian stared at the massive glass structures, unable to reconcile what he saw with the world he thought he understood. Objects of such scale and clarity did not belong to mortal craftsmanship.

Zhu Piaoling guided the carriage directly toward the base of the soy sauce bottle, where a Soy Sauce Bottling Plant had been established. Normally, entry was restricted, guarded carefully to prevent unauthorized access.

At the gate, however, they encountered a sailor from the Xiaolangdi militia. The man had once ferried Zhu Piaoling to Nanjing and recognized him as someone favored by Dao Xuan Tianzun. His attitude immediately shifted to respectful familiarity, and he waved them inside without hesitation.

Zhu Piaoling led Zhu Yujian through the facility with the bearing of an inspecting official.

Inside, workers moved efficiently between massive vats, ladling dark, fragrant soy sauce into ceramic bottles. The scent filled the air, rich and savory, clinging to clothes and hair alike.

All of it was immortal soy sauce bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Yet the packaging varied dramatically.

Premium soy sauce, intended for the wealthy elite, was poured into elegant ceramic bottles adorned with vivid blue-and-white porcelain patterns so lifelike they seemed almost painted by spirits. On each bottle, the words "Immortal Brew" were inscribed in bold characters, lending an air of prestige that matched the price.

Each bottle cost several taels of silver, and the rich paid without hesitation. For them, the bottle itself was already a collectible treasure.

Meanwhile, the economy version was packaged in plain earthenware containers, simple but sturdy, designed with practicality in mind. As long as they did not leak, appearance was irrelevant. These sold for a handful of copper coins, affordable even to common households.

There was also a special batch prepared for foreign markets.

The bottles were sturdy, built to survive long journeys, but visually unremarkable. Inscribed upon them was a peculiar phrase:

"Five millennia of heritage, handcrafted by artisans of the Great Eastern Nation."

Even Zhu Piaoling blinked at that.

"Is this not a divine gift from Dao Xuan Tianzun? How did it become five millennia of heritage? And handcrafted by artisans? That sounds like complete fabrication."

The factory manager chuckled.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun personally instructed us to label it this way. He said it would bewilder foreigners and allow us to fleece foreign markets. We do not fully understand either, but we obey."

Zhu Piaoling stared at the bottles for a moment longer before deciding that understanding the thinking of immortals was above his pay grade.

After completing the tour, they exited.

"Well?" he asked Zhu Yujian. "Impressive, is it not?"

Zhu Yujian nodded slowly.

"I do not fully comprehend what I have seen," he admitted, "but it is undeniably formidable."

They reentered the carriage and departed Luoyang, heading toward the Xiaolangdi Water Stronghold.

Upon arrival, they spotted Bai Yuan in the distance, personally training a group of fresh recruits. His voice carried across the grounds as he corrected stances and adjusted grips with patient authority.

Zhu Yujian felt a surge of emotion and nearly stepped forward at once, but hesitation stopped him.

"If I approach him openly, will it bring trouble upon him?"

Zhu Piaoling waved a dismissive hand.

"This is a militia-controlled military zone. Unauthorized persons cannot enter. Your presence here will not leak."

Reassured, Zhu Yujian walked forward and bowed respectfully from a distance.

"Mr. Bai, it has been a long time. Your bearing remains as splendid as ever."

Bai Yuan turned, surprise flickering across his face.

"Prince of Tang? Wait... the news reported that you were..." His gaze shifted to Zhu Piaoling, understanding dawning. "So it was you. You rescued him?"

Zhu Piaoling straightened proudly.

"That is correct."

Zhu Yujian had expected reproach. Instead, Bai Yuan merely smiled faintly.

"A good rescue."

He turned back to Zhu Yujian and returned the salute.

"Your Highness, your initiative in raising troops to support the emperor was commendable. The imperial clan's rigid rules are many, and you have indeed suffered injustice."

Zhu Yujian let out a long breath, as though a weight he had carried alone was finally acknowledged.

"To have you understand me, Mr. Bai, moves me deeply."

At that moment, a young scholar stepped forward from the side, eyes bright with conviction.

"The rise and fall of the realm concerns every common man," he said solemnly. "I am Gu Yanwu. Upon hearing the Prince of Tang's story, I was profoundly stirred. By all logic, Your Highness should have been the least inclined to raise troops for the emperor, yet for the salvation of the nation you advanced without hesitation. You are a model for our generation."

He bowed.

"I wish to record your deeds in a book, so that future generations may learn to do good without seeking personal gain."

And for the first time in many days, Zhu Yujian felt that perhaps his choices, reckless and costly though they had been, were not entirely in vain.

Chapter 1087 Problems in Sichuan

At Gu Yanwu's earnest declaration, Bai Yuan could not help but chuckle.

"Brother Gu," he said, eyes gleaming with mischief, "why not turn it into a proper stage production? Or better yet, a film. Let His Royal Highness the Prince of Tang play himself and recount his true story. We can adjust the ending a little. Instead of being rescued by us, he arranges for loyal retainers to save him. After that, he wanders through mountains and forests, living freely as a cheerful commoner. What do you think?"

Gu Yanwu's eyes widened, the scholar in him instantly captivated.

"That actually sounds rather compelling."

Bai Yuan grew more animated as the idea took shape. "Naturally it does. Every story needs a villain. The greatest villain would be the Emperor himself. We can get Chen Qianhu to portray him. He would absolutely capture the role."

Gu Yanwu burst out laughing, nearly doubling over. "Have someone portray the Emperor as a villain? That would be treason enough to condemn us all. No, no, that absolutely will not do."

Bai Yuan stroked his chin thoughtfully, adjusting the concept with effortless flexibility. "Very well, then we remove the Emperor from the stage entirely. Instead, we make an evil Jinyiwei centurion the main antagonist. The entire film will revolve around his relentless pursuit of the Prince of Tang, and the Prince's ingenious escapes through wit and courage. Suspenseful, dramatic, full of tension."

Gu Yanwu nodded slowly, clearly envisioning the narrative structure already forming in his mind. "Now that does sound promising. I will have to give it serious thought."

In just a few casual exchanges, the two had practically outlined an entire screenplay.

Zhu Yujian, standing nearby, listened in stunned confusion.

"What exactly are you two discussing?" he asked, unable to follow how his near-execution had transformed into entertainment material.

Zhu Piaoling, feeling faintly indignant, folded her arms. "I have known you both for years. Not once have you written a story about me. Zhu Yujian shows up, and immediately you are crafting a film centered around him. I find this highly unfair. I demand a biography of my own."

The group was still bickering cheerfully when something utterly unexpected occurred.

The gold-embroidered statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Bai Yuan's chest suddenly spoke.

"Make preparations. A large number of refugees will be arriving shortly by train."

Everyone immediately straightened and bowed in unison.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Zhu Yujian stared in horror.

"The embroidery... it spoke."

Bai Yuan reacted first. "Refugees arriving by train? That is unusual. The railway runs from Xi'an to Xiaolangdi. Are refugees not being resettled near Xi'an? Why transport them specifically here?"

The golden embroidered figure responded calmly.

"These refugees originate from Nanyang in Henan. Because of the severe drought, they fled toward Sichuan. We discovered them in Lingwu Cave in Sichuan and are now sending them back to Henan by train. Refugees are best resettled in their native regions."

Bai Yuan nodded. "Understood. We will arrange work for them and settle them in Xiaolangdi, Xin'an County, Hejin County, and Luoyang. Once the bandits in Nanyang are suppressed, they can return to their original homes."

The embroidered Tianzun gave no further reply and fell silent once more.

Bai Yuan's expression brightened immediately. "Continue your discussion. I must prepare for their arrival."

With that, he hurried off to organize manpower and supplies.

Meanwhile, Zhu Yujian remained rooted in place, staring blankly at Bai Yuan's chest.

"The embroidery spoke," he repeated faintly.

Zhu Piaoling grabbed his arm and tugged him along. "Come, let us go watch the spectacle."

"The embroidery... spoke."

"These are refugees from Nanyang," Zhu Piaoling pressed. "Is that not your own domain? Should you not see your people?"

"The embroidery spoke."

Her patience snapped.

She raised her hand and delivered a solid smack to the back of his head.

Only after the sound rang out did she freeze, suddenly remembering that Zhu Yujian was technically two generations her senior, making her action a rather textbook case of striking an elder.

Meanwhile, far to the southwest.

Leading his troops out of Daning, Cheng Xu finally reached Kuizhou.

Kuizhou, located in eastern Sichuan, was no ordinary town. In the historical epic Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Zhuge Liang had once deployed the Eight Trigrams Formation here to repel Lu Xun. The famed Baidi City lay within its territory. For centuries, it had been considered a critical gateway into Sichuan.

Now it lay in ruins.

The city walls had been torn down by bandits. Houses were blackened skeletons. Streets were silent except for wind stirring debris. The local population had long since been slaughtered or scattered.

Scenes once witnessed in Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Henan were repeating themselves here in Sichuan, confronting the Gao Family Village Militia once again.

Cheng Xu exhaled softly.

Flat Rabbit, standing beside him, clenched his fists until the knuckles whitened.

At that moment, a White Pole Soldier rushed forward from the shattered remains of the city.

"You have finally arrived!" he called out excitedly upon seeing the bright banner of Dao Xuan Tianzun.  
"Instructor He, it has been some time."

This soldier had previously followed Ma Xianglin in Shanxi, fighting bandits side by side with the Gao Family Village Militia. He had even tasted their luncheon meat, an experience he clearly remembered fondly. Seeing the Tianzun's banner stirred immediate warmth and familiarity within him.

"General Qin sent me to meet you," he explained.

Cheng Xu asked directly, "The situation in Sichuan must be extremely dire."

The White Pole Soldier nodded grimly. "After the Sichuan Commander Hou Liangzhu fell in battle, government forces collapsed. The Governor is incompetent, hiding in Chengdu and trembling in fear. The rebels have already seized thirty-eight prefectures and counties. Kuizhou is merely one among many."

"Thirty-eight?" Cheng Xu's expression darkened. He had expected urgency, but not devastation on this scale.

He frowned. "The Sichuan army is renowned as an elite force. Why did its defenses crumble even faster than Henan's once the bandits invaded?"

The White Pole Soldier could not answer.

At that moment, the mass-produced avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun sat upright in the transport vehicle and sighed.

"There are three primary reasons."

Everyone turned to listen.

"First, the terrain. The mountainous landscape greatly benefits the mobility of rebel forces. Second, the economy. Aside from the Chengdu Plain, most of Sichuan is impoverished. In poor regions, rebels can more easily coerce or recruit common people. Third..." The Tianzun paused slightly. "Separatist forces."

Sichuan's mountainous geography and ethnic diversity had long made centralized governance difficult. The court appointed numerous *tusi*, native chieftains, such as Qin Liangyu of the Shizhu Tujia. These leaders nominally obeyed imperial authority but in practice governed semi-independently.

In times of stability, the system functioned. In times of chaos, fragmentation flourished.

Many such local powers prioritized their own survival over broader national stability.

"Of course," the Tianzun added evenly, "Qin Liangyu is an exception. She consistently prioritizes the greater good."

Cheng Xu absorbed the explanation, then asked candidly, "What should we do?"

"It is both difficult and simple," Li Daoxuan replied.

"The difficult part lies in persuading the various ethnic groups to consider the larger picture and cooperate in restoring order."

He continued calmly, "The simple part is economic development. Improve infrastructure. Build transportation networks. Encourage cultural exchange between Han and minority groups. When people have stable livelihoods and share mutual interests, separatism loses its foundation."

Cheng Xu's eyes lit with understanding.

"So whenever our militia conquers a new region, the Gao Family Village's economic methods must follow immediately."

"Precisely," Li Daoxuan confirmed. "We have already begun introducing crops suitable for Sichuan's terrain at the Tujia stronghold of Wan Shou Zhai. From there, we will expand to other mountain settlements."

He added, "Shanxi is largely stabilized. It is time for San Shier to be transferred here."

At that command, San Shier, the chief administrator of Gao Family Village's internal affairs, departed from Taiyuan in Shanxi and began his journey toward Sichuan.

The next stage of reform had begun.

Chapter 1088 Nothing But Ba Mountains Kaixian County.

Kaixian County.

In later generations, it would be renamed Kaizhou, but at this moment in time it was still known by its older name, tucked deep within eastern Sichuan.

The population here was a patchwork. Roughly forty percent were Han Chinese. About ten percent belonged to the Miao, Yi, and Zhuang ethnic groups. The remaining half were known collectively as the Ba people, most of whom were Tujia.

Yet the Tujia of Kaixian County did not fall under the authority of Qin Liangyu.

Qin Liangyu governed the Tujia of Shizhu. Her command did not extend here.

In Kaixian, the Tujia Pacification Commissioner was a man named Ran Ke.

Unlike Qin Liangyu, Ran Ke was no fiery general burning with loyalty to the Great Ming. He was the very definition of a small mountain chieftain, content to guard his modest territory and enjoy a quiet life. As

long as his own lands were peaceful, he saw little reason to concern himself with the turmoil of the wider realm.

He believed firmly in sweeping the snow from his own doorstep and ignoring the frost on others' roofs.

When the rebel army first pushed into Sichuan and reached Daning Prefecture, he did not mobilize. When Kuizhou City came under siege, he offered no reinforcements. Even when Ma Xianglin led the White Pole Soldiers through Kaixian in pursuit of the rebels, Ran Ke stood aside and lent no aid.

Let the world beyond his mountains drown in chaos if it wished.

But now the flood had reached his door.

Clad in mountain-patterned armor, Ran Ke stood atop the battered walls of Kaixian County. Around him were Tujia soldiers gripping long wooden spears soaked in tung oil, each shaft tipped with a small iron spearhead. The weapons were similar in style to those of the White Pole Soldiers, though these men were not part of that famed corps.

The spear shafts were impressively long yet surprisingly light, designed for reach rather than brute force.

Facing the advancing rebels, the Tujia soldiers locked their spears together and thrust them outward, forming a dense bristling wall of iron points.

It might have worked against charging infantry.

It did not work against firearms.

The rebels brought forward a Three-Eyed Arquebus. Three sharp reports split the air in rapid succession.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The formation shuddered. Men collapsed where they stood. Blood darkened the stone beneath their feet.

Elsewhere along the walls, the county militia under the magistrate fared no better. Their casualties mounted just as quickly.

Kaixian's already modest walls trembled under pressure, looking as though they might crumble at any moment.

A Tujia soldier rushed to Ran Ke's side, panic written across his face.

"General, we cannot hold much longer. We must abandon the county seat and retreat into the Ba Mountains."

The Ba Mountains were the ancestral homeland of the Ba people.

In truth, Sichuan was filled with Ba Mountains. Every peak seemed to claim that name. Each rise in the terrain sheltered a different chieftain, each carving out a small independent domain amid the vast ranges.

Ran Ke let out a bitter breath.

"Have our reinforcements not arrived?"

"There are no reinforcements," the soldier replied desperately. "Hou Liangzhu is dead. The authorities will not come. We requested aid from Xinning County, but their magistrate has no troops. The other chieftains say that when the rebels attacked them, we offered no help. Now they refuse to help us."

Ran Ke cursed under his breath.

He looked out over the sea of rebels surging toward his walls and felt the weight of his earlier indifference press down on him.

"So this is the price," he muttered.

After a long pause, he said, "Very well. We retreat into the Ba Mountains. The magistrate has a duty to defend the county seat to the last. We chieftains do not."

Even as he spoke, his gaze drifted toward the city behind him.

Many Tujia commoners still lived inside these walls.

If he withdrew, the rebels would slaughter the inhabitants and burn the city. His mountain stronghold would lose access to trade and supplies. Food would become scarce. Daily necessities would vanish. Life in the mountains would grow harsh beyond measure.

He did not truly want to abandon the county.

But what choice remained?

He drew breath to issue the retreat order.

At that very moment, shouts erupted from the distance.

A thousand-strong force appeared as if conjured from thin air. At their head strode a figure with a gleaming blade raised high. In his left hand he lifted a strange iron tube to his lips and bellowed through it with astonishing volume.

"Your Lord Rabbit has arrived! Rebels attacking Kaixian County, prepare to die!"

Flat Rabbit charged forward without hesitation.

The rebels, fully committed to their siege, were thrown into confusion by the sudden assault from behind. They faltered, unsure whether to press the attack or turn to confront this new threat.

Their leader roared orders, but the command structure was clumsy. Half their forces wheeled around to face the newcomers. The other half stubbornly continued attacking the walls.

Then came the thunder.

Musket fire cracked in disciplined volleys.

Hand grenades detonated with deafening force.

From atop the walls, Ran Ke saw nothing but rolling white smoke and flashes of fire. The rebel formation dissolved into chaos.

Some screamed. Others turned and ran. Many were trampled by their own comrades in the scramble.

The pressure on Kaixian's walls eased almost instantly.

Ran Ke's eyes lit with relief.

"No retreat! No retreat!" he shouted. "Reinforcements have arrived. Hold the line. Hold fast!"

The rebels attempted to swing their Three-Eyed Arquebuses toward the newcomers, but before they could even close the distance, another volley of musket fire cut them down where they stood.

Realizing they faced a disciplined and heavily armed force, the bandits did what bandits did best.

They fled.

They scattered into the mountains with impressive speed, vanishing into ravines and forest paths as though absorbed by the earth itself.

Flat Rabbit's men pursued briefly, but musket-bearing troops were not well suited for extended mountain chases. After driving the rebels deep into the hills, they withdrew in orderly fashion.

Shortly thereafter, Flat Rabbit approached Kaixian County.

"Open the gates!" Ran Ke called.

The magistrate gave the order. The heavy gates creaked open.

Ran Ke hurried out to greet the savior of his city.

"This humble official is Ran Ke, Pacification Commissioner of Kaixian County. May I ask the esteemed general's name?"

Flat Rabbit grinned broadly.

"My name is Flat Rabbit, Captain of the Third Company of the Shaanxi Relief Militia."

Ran Ke blinked.

A militia?

He had heard of imperial armies. He had heard of provincial garrisons. He had never heard of a civilian militia charging across provinces to provide relief.

Flat Rabbit laughed at his expression.

"Look at that face. Can a militia not come to help? I just learned a particularly cool saying from a very learned fellow. Listen carefully. Every common man bears responsibility for the fate of the world. Impressive, is it not?"

Ran Ke's facial muscles twitched.

"It is... quite impressive."

Flat Rabbit beamed and slapped him on the shoulder.

"As long as it sounds cool, that is enough. Your Lord Rabbit is the coolest of all."

Ran Ke stood there, momentarily speechless.

The Pacification Commissioner, the de facto ruler of the Tujia in Kaixian, found himself utterly at a loss for words after only a few exchanges.

After a pause, Flat Rabbit asked, "How long have these bandits plagued you?"

"Half a month," Ran Ke replied. "At first they merely plundered the surrounding mountain villages. In the past two days, they turned their attention to the county seat."

Flat Rabbit nodded thoughtfully.

"They have likely stripped the villages of all food. With nothing left to loot, they had no choice but to attack the city."

Ran Ke sighed. "The county is now crowded with refugees from those villages. Others have fled into the Ba Mountains."

Flat Rabbit blinked.

"There is a Ba Mountain here too? I passed through a village earlier, and they told me their mountain was also called Ba Mountain."

Ran Ke gestured broadly toward the surrounding peaks.

"These are all Ba Mountains."

Flat Rabbit stared at the endless ridgelines, each rising like waves frozen in stone.

"Aaargh!" he groaned dramatically. "You cannot do this. Outsiders already get lost in these mountains. If every single peak has the same name, how are we supposed to navigate? Give them different names at least!"

Ran Ke had no immediate answer to that.

For the first time in days, however, the walls of Kaixian were no longer trembling, and the Ba Mountains stood not as a retreat of desperation, but as a backdrop to unexpected salvation.

Chapter 1089 Transportation Routes

Grumbling was one thing. Reality was another.

Flat Rabbit led his army into Kaixian with the expression of a man who had just finished arguing with the sky and lost.

The county magistrate and the Tujia Pacification Commissioner, Ran Ke, practically sprinted out of the yamen to receive him. Both men bowed so low their hats nearly scraped the dirt.

Their smiles were polite.

Their eyes were terrified.

If this relief force packed up and left, the rebels would circle back like hungry wolves. Kaixian would not survive a second bite.

Flat Rabbit entered the city.

What he saw made him freeze.

The streets were swollen with refugees. Families huddled under broken eaves. Children clung to bundles larger than themselves. Old women stared blankly at the sky as if waiting for someone to explain what went wrong.

Just as Ran Ke had said, villagers from the surrounding mountains had flooded into the county seat.

It was the same old story.

When bandits ravaged Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Henan, the peasants ran. They always ran. They abandoned ancestral graves, fields, houses built by three generations of hands. When steel and fire came, dignity packed up and left first.

Flat Rabbit opened his mouth.

"Save—"

He did not get to finish.

The militia battalion commander leaned in and whispered urgently, "This is Sichuan, not home. Our supplies are thin. We cannot help them yet. We have to wait for the transport convoy."

Flat Rabbit blinked. "Where is the convoy?"

"Still crawling somewhere between here and regret," the commander muttered. "We barely made it ourselves. Lost the road twice. Took three detours. One steam car nearly died climbing a slope that looked innocent from far away. You think the transport team is gliding here on clouds?"

Flat Rabbit: "..."

Silence.

It was not that he did not want to help.

It was that wanting did not produce grain.

In half of Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Henan, Gao Family Village's transport convoys were already running smoothly. Their vehicles rolled confidently along concrete roads like iron buffalo that feared nothing.

But this was Sichuan.

Concrete roads had not yet arrived.

Here, the steam cars relied on their miserable off-road ability and sheer stubbornness. The official roads twisted like snakes with bad tempers. Steep climbs that made engines wheeze. Sudden drops that tested faith. S-curves sharp enough to make drivers question their life choices. Sections so narrow that two goats meeting head-on would need diplomatic negotiations.

The transport convoys had to move together with the engineer corps.

Repair.

Fill.

Reinforce.

Push.

Pray.

Only then could supplies crawl forward a few more li.

Flat Rabbit clenched his fists and forced confidence into his voice.

"Endure a few more days," he told the refugees loudly. "When the convoy arrives, I will make sure you eat properly. Meat if we have it. Rice until you are full."

The crowd stirred.

Hope was a dangerous thing. But it was better than nothing.

High above the Yangtze River Three Gorges, a mass-produced avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun stood at the mountain's edge, golden robe gleaming in the wind.

Beside him stood Cheng Xu.

"Is Dao Xuan Tianzun admiring the scenery?" Cheng Xu asked softly.

Li Daoxuan did not look at the water.

"I am studying shipping routes."

Cheng Xu's expression sharpened. "Transportation."

"Yes."

Li Daoxuan's voice turned calm and analytical.

"If we cannot solve transportation, we cannot save Sichuan."

His Field of View Expansion had not yet reached Sichuan. He could not directly drop supplies like a benevolent cheat code from the sky. The little people had to move everything with their own hands.

And hands were limited.

Sichuan's terrain was cruel. Steam cars lost half their life climbing a single mountain road. Land transport was slow, fragile, and exhausting.

Water.

Only water would work.

Li Daoxuan gazed at the Yangtze.

As a native of Chongqing, he understood the river's temper.

In both ancient and modern times, ships could reliably reach Chongqing. The true difficulty was the Three Gorges section. Once past that throat of stone and current, the rest of the route was workable.

If they relied on Yangtze shipping, they could support at least half of Sichuan's logistical needs.

But one problem remained.

"How do we get supplies into the Yangtze efficiently?"

If Gao Family Village sent goods down the Yellow River, then cut through the Huai River before entering the Yangtze, it would be absurdly long. A logistical pilgrimage. Grain would rot. Time would bleed away.

Li Daoxuan frowned.

"Is there a shorter path?"

Cheng Xu suddenly snapped his fingers.

"What about the Han River? It has been navigable since ancient times. From Hanzhong Prefecture downstream all the way to Hankou. The entire route is established. We send supplies from Hanzhong by ship to Wuhan, enter the Yangtze there, then sail upstream into Sichuan. It looks like a detour on paper, but it is far faster than dragging steam cars through mountains."

Li Daoxuan's eyes lit up.

"Hanzhong."

The name tugged at memory.

"Which of our people mentioned Hanzhong before?"

Cheng Xu slapped his thigh.

"Zhu Cunji. The heir of the Prince of Qin. He was building the West Han Railway. From Xi'an to Hanzhong Prefecture. I wonder if it's complete."

Li Daoxuan shifted his perspective instantly, glanced back toward Shaanxi, then returned.

He laughed.

"It is already operational."

On a grand train rumbling toward Xi'an, two men in bamboo hats sat side by side.

It made the entire carriage feel like a Jianghu gathering that had mistakenly boarded public transportation.

Zhu Cunji sat straight, looking unbearably pleased with himself.

Beside him, Zhu Yujian stared at everything like a caveman who had just discovered lightning was optional.

"So such a thing exists in this world!" Zhu Yujian exclaimed. "It runs without horses! It devours distance! Incredible! Absolutely incredible!"

Zhu Cunji puffed up.

"Incredible, yes? I own one."

Zhu Yujian's jaw dropped.

"You own one?"

Zhu Cunji raised two fingers.

"I own two."

The carriage felt quieter.

"How did you acquire such divine iron beasts?" Zhu Yujian whispered.

Zhu Cunji rubbed his fingers together in the universal gesture of silver.

"Bought them."

Zhu Yujian: "..."

Of course.

The Prince of Tang's manor was poor enough to argue with candle prices. The Prince of Qin's manor, however, swam in wealth.

Zhu Yujian hesitated. "This must cost tens of thousands of silver taels."

Zhu Cunji burst into laughter.

"Tens of thousands? Even a hundred thousand taels would not cover it. The iron carriages are nothing. The real cost is the tracks. Laying the road beneath them. Iron. Sleepers. Labor. Endless labor."

Zhu Yujian nodded slowly. "That is no small undertaking."

Zhu Cunji leaned back smugly.

"And I have two."

His laughter rolled through the carriage like a man who had finally found a hobby that justified his allowance.

At that very peak of pride, the golden-threaded Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidered on his chest spoke.

"Zhu Cunji."

Zhu Cunji nearly leapt out of his seat.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

He bowed hurriedly.

Zhu Yujian, once terrified of this phenomenon, now considered himself among the faithful. He bowed too, trying to look composed and not like someone greeting a talking embroidery pattern.

Li Daoxuan's voice was calm.

"The militia requires your West Han Railway to transport a batch of supplies."

Zhu Cunji's face lit up like a festival lantern.

"My railway can serve Dao Xuan Tianzun? That is glorious! Please use it freely! If my possessions can aid you, then who dares call me useless? I am the most useful man in the world!"

Zhu Yujian glanced sideways at him.

The most useful man in the world had discovered railways yesterday.

Li Daoxuan's tone hardened slightly.

"It cannot be used for free."

Zhu Cunji blinked. "I would not dare take money from you. That silver would burn my hands."

"You must take it," Li Daoxuan said firmly. "Your West Han Railway is privately owned. It is not like the village-operated West Luo Railway. If the village uses private property without payment, order will collapse in the future."

The carriage fell silent.

"This railway," Li Daoxuan continued, "will be the precedent. From now on, cooperation between village-operated enterprises and private enterprises must involve proper payment. No free use. No favoritism."

He paused.

"Without rules, there is no order."

Zhu Cunji swallowed.

For the first time, the weight of ownership settled on his shoulders.

This was no longer a toy for pride.

It was infrastructure.

And infrastructure, in times like these, was the difference between starvation and survival.

Chapter 1090 No Patronage

Xi'an North Station was roaring like a steel beehive.

Mountains of supplies were stacked in disciplined chaos. Crates of grain. Barrels of salt. Bundles of cloth. Medical chests. Tools. Spare parts. Everything labeled. Everything recorded.

Wang Tang stood at the center of it all with a thick stack of manifests in his hand, looking less like a merchant and more like a general commanding an army of paperwork.

Each time a batch of goods was loaded onto the train, he ticked a line.

Check.

Next.

Check.

Beside him, two figures in wide-brimmed bamboo hats leaned suspiciously close.

They were trying to look casual.

They were failing.

Wang Tang did not even look up. "If you two want to read the list, just read it. There's no need to act like thieves scouting a treasury."

Zhu Cunji inhaled sharply. "Don't call me anything official! If someone hears, my identity will be exposed. Call me Great Hero."

Zhu Yujian added calmly, "I am no longer a prince. I have been demoted to a commoner."

Wang Tang coughed to hide his laughter. "Very well. Great Heroes. What exactly are you peeking at?"

Zhu Cunji lowered his voice dramatically. "Isn't this military intelligence? How can I read it openly?"

Wang Tang finally looked at him.

"Military intelligence? No. These supplies will enter Sichuan under the name of 'private aid.' The decree came from Dao Xuan Tianzun himself. Local gentry and wealthy households have jointly signed documents claiming these goods as their donations."

He tapped the manifest.

"If it is private aid, then it is not a secret. Anyone may inspect it."

Zhu Yujian fell silent for a moment.

Then he sighed.

"You handle matters with such care. Avoiding imperial suspicion at every turn. Compared to this, I was truly foolish."

His voice grew softer.

"When I raised troops to assist the emperor, I could have used the militia's name. Provided support from behind the curtain. Instead, I mobilized the Prince of Tang's personal guard directly."

He smiled bitterly.

"And invited imperial suspicion."

Zhu Cunji clicked his tongue. "Exactly. You should have done as I do. Dress like a knight-errant. Wear a large bamboo hat. Adopt a heroic alias. Lead hired warriors in righteous chaos."

He puffed out his chest.

"Never move as a prince. Always move as Jianghu."

Zhu Yujian shook his head. "If I had done that, I would have looked like a bandit. If I had encountered Master Bai on the way, he might have shot me with a flintlock before I could explain."

Zhu Cunji considered this carefully.

"That is... possible."

Zhu Yujian sighed again. "If the name is not correct, words lack authority. If the name is correct, it invites danger. Being a prince is exhausting."

Wang Tang smiled faintly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun calls this a systemic flaw. To resolve it, a more advanced social system is required. Unfortunately, I only completed middle school. I cannot explain what that system looks like."

Both former princes looked at him as if he had just described a mythical beast.

Wang Tang continued, "Gu Yanwu has many thoughts on this matter. Dao Xuan Tianzun values him highly."

Zhu Yujian remembered that spirited young scholar at Xiaolangdi Water Fortress. Sharp eyes. Quick tongue.

The kind of man who questioned foundations.

Zhu Cunji meanwhile leaned openly over the manifest now that permission had been granted.

He read line by line.

Then his expression shifted.

"There is a problem."

Wang Tang raised a brow. "What problem?"

Zhu Cunji tapped the paper.

"These supplies are labeled as private aid. That means they have no patronage."

Wang Tang blinked. "Patronage?"

"Protection," Zhu Cunji clarified. "A powerful name attached to them."

Understanding dawned on Wang Tang's face.

"You mean... as they pass through imperial jurisdictions on the way to Sichuan, corrupt officials may intercept them?"

Zhu Cunji nodded solemnly. "Precisely."

Zhu Yujian added, "If these supplies were sent under the banner of a high official or powerful clan, someone stronger would covet them. If under a prince's name, few would dare touch them."

He paused.

"But any prince capable of sending such vast quantities would instantly attract the Emperor's suspicion."

He spread his hands helplessly.

"Systemic flaw."

Wang Tang stared at the mountain of supplies.

Then he grinned.

"Yes. It is a problem."

The two princes leaned closer.

"But it is not a big problem."

Zhu Yujian's eyes widened. "Not big?"

Wang Tang shrugged casually. "If someone tries to intercept disaster relief supplies, we will fight our way through."

Zhu Yujian inhaled sharply. "Fight? Would that not invite imperial suspicion again?"

Wang Tang shook his head.

"These are relief supplies. If officials attempt to embezzle them, they must do so quietly. Secretly. If they reach out and get slapped for it, do you think they will announce it publicly?"

He smiled.

"They would never report to the Emperor that they were beaten while attempting to steal disaster relief grain."

Zhu Yujian thought about it.

"That... is true."

"They would fabricate other charges," Wang Tang continued. "Invent accusations. But one lie requires countless more to sustain it. We now have civil officials under Dao Xuan Tianzun's banner who specialize in paperwork warfare."

He tapped his temple.

"Bureaucratic wrangling? We do not fear them."

Zhu Yujian clasped his hands respectfully.

He said nothing more.

He had seen armies.

Now he saw systems.

Beside him, Zhu Cunji's eyes sparkled.

"In that case, I must join this excitement."

Wang Tang turned slowly. "No."

"I will join as a private aid volunteer," Zhu Cunji insisted. "That is reasonable."

"No."

Zhu Cunji pointed dramatically at the station.

"This train station is mine. The trains carrying these supplies are mine. Dao Xuan Tianzun himself declared it a private enterprise. Whether you agree or not, I am already involved."

He crossed his arms.

"There is nothing you can do."

Wang Tang opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Opened it again.

Nothing came out.

There was truly no cure for a wealthy enthusiast with infrastructure.

He sighed. "Fine. Do as you wish."

Zhu Cunji beamed. "Mission accomplished."

Zhu Yujian lowered his voice. "You intend to leave Xi'an openly like this? Are you not afraid someone will notice your absence? You even traveled to Henan to rescue me. Can you truly disappear for so long?"

Zhu Cunji smiled mysteriously.

"Come."

He pulled Zhu Yujian through twisting streets until they reached the busiest avenue in Xi'an.

Merchants shouted.

Carts rattled.

And parked conspicuously at the roadside stood the glittering Kulinan.

Zhu Cunji pointed. "That is my car."

Zhu Yujian frowned. "And?"

Before he could finish, another Zhu Cunji stepped out of a nearby tavern.

This one wore princely robes.

Eunuchs flanked him.

His lips glistened with grease from a heavy meal.

He laughed loudly. "Excellent dishes! This heir apparent shall dine here again!"

As he approached the Kulinan, one eunuch subtly nudged him and gestured across the street.

Princely Zhu Cunji glanced up.

Across the way stood Hat-Wearing Zhu Cunji, guarded discreetly by sworn loyalists.

The two exchanged a subtle look.

Everything is under control.

Princely Zhu Cunji entered the Kulinan and drove off at a dignified pace.

Hat-Wearing Zhu Cunji remained where he was.

Zhu Yujian stared.

Then he exhaled slowly.

"A body double."

Zhu Cunji adjusted his bamboo hat.

"In troubled times, survival requires preparation."

He grinned.

"Besides, how can the most useful man in the world travel without backup?"