

Great Ming 1091

Chapter 1091 Hanzhong North Station

Zhu Cunji puffed out his chest proudly.

"That's right. That's my body double. His real name is Zhao Si. He's an actor. Dao Xuan Tianzun even gave him a special nickname. 'Nicholas Zhao Si.'"

He scratched his chin.

"I have no idea why that name. But if Dao Xuan Tianzun names someone that way, there must be profound meaning behind it."

Zhu Yujian looked deeply impressed.

"You actually found someone like that? He looks almost identical to you. And he can act."

He paused.

His eyes slowly drifted upward toward Zhu Cunji's head.

The implication was obvious.

"If even your own women cannot tell the difference... then wouldn't that mean..."

Zhu Cunji burst out laughing before the suspicion could grow roots.

"Do not let your imagination gallop like a wild horse! My princess consort knows his true identity. The eunuchs know. The loyal guards in the Prince of Qin's Mansion know. Most importantly, Dao Xuan Tianzun knows."

He pointed at himself.

"He cannot act out of line. He is an employee. A salaried one."

Zhu Yujian nodded slowly.

"Even Dao Xuan Tianzun supervises this matter... He truly looks after you."

That sentence inflated Zhu Cunji's ego like a bellows feeding a furnace.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun did not think much of me before," he admitted honestly. "But after I built two railway lines, he started favoring me more often."

He chuckled smugly.

"In the future, I will build even more railways. I will live up to Dao Xuan Tianzun's cultivation and trust."

Then he clapped his hands.

"Come. Let us go with the logistics team. As princes, what we lack most are chances to roam freely. Do you not wish to see the mountains and rivers of our vast empire?"

Zhu Yujian's gaze turned distant.

"I wish to see the mountains and rivers. But more than that, I wish to see this empire stand upright. With a straight spine."

Zhu Cunji grinned.

"Then this trip is exactly what you need."

Zhu Yujian considered.

Then nodded.

"That is true."

Back at the station, the grand train was still being loaded.

Crates.

Barrels.

Sacks.

More crates.

The loading went on for hours. By the time it finished, the train looked like it had swallowed an entire warehouse and was still hungry.

Passengers who had originally planned a comfortable journey to Hanzhong Prefecture found themselves squeezed between cargo stacks. Many sat directly on wooden boxes, packed shoulder to shoulder.

It looked less like transportation and more like a mobile storage unit with breathing decorations.

Zhu Cunji and Zhu Yujian squeezed in with their loyal guards. The space was tight. The air smelled like grain and ambition.

Zhu Cunji was in excellent spirits.

"We depart! Another journey!"

His triumphant declaration had barely settled when a ticket inspector approached.

"Straw hat gentleman," the inspector said flatly, "your ticket."

Zhu Cunji froze.

"A ticket?"

His voice rose indignantly.

"Do I need to buy a ticket? Do you know who I am? For this train? This train?"

The entire carriage turned to stare.

The ticket inspector narrowed his eyes.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun personally decreed: no matter how important you are, even if you hold a key position in Gao Family Village, you may not put on airs. No abusing authority. No using power for personal gain. No infringing on private enterprise rights."

He crossed his arms.

"If you have no ticket, purchase one immediately. Otherwise I will report this to the Saintess."

Zhu Cunji's face stiffened.

He wanted to shout, This is my train.

But that would ruin everything.

So instead, with the expression of a man swallowing pride whole, he dug into his pouch and paid.

The ticket inspector took the silver cheerfully and walked away humming.

Over his shoulder he added, "In Dao Xuan Tianzun's domain, no one dares be arrogant. No matter how grand you act, once I invoke his name, you still buy your ticket."

Zhu Cunji trembled.

"You... I... you..."

Beside him, Zhu Yujian burst into laughter.

It was loud.

And sincere.

The train rolled out of Xi'an, crossing the Guanzhong Plain toward Hanzhong.

Zhu Cunji pressed his face to the window like an excited child.

Mountains.

Fields.

Villages.

Everything fascinated him.

Zhu Yujian, however, did not look at the scenery.

He looked at the people.

Years ago, he had heard about the catastrophic drought in Shaanxi. Land scorched for a thousand miles. Starvation. Cannibalism.

But what he saw now was different.

Green fields stretched across the plain.

Crops stood tall and thick.

Farmers worked with relaxed expressions, even smiling.

"The drought here..." Zhu Yujian began slowly.

Zhu Cunji chuckled.

"When Dao Xuan Tianzun descended, he brought the Four Dragon Kings. They brought several years of continuous rain. The drought ended."

Zhu Yujian blinked.

"Brought?"

"Yes. Brought."

Zhu Cunji gestured dramatically.

"I personally saw it. Dao Xuan Tianzun's golden hand pinched the East Sea Dragon King by the neck, lifted it above Xi'an, and ordered it to spray water. The Dragon King dared not disobey and spewed rain for days."

Zhu Yujian inhaled sharply.

He needed a moment.

Then he looked back at the fields.

"The crops grow better than in our region even during normal years."

"That," Zhu Cunji said proudly, "is because of Celestial Fertilizer."

"Celestial Fertilizer?"

"A heavenly technique derived from something called chemistry. Far superior to manure. Apply it once and yields double."

For an empire built on agriculture, doubling yields was more terrifying than any cannon.

Zhu Yujian's expression grew complicated.

"Such a treasure... will attract greedy eyes."

Zhu Cunji's face twisted.

"Yes. It will."

He pointed at himself.

"For example. Me."

Zhu Yujian stared.

Zhu Cunji did not hide his embarrassment. He openly recounted how he had once tried to seize Wu Shen and Shi Kefa's chemical fertilizer, only to smash headfirst into Gao Family Village's authority. The emperor's name had been used against him. The Prince of Qin's Mansion had paid fifty thousand taels in disaster relief before the matter settled.

Zhu Yujian listened.

Then sighed.

"You truly are a wealthy scion."

Zhu Cunji laughed heartily.

"I truly am."

After a long journey, the train finally arrived in Hanzhong.

This was Zhu Cunji's first time here.

The moment the train stopped, he jumped off with enthusiasm.

Then he froze.

Hanzhong North Station looked... tragic.

Only a short section of platform was concrete. The rest was uneven stone. The ticket booth was covered by a crude thatched roof. It looked less like a symbol of modern progress and more like a temporary farming shed.

Zhu Cunji frowned.

"Why is Hanzhong North Station so crude? It is not on the same level as Xi'an South Station at all."

Zhu Yujian stepped down and scanned the surroundings.

He nodded slowly.

"This is supposed to be one end of the same railway line. Yet its standard is worlds apart."

The wind blew across the rough platform.

Behind them stood a train full of supplies that could change Sichuan's fate.

Before them stood a station that revealed a truth.

Development was uneven.

And uneven development, in an empire this large, was not just inconvenience.

It was destiny waiting to be corrected.

Chapter 1092 The Money-Grubber

Zhu Cunji paced slowly across the platform of Hanzhong North Station, his hands clasped behind his back in a posture he probably thought looked dignified, though the twitch in his jaw betrayed a very different mood. The longer he looked, the darker his expression became, as if the station itself were personally insulting his lineage.

He lifted his sleeve and pointed at the ticket booth.

"This wretched place," he said coldly, "is supposed to represent the dignity of the Prince of Qin's mansion? Who built this? Who approved it? Bring that man to me."

A loyal guard stepped forward and lowered his voice. "Your Highness... this station was constructed by Prince Rui's mansion."

Zhu Cunji froze.

Ah.

Only then did he remember that he was not, in fact, the sole patron saint of the Xi'an railway. He was merely the largest shareholder. The second largest shareholder was Prince Rui, Zhu Changhao, whose fief lay in Hanzhong.

When the West Han Railway was first being built, both sides had agreed very clearly: Xi'an South Station would be handled by the Prince of Qin's mansion, and Hanzhong North Station would be handled by Prince Rui's.

Now, standing beneath the sagging eaves of what could generously be described as a thatched shed pretending to be a ticket office, Zhu Cunji finally understood what "handled" meant in Prince Rui's vocabulary.

Handled cheaply.

Handled painfully.

Handled as if every copper coin screamed when it left his hand.

He stared upward at the crude structure and muttered through clenched teeth, "Just how much silver did he think he was saving? Damn that Prince Rui, that shameless miser."

Beside him, Zhu Yujian smiled faintly, as though enjoying the performance. "Careful. He is a generation above you. Your maternal uncle. Try not to curse your elders in public."

Zhu Cunji snorted, but before he could respond, a commotion rose at the station entrance.

A large retinue was sweeping in.

At the front strode a well-dressed man in his mid-forties, robes perfectly arranged, beard neatly trimmed, his eyes sharp and alert like a shopkeeper counting customers from across the street.

Prince Rui, Zhu Changhao.

Although technically a generation senior to Zhu Cunji, the two were close in age. Both were middle-aged men in their forties. Both had reputations. But their reputations were very different.

Most dissipated men of their rank indulged in wine and women, spending their evenings drowning in songhouses and their mornings recovering from them.

Zhu Changhao did not drink much.

He showed no interest in women.

To him, beauties were bones wrapped in skin.

Money, however, was alive.

Money breathed.

Money sang.

Money was the only thing worth loving.

So when the Prince of Qin's mansion approached him about investing in the railway, carefully explaining projected profits and future returns, Zhu Changhao did not hesitate. He subscribed eagerly, bought shares, and immediately dispatched his eunuch, Supervisor Zhang, to oversee construction and manage expenditures.

Unfortunately, Supervisor Zhang discovered that railways had many workers, and workers had wages, and wages, if not delivered, tended to accumulate.

Into his own pockets.

When the Heir Apparent of the Prince of Qin wrote to inform Zhu Changhao that Supervisor Zhang had been embezzling labor wages, Prince Rui's reaction was not moral outrage.

It was personal betrayal.

A eunuch stealing from workers meant the railway profits would shrink.

Which meant his silver was being stolen.

That was unforgivable.

Supervisor Zhang received fifty planks.

After that, Zhu Changhao personally took control of the accounts. Especially Hanzhong North Station. Since it was within his own territory, he could supervise every beam, every tile, every thatch bundle, every nail.

Every coin.

Not a single copper coin would be wasted.

And thus, the station stood as it did now.

Frugal. Austere. Economical to the point of embarrassment.

Zhu Changhao entered surrounded by eunuchs and guards, surveyed the shabby ticket shed, and instead of feeling shame, felt pride. His gaze lingered on the thin thatch roof like a father admiring a promising son.

He walked to the ticket seller.

"How many tickets sold today?"

The ticket seller bowed deeply. "Your Highness, eighty taels of silver."

Zhu Changhao's eyes gleamed instantly.

"Eighty taels. Excellent. The Prince of Qin's mansion takes sixty percent, that is forty-eight taels. I receive forty percent, thirty-two taels." He nodded with satisfaction. "A splendid day. By the way, how many tickets did Xi'an sell?"

"The train has just arrived, Your Highness. We have not yet received the figures."

Zhu Changhao waved dismissively. "No need. I will ask myself."

He hurried toward the locomotive like a merchant rushing toward a warehouse shipment.

"Driver!" he shouted. "How were ticket sales in Xi'an today?"

One of the drivers leaned out. "Two hundred and fifty taels."

Prince Rui blinked.

Then his face exploded with joy.

"Two hundred and fifty taels? So much more than Hanzhong?" He began calculating aloud, fingers twitching. "Forty percent of two hundred and fifty... one hundred taels. Added to thirty-two... one hundred and thirty-two taels. I have done nothing today and earned one hundred and thirty-two taels!"

He laughed loudly, almost affectionately.

For a money-grubber, few sensations rival watching silver multiply without effort.

In that moment, Zhu Changhao felt life had reached its summit.

Then he paused.

Something felt... off.

He looked up again. "Why so high today? That is not normal."

The driver gestured behind him. "All carriages were fully loaded. A vast quantity of cargo. Tickets were purchased for all of it."

"A vast quantity?"

Zhu Changhao's eyes sharpened.

He turned and saw the Gao Family Village Militia logistics team unloading basket after basket from the train, grain and cloth spilling out in endless succession.

It looked like a moving treasury.

His interest flared instantly.

He walked briskly toward the unloading scene.

Zhu Cunji and Zhu Yujian exchanged a glance. Should they greet him? Reveal themselves?

After a silent calculation, they decided against it.

Better to watch.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Wangchan, who adhered faithfully to his principle of questioning anyone who looked relevant, noticed Prince Rui approaching and deliberately drifted closer.

Prince Rui asked first.

"What are all these goods? Basket after basket, grain, cloth... what is this for?"

Zhuce Wangchan smiled calmly. "Reporting to Your Royal Highness, Sichuan is in chaos. Rebels have risen. The Regional Commander, Hou Liangzhu, has been killed. Thirty-eight cities have already fallen."

Prince Rui's brows rose.

"Thirty-eight?"

"Yes. The situation is grave. Therefore, gentry, wealthy households, and certain officials in Xi'an have personally contributed these supplies. They are being sent to Sichuan to aid refugees."

For a brief moment, Prince Rui was startled.

But Sichuan was far.

Far enough that concern dissolved quickly.

What did not dissolve was the sight of silver embodied as grain.

He watched basket after basket being unloaded, each one representing expenditure.

"Donated by gentry and officials?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Which officials?"

That question tightened the air slightly.

Zhu Cunji and Zhu Yujian both frowned subtly.

The intent was obvious.

Prince Rui was testing strength. Measuring backing. Calculating leverage.

If the names were weak, perhaps a portion could be... adjusted.

Zhuge Wangchan smiled in a peculiar way. "No great ministers. Merely small officials. Wang Zheng, Surveillance Commissioner for Shandong. Liang Shixian, magistrate of Chengcheng County. Feng Juan, magistrate of Heyang County. And others of similar rank."

Prince Rui's lips curved faintly.

"Ah. Those people."

He withdrew into his circle of eunuchs and guards. They formed a tight cluster and whispered. Heads leaned in. Eyes flicked toward the cargo.

Moments later, a eunuch stepped forward.

"You have come from afar," the eunuch said politely, "and may not be aware of Hanzhong Prefecture's regulations. All goods transshipped through Hanzhong must pay a five percent transit tax to Prince Rui's mansion."

He paused.

"However, seeing the considerable quantity of your goods, His Highness has graciously reduced the tax. You need only pay one percent."

One percent.

On donated relief supplies.

Even the wind seemed to hesitate for a breath.

Chapter 1093 Things Escalated

The moment the eunuch finished speaking.

Silence did not fall.

Instead, something far more dangerous appeared on Zhuge Wangchan's face.

A smile.

Not an ordinary smile. Not even a polite one. It was that eerie, faintly artificial curve of the lips that the people of Gao Family Village had painstakingly learned to imitate from Dao Xuan Tianzun himself. That unsettling, almost plastic expression that hovered somewhere between kindness and mockery, as if the one smiling had already calculated the outcome three steps ahead.

Among the villagers, this particular smile had become reserved for special occasions.

Like when someone was about to get into trouble.

Of course, it was extremely difficult for an ordinary human face to achieve that silicone-like effect. Many had practiced in front of mirrors, trying to cultivate a perfectly insincere smile. Most ended up with cramped cheeks and twitching eyelids instead.

Zhuce Wangchan, however, had mastered it.

He let out a low chuckle. "This tax," he said lightly, "wasn't invented just now on the spot, was it?"

The eunuch sneered. "What nonsense are you babbling about? This is a long-established tax item, carefully considered and instituted by Prince Rui's Estate."

Zhuce Wangchan did not argue emotionally. He spoke as though reciting a lesson.

"No tax item may be privately instituted. It must be reported to the imperial court, examined by the Ministry of Revenue, debated by officials, and formally approved before collection. Take the Liaodong tax, for example. Officials quarreled for months before that passed. So tell me... when did the Ministry of Revenue approve this 'goods turnover tax' for Prince Rui's Estate? Do you have the official document?"

The eunuch froze.

He had not expected a mere transport commander to know the procedure of tax legislation.

For a brief moment, hesitation flickered in his eyes.

Then pride overcame prudence.

"Of course we have the document," he snapped. "But what right do you have to see it? Even if I don't show it to you today, you will still pay the tax. Obediently."

Zhuge Wangchan's smile did not move a fraction.

"If there is a document, I will pay. If there is none..." His tone remained calm. "Then I am afraid you will not receive a single grain of flour from us."

The eunuch's face turned red.

Nearby, Zhu Cunji and Zhu Yujian exchanged looks.

"This Prince Rui," Zhu Cunji muttered under his breath, "is truly courting disaster. Of all people, he chose to extort Gao Family Village's transport team. Even greed should have limits."

Zhu Yujian sighed softly. "Now he will be taught one."

Zhu Cunji scratched his chin. "Should we intervene? Stop Zhu Changhao before this goes too far?"

"We cannot reveal ourselves," Zhu Yujian replied. "Without status, he will ignore us. With status, we expose ourselves. Neither is wise."

Zhu Cunji considered it and nodded reluctantly. "You are right. Let him stumble into his own pit. A greedy man like him deserves to learn what pain feels like."

He glanced around at the crude station. "Honestly, I would like to beat him myself. Swimming in silver, yet unwilling to build a proper station. Disgraceful."

The two princes remained still, their guards equally motionless behind them, all watching like spectators at a street opera.

Meanwhile, the eunuch had reached the end of his patience.

He waved sharply. "Men! Seize the goods!"

Zhu Cunji could not help himself.

He laughed out loud.

Zhu Yujian turned. "What is amusing?"

"This scene," Zhu Cunji said between chuckles, "reminds me of when my men tried to seize Gao Family Village's celestial fertilizer. They looked just as confident. I ended up paying fifty thousand taels. Fifty thousand! Even for me that was painful. For a miser like Zhu Changhao... losing silver might be worse than losing blood."

Zhu Yujian shook his head. "The nature of your case was different."

"How so?"

"You were attempting to seize imperial goods brought by Wu Shen and Shi Kefa. It was improper, but not malicious. Zhu Changhao is trying to confiscate relief supplies meant for disaster victims. If both cases were presented to me, you would receive light punishment. He would not."

Before Zhu Cunji could reply, Prince Rui's guards advanced.

The lead guard stepped forward and casually reached out to shove Zhuge Wangchan aside, the gesture relaxed and arrogant, born of habit. In his world, resistance did not exist.

Until it did.

Zhuge Wangchan moved.

His hands shot forward with trained precision. Using a military grappling technique jokingly nicknamed Ghost-God Boxing, he locked onto the guard's wrist.

A sharp crack echoed.

The guard blinked in confusion.

Then the world turned upside down.

Zhuge Wangchan twisted, lifted, and swung the fully armored man as though he weighed nothing more than a sack of millet, then slammed him onto the ground with a thunderous thud that reverberated across the station floor.

Armor and flesh struck stone together.

For a heartbeat, everything paused.

Then chaos erupted.

"They're rebelling!"

"How dare you!"

Prince Rui's retainers rushed forward all at once.

Unfortunately for them, Zhuge Wangchan had not come alone. Behind him stood five hundred logistics soldiers, men accustomed to marching, hauling, and fighting. By sheer numbers alone they surpassed Prince Rui's present guard detail, which consisted of only a few dozen ordinary retainers.

The result was predictable.

The logistics soldiers calmly set down their baskets of grain.

They rolled up their sleeves.

Then they waded in.

What followed was not a duel. It was a demonstration.

Prince Rui's guards were grabbed, flipped, swept, and slammed. Armor scraped loudly across the polished stone floor. Bodies skidded. Shouts overlapped. Dust rose.

Within moments, the retainers lay sprawled across the ground, groaning.

The train station exploded into noise.

Common folk hurried backward at first, instinctively seeking safety. But once they realized no blades were drawn and the militia clearly had the upper hand, they stopped retreating and began watching with open fascination.

This was not some remote village where news traveled slower than ox carts. This was a railway station. Many here had traveled to Xi'an. Many had seen what a militia looked like.

When they recognized that Prince Rui was clashing with the Gao Family Village Militia, they sensed something historic was unfolding.

A spectacle.

Some even began quietly cheering.

Only a few locals who had never left Hanzhong whispered anxiously, "It feels satisfying to beat Prince Rui's men now... but afterward they will surely be executed."

Prince Rui himself had already retreated into a protective ring of eunuchs.

"Rebellion!" he shouted, his composure crumbling. "Utter rebellion! Summon the guards! Fetch the Hanzhong Prefect! Call the Regional Commander!"

Zhuge Wangchan cupped his hands around his mouth and added cheerfully, "And do not forget to summon the Tathagata Buddha!"

The crowd burst into laughter.

"Yes! Quickly summon the Tathagata Buddha!"

"Hahahaha!"

Even Zhu Cunji could not suppress a grin.

"This," he murmured, "has truly escalated. If the Prefect becomes involved, the matter will inevitably reach the imperial court."

Zhu Yujian's brows furrowed.

Yes.

It had escalated.

Prince Rui's entourage fled the station in a flurry of robes and panic, disappearing into the streets of Hanzhong.

Behind them, the logistics soldiers resumed their work as if nothing extraordinary had occurred.

Basket after basket of grain was lifted down from the train.

Order returned.

But the air had changed.

Storms do not announce themselves loudly at first.

Sometimes, they begin with a single slap on stone.

Chapter 1094 All Good Citizens, No Rebellion

A wave of common folk rushed forward, some wringing their hands, some practically hopping in anxiety.

"Brave sirs, you must run!" one of them cried. "At a time like this you're still calmly moving goods?"

Zhuge Wangchan laughed softly, as if the suggestion were absurd.

"Run?" he said. "And leave the supplies behind? These are disaster relief provisions. They must reach the people of Sichuan. How could we abandon them and flee for our own safety?"

The villagers looked at one another in disbelief.

"But Prince Rui's guards will return soon! The Prefect will come! The Regional Commander too!"

Zhuge Wangchan shrugged lightly. "Let them come. Who is afraid of whom?"

The words were spoken without bravado. That made them even more unsettling.

Some of the more timid onlookers retreated immediately, unwilling to be swept into trouble. Others hesitated. And then there were those who knew. Those who had heard of Dao Xuan Tianzun. Those who understood who stood behind Gao Family Village.

They stepped forward.

"Quickly, help them unload!"

It did not take long for the train to be emptied. Basket after basket of grain and bolts of cloth were stacked neatly at the station, forming a small mountain of relief supplies.

Soon after, a convoy of carts and horses arrived in orderly lines. The quartermasters began loading the grain, directing traffic efficiently, sending cart after cart toward the Han River.

On the riverbank, small boats were already prepared, rocking gently as if impatient to depart.

Despite the visible urgency in the air, the logistics team worked at their usual pace. Calm. Measured. Disciplined.

The common folk grew increasingly anxious.

"Hurry! Hurry!"

Some rushed to push carts, others lifted sacks, trying to accelerate the process. But reality was stubborn. A single large train could carry hundreds of thousands, even close to a million jin of supplies. Moving that much grain required trip after trip.

Speed had limits.

Then came the clatter of armored footsteps.

Prince Rui's guards had arrived.

Two hundred of them.

Even the Prince of Qin's Mansion, the premier enfeoffment of the realm, maintained only five hundred guards. Prince Rui, lower in rank and famously frugal, found supporting five hundred far too expensive. Two hundred was far more economical.

When those two hundred guards saw the scene, they hesitated.

Before them stood five hundred militia quartermasters, broad-shouldered and steady-eyed, men accustomed to carrying heavy loads and heavier responsibilities. Muscles gleamed under sleeves rolled high.

The guards swallowed.

Prince Rui, red-faced with indignation, stomped forward. "What are you staring at? Charge! Arrest them!"

The Guard Commander shifted uneasily. "Your Highness... they outnumber us."

"You are proper imperial soldiers!" Prince Rui snapped. "They are merely a local militia. What are you afraid of?"

The Guard Commander lowered his head, but inwardly he could not help thinking, If we are proper imperial soldiers, perhaps we should receive proper pay. Perhaps more meat in our rations. Perhaps less stinginess.

He dared not voice such thoughts.

"We must wait for reinforcements," he said carefully. "The Prefect and the Regional Commander are on their way."

Thus, in a rather embarrassing display, two hundred imperial guards drifted backward and blended into the crowd, choosing observation over confrontation.

The standoff stretched awkwardly.

Then the ground began to tremble faintly with approaching steps.

The Hanzhong Prefect and the Hanzhong Regional Commander had arrived.

The Prefect was an ordinary official, cautious and pragmatic. The Regional Commander, however, was not ordinary at all.

Zhao Guangyuan.

Son of the renowned General Zhao Shuaijiao, the man known as the General Who Pacified Liao. A name spoken with respect across the frontier.

When Zhao Guangyuan rode in, Prince Rui immediately regained his confidence.

"General Zhao!" he shouted. "Arrest these scoundrels at once!"

Zhao Guangyuan did not move.

He surveyed the scene calmly. Grain. Carts. Boats. Militia working methodically.

"What exactly is happening here?" he asked.

"They are rebelling!" Prince Rui declared.

"Rebelling?" Zhao Guangyuan lifted a brow. "All I see are men moving supplies."

"They assaulted my men!"

Zhao Guangyuan's tone remained steady. "Any fatalities?"

"No."

The difference between assault and rebellion was enormous.

Zhao Guangyuan very much wanted to say so aloud, but he restrained himself.

At that moment, the Hanzhong Prefect leaned closer and whispered in his ear.

"We cannot touch them."

Zhao Guangyuan's eyes shifted slightly. "Explain."

The Prefect spoke in a low voice. "Across Guanzhong, crop yields have tripled because of Celestial Fertilizer. You know this. These people belong to a faction known as the Dao Xuan Tianzun Daoist Sect. Backed by the powerful Li clan of Longxi. Even the Prince of Qin's Mansion and the Shaanxi Governor have ties to them."

Zhao Guangyuan's expression hardened.

The Prefect continued, "Observe them. They have offended Prince Rui and yet continue calmly moving supplies, utterly fearless. Why? Because they know who stands behind them. If Prince Rui clashes with the Prince of Qin, who loses?"

Zhao Guangyuan understood.

"If they truly have that backing," he murmured, "why not simply say so?"

The Prefect's voice dropped further. "Because some things cannot be spoken aloud. If such a connection were openly acknowledged, how would it differ from rebellion? Look at what happened to Prince of Tang Zhu Yujian. Some truths are safer left unspoken."

Silence passed between them.

Then Zhao Guangyuan straightened in the saddle and raised his voice.

"This general has carefully observed the situation. These are good citizens, diligently transporting relief supplies. There is no rebellion here."

He turned slightly toward Prince Rui. "Your Highness, please refrain from making such grave accusations lightly. Mobilizing imperial troops so hastily is taxing on the soldiers."

Prince Rui blinked in disbelief. "What?"

Zhao Guangyuan gave a brief nod. "Return."

He turned his horse and rode away.

The garrison followed immediately, vanishing as swiftly as they had arrived.

The Hanzhong Prefect bowed respectfully. "Your Highness Prince Rui, please be cautious in the future and avoid disturbing the common people."

Then he too departed with his retinue.

In the blink of an eye, the field was cleared.

Prince Rui stood there, utterly dumbfounded.

Then something worse happened.

Zhuge Wangchan watched the officials leave and understood everything.

He chuckled.

Then he cracked his knuckles.

"Brothers," he called lazily, "after carrying so much grain, are your arms stiff? How about we stretch them a bit?"

The quartermasters grinned in unison.

"Alright!"

They advanced together.

Five hundred men.

Two hundred guards.

Prince Rui stumbled backward. "What are you doing? Do not come closer!"

"Beat them!"

"Charge!"

The militia surged forward like a tide finally allowed to break.

Prince Rui's guards collapsed instantly into chaos, discipline dissolving under the sudden wave of fists and boots.

In the confusion, an unidentified flying kick struck Prince Rui squarely in the backside.

He yelped.

Then pitched forward.

He hit the ground heavily and slid across the stone floor for more than a meter, robes twisted, dignity scattered somewhere behind him.

Chapter 1095 No Recourse

Prince Rui stood at a distance, face dark as storm clouds, a very clear and very humiliating footprint stamped across the back of his robe like an official seal of disgrace. From where he hid among the warehouses, he watched the Gao Family Village militia loading grain at the docks of Hanzhong Prefecture, his eyes burning with a mix of greed, resentment, and wounded pride.

Sacks upon sacks of grain were carried down in disciplined lines, transferred from carts to boats with astonishing efficiency. Before long, the river was crowded with vessels, forming a dense flotilla that stretched along the upper reaches of the Han River like a floating marketplace preparing to migrate downstream.

Here, the river was still narrow. No towering merchant junks could pass through these waters. Only smaller boats could operate safely, which meant that if one wished to move mountains of grain, one had to rely not on size, but on numbers.

And numbers were precisely what Gao Family Village possessed.

Their advance team had swept through the area earlier, waving silver with cheerful decisiveness, leasing nearly every boat available. The boatmen, who had grown used to scraping by on irregular transport work, found themselves suddenly blessed by fortune. Not only were they paid generously, they were told this arrangement might continue for a long time.

Nothing in this world pleased a boatman more than steady income and someone else worrying about the risks.

To accelerate operations, Gao Family Village's logistics soldiers worked shoulder to shoulder with hired porters, who were being paid wages so high that several of them had begun reconsidering their career choices in favor of permanent service.

The porters laughed as they worked. The boatmen hummed songs. Even the tea stalls nearby had doubled their prices without protest from customers.

The entire city of Hanzhong buzzed like a marketplace during festival season. Carpenters repaired docks. Ropemakers sold out their stock. Food vendors did brisk business feeding laborers who suddenly had money to spend. Even those with no direct involvement found themselves benefiting from the surge.

Only one man did not.

Prince Rui.

He watched all of it with clenched teeth.

He had not managed to skim a single copper coin. Not one.

He had been kicked. In public. By commoners.

And now this grand spectacle of wealth flowed before him like a river he could neither dam nor divert.

"This Prince must report this to the Emperor," he muttered, lips pursed petulantly. "To assault a prince is lawless. Utterly lawless. I will accuse them."

His trusted eunuch, who had survived court politics precisely because he knew when not to be enthusiastic, leaned closer and whispered urgently, "Your Highness, you must not."

Prince Rui snapped, "Why must I not? This Prince was beaten. Am I forbidden even from complaining?"

The eunuch lowered his voice further, glancing around as if the wind itself might inform on them.

"These are disaster relief supplies, Your Highness. His Majesty wishes to provide relief, yet the treasury is strained. The civil officials press him to use his personal reserves, which has caused him considerable distress. He prays daily for wealthy subjects to step forward with donations. He even sells official titles to gentry willing to contribute funds and grain."

Prince Rui's expression shifted slightly.

The eunuch continued, carefully, "These supplies will certainly earn imperial favor. If Your Highness had skimmed even a little, you would have to worry about them reporting you first. And if His Majesty asks why they struck you..."

He paused.

"If you admit you tried to take from disaster relief supplies, would His Majesty not make an example of you?"

Silence fell.

Prince Rui blinked.

For the first time since the kick, clarity descended.

So that was why they had dared.

His earlier indignation shrank, replaced by something colder. Fear.

Not only had he been beaten, but now he had to worry about being reported.

Prince Rui wiped sweat from his brow.

"These supplies originated in Xi'an," he muttered. "If the local gentry wish to accuse this Prince, they would require the cooperation of Shaanxi Governor Sun Chuanting to submit a memorial."

His eyes sharpened.

"Go to Xi'an at once. Smooth things over with Sun Chuanting. Make sure the gentry keep quiet. This must not reach the capital."

The eunuch departed immediately.

Prince Rui abandoned thoughts of embezzlement, but another idea began forming in his mind like mold in damp wood.

These ships would eventually enter the Yangtze via Hankou.

And Hankou was under the authority of Prince of Chu, Zhu Huakui.

That man was not known for restraint.

Prince Rui's lips curved faintly.

Let us see, he thought, whether these so-called mighty dragons can survive meeting a true local tyrant.

A few days later, the eunuch returned to Hanzhong.

"Sun Chuanting has agreed," he reported. "He will restrain the gentry."

Prince Rui brightened immediately.

"But..." the eunuch added in a lower tone, "he demanded a thousand taels of silver as a hush fee. This servant argued relentlessly and managed to reduce it to seven hundred."

Prince Rui sucked in a sharp breath.

Seven hundred taels was not ruinous to him. He could afford it easily.

But to fail at extorting profit and instead be forced to pay money...

For a miser, this was a spiritual injury.

Somewhere far away, the treasury of Gao Family Village very happily received seven hundred taels of silver into its accounts.

The fleet, meanwhile, continued downstream toward Hankou.

Zhu Cunji and Zhu Yujian accompanied the convoy.

The boats moved swiftly, covering astonishing distances each day. Before long, they entered the Yunxiang region. Thanks to Luo Xi's oversight and the solid groundwork laid earlier by Lu Xiangheng, the fleet encountered no obstruction and passed through smoothly.

Here, however, Zhu Yujian lingered at the railing longer than usual.

To the northeast lay Nanyang, his former fief.

He gazed in that direction for a long time.

There was melancholy in his eyes. Regret, certainly. But not remorse.

Strangely, he felt something akin to gratitude.

Had he remained confined in Nanyang, he might never have seen how vast the world truly was. His journey to Shaanxi had only begun, yet already his horizons had expanded beyond anything his former title could contain.

After leaving Yunxiang behind, the fleet would soon enter the territory of Prince of Chu, Zhu Huakui.

On the largest ship, Zhuge Wangchan reviewed reports concerning the man.

"This one," he said thoughtfully, "will not be simple."

Zhu Yujian nodded. "He is ruthless. Years ago there was the False Prince of Chu Case. Some claimed he was not the legitimate son of the previous Prince. The matter caused tremendous uproar. In the end, Zhu Huakui sent men to beat Huguang Governor Zhao Kehuai to death. Only then did the issue disappear."

Zhuge Wangchan frowned. "He dared to kill a governor?"

"Yet he still sits comfortably as Prince of Chu," Zhu Yujian said bitterly. "While I..."

He stopped.

Too many ears.

The rest remained unsaid.

Before the silence could grow heavier, a small boat approached from upstream. A soldier from Gao Family Village's advance reconnaissance unit stood at the bow, shouting before he had even fully drawn near.

"Captain! Urgent news! Wuchang is overrun by bandits. The main force of the Eight Great Kings, Zhang Xianzhong, is ravaging the countryside outside the city. Both banks of the Han River are filled with refugees."

The deck fell silent.

Zhu Cunji stiffened.

Zhu Yujian's expression darkened.

A soldier asked carefully, "Should we assist them?"

Zhuge Wangchan turned sharply. "Of course."

The soldier hesitated. "But our destination is Sichuan. These supplies were allocated for disaster relief there."

Zhuge Wangchan's gaze sharpened.

"There is no such thing as pre-ordered destiny," he said evenly. "Divide the supplies. Aid the refugees at Wuchang and continue transporting the remainder to Sichuan. Send word back to the village to dispatch more grain."

He looked toward the distant smoke rising near Wuchang.

"As long as it is to save refugees, Dao Xuan Tianzun will not let us lack provisions."

The soldiers answered in unison, "Understood."

The fleet pressed forward without fear.

Before long, they reached the stretch of river near Wuchang.

And there, along both banks, humanity overflowed like floodwater.

Refugees packed the shore in endless streams, fleeing toward the city, clutching children, dragging carts, carrying what little remained of their lives in bundles tied with fraying rope.

The Han River flowed between them.

And into that river sailed grain.

Chapter 1096 Chaos in Wuchang

Refugees dragged their children, supported their elderly, and stumbled along the banks of the Han River toward Wuchang.

Behind them lay villages reduced to ash and trampled fields flattened beneath marauding hooves. Even county seats, once symbols of minor stability, had become traps waiting to be overrun. For ordinary people who possessed neither soldiers nor walls, the only direction left was toward something larger, something with battlements and gates and the illusion of protection.

Wuchang.

In ordinary times, the sight of a massive flotilla on the river would have drawn crowds to the shore. Children would point. Men would speculate about cargo. Women would shade their eyes and gossip about merchants and officials.

But these were not ordinary times.

These people did not look up.

They walked with their heads lowered, faces gray with exhaustion, expressions carved from resignation. A fleet meant nothing if one's stomach was empty and one's house was smoke.

Then something unusual happened.

Several smaller boats detached themselves from the main convoy and angled toward the bank. Oars dipped. Water rippled outward. A voice carried over the river.

"My friends! If you flee to Wuchang like this, will there be food waiting for you?"

Most did not respond. Who had energy left for idle shouting?

But a few bolder refugees called back hoarsely, "The fields were destroyed! The houses burned! We have nothing. We can only beg in Wuchang."

A sigh drifted from the boat.

"So there is truly nothing left..."

There was a brief pause, and then the tone shifted, brightened deliberately.

"Come collect relief grain! We cannot give much today. Ten catties per person to help you through a few days. More will follow later!"

The refugees froze.

It was as if someone had uttered a spell.

Heads turned slowly, stiffly, disbelief written plainly across hollow faces.

Then they saw it.

A man on the boat lifted a full sack of grain and shook it for emphasis.

"Form lines along the riverbank! One line per boat! Quickly!"

What happened next would have impressed any drill instructor in the empire.

The refugees erupted into motion.

There was no training, no command structure, no discipline beyond desperation. For a moment chaos reigned, people jostling and shouting, clutching children and bundles. Yet hunger is a powerful organizer. Within minutes, more than a dozen uneven lines had formed, each facing a boat that had pulled up against the shore.

On the boats, the quartermasters exchanged looks and sighed in relief.

Distribution began.

And then something entirely unexpected occurred.

Zhu Cunji leapt from one of the boats and personally began handing out grain on the riverbank, sleeves rolled up, expression radiant as though he had discovered his true calling.

Each time he handed over a sack, he asked with disarming directness, "Well? What do you think of me?"

The refugees, clutching grain like treasure, invariably replied, "Benefactor! You are the finest person in the world!"

Zhu Cunji beamed.

"Hahaha! I like you!"

He patted shoulders with reckless enthusiasm, nearly causing one old man to stagger backward under the combined weight of rice and princely affection.

On the boat nearby, Zhu Yujian wiped sweat from his brow.

"Is the heir to the Prince of Qin always like this?" he asked quietly.

Zhuge Wangchan leaned closer and whispered, "He has a chronic need to be admired."

Zhu Yujian fell silent for a moment, then said softly, almost to himself, "When I raised troops to aid the Emperor, was I not the same? I wished to save the Great Ming, yes... but I also wished for people to say that imperial kinsmen are not merely pigs in gilded pens. I wanted them to say, 'Zhu Yujian is wise and valiant.'"

Zhuge Wangchan opened his mouth, then closed it.

There were some reflections best left undisturbed.

Just then, chaos erupted at the back of the refugee lines.

Shouts rang out.

"Zhang Xianzhong's men are here!"

"The bandits!"

"Run!"

The carefully formed lines disintegrated instantly. Grain sacks dropped. Children screamed. People scattered in blind panic.

One refugee who had just received grain from Zhu Cunji bolted before the prince could finish asking his customary question. Zhu Cunji stood there mid-sentence.

"What do you think of—"

Gone.

"Damn it!" he roared. "Who dares interfere with my act of... cough... benevolence?"

Zhu Yujian's voice was tight. "The bandit cavalry has arrived."

That sobered him immediately.

In the distance, a small troop of horsemen appeared, riding hard along the bank. They were not a large force, but cavalry did not need numbers when facing exhausted peasants.

Zhu Yujian frowned. "They are fast. If the refugees scatter, they will be cut down."

The Gao Family Village quartermasters reached the same conclusion in less time than it took to say it.

"Do not run!" they shouted toward the crowd. "Move toward the river! The closer you are to the water, the safer you will be!"

Authority had already been established through grain.

People obeyed.

Instead of fleeing inland, refugees pressed themselves toward the riverbank in a trembling mass, bodies packed tightly together.

Meanwhile, the larger boats that had remained midstream began angling toward shore. The quartermasters reached beneath the grain baskets.

Out came firearms.

The bandit cavalry thundered closer.

"Get down!" the soldiers roared. "All of you, get down!"

The refugees did not understand, but instinct overrode confusion. They crouched low, covering their heads.

Then came the thunder.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Gunfire shattered the air in relentless succession.

The charging horsemen faltered. One rider toppled backward from the saddle. Another's horse reared violently before collapsing sideways. Dust and screams mingled with smoke.

The bandit troop had not expected armed resistance.

Seeing several of their own fall in rapid succession, they abandoned the charge and wheeled around, retreating as swiftly as they had appeared.

Silence followed, broken only by the crackle of dissipating smoke and the distant drumming of retreating hooves.

Slowly, cautiously, the refugees lifted their heads.

They looked at one another.

They looked at the river.

Then cheers erupted.

"Our benefactors are mighty!"

"Where are you soldiers from?"

"Are you Shaanxi troops?"

"You are not government soldiers, are you? How can you be so formidable?"

The questions overlapped in noisy waves.

The quartermasters restored order and resumed distribution.

"We are the Gao Family Village Militia," they said while handing out grain. "Once you receive your portion, proceed directly to Wuchang and remain within the city. We will transport additional grain there by ship. Do not wander aimlessly."

The refugees nodded fervently.

Ten catties per person were distributed in full.

When the fleet began moving again, something unexpected happened.

The refugees ran alongside the riverbank.

They had realized something simple and profound: if they stayed near this fleet, the bandits would not dare approach easily.

They were not far from Wuchang now, so Zhuge Wangchan ordered the ships to reduce speed. Oars slowed. Sails adjusted.

Thus, water and land advanced together.

In the middle of the river, a great fleet.

On the banks, a vast human tide.

Both moving toward Wuchang.

Inside the city, tension coiled tightly.

Government troops under the Wuchang Prefect manned the walls. Armor glinted beneath a gray sky. Supplies were hauled upward in haste. Civilians who once muttered curses at officials now worked frantically beside them, carrying stones, hauling arrows, reinforcing gates.

When a truly savage enemy approaches, grievances become luxuries.

Prince of Chu, Zhu Huakui, sixty-five years old and long accustomed to authority, stood atop the city wall with his Princely Guards. His once-sharp eyes were now clouded with age, yet fear had sharpened them.

"Where is the Huguang Provincial Governor?" he demanded sharply of the Prefect beside him. "Why has he not brought troops to assist?"

The Wuchang Prefect kept his expression carefully neutral.

Inwardly, he thought: You once had a Huguang Governor beaten to death. The entire realm knows. Which successor would rush eagerly to your rescue? They would sooner pray the bandits solve their problem for them.

But such thoughts were not for spoken air.

He bowed slightly.

"The Provincial Governor led his troops to aid the Emperor and has not yet returned."

Zhu Huakui's jaw tightened.

Beyond the walls, somewhere in the distance, Zhang Xianzhong was coming.

And from the river, so was something else.

Chapter 1097 Unable to Enter the City

At this time, the Governor of Huguang was none other than Lu Xiangheng.

His position was not a simple one. He was both Governor of Huguang and Supreme Commander of Five Provinces, tasked with suppressing the roaming bandits that had turned half the empire into a chessboard of smoke and blood. Under normal circumstances, the Governor of Huguang would remain stationed in Wuchang, anchoring the region like a nail hammered into wood.

But Lu Xiangheng was no nail.

He was perpetually in motion, marching across mountains and plains, dragging his troops wherever the bandits flared up.

Not long ago, he had led his army north to the capital to defend the Emperor. Had he remained in Huguang, the roving bandits would never have come this close to Wuchang. They would likely still be pinned in the Dabie Mountains, harried and besieged.

Instead, with his departure, the Central Plains sagged under sudden weakness.

Wuchang, a city of immense strategic value where the Han River met the Yangtze, was left with almost no real defenders. A handful of undertrained garrison troops. A few hundred of the Prince of Chu's personal guards. Local militias. Ordinary citizens clutching spears they barely knew how to hold.

Such forces might defend tall walls.

They could not fight in open fields.

They did not even dare defend a county town beyond the shadow of Wuchang's gates.

On the city wall, Prince of Chu Zhu Huakui scowled deeply.

"That Huguang Governor is useless," he grumbled. "Bandits are at Wuchang's gates, and he is nowhere to be found."

The Wuchang Prefect, standing beside him, maintained a respectful tone.

"Lord Lu is no coward, Your Highness. But he cannot be in two places at once."

Zhu Huakui turned sharply, eyes flashing with anger.

How dare this minor official contradict him?

He glared with open menace. The Prefect immediately pressed his lips shut. He valued his life and had no desire to test the Prince's temper against his own bones.

At that moment, a scout rushed up the stairs of the wall, breathless.

"A massive fleet is sailing down the Han River! They are accompanied by a great throng of refugees!"

Had the report mentioned only the fleet, Zhu Huakui might have asked questions.

But refugees?

He dismissed it at once.

"Refugees coming to Wuchang?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The bandits are ravaging the countryside. Villagers from all directions are bringing their families and heading here."

The Prefect seized the moment. "Open the gates. Let them in."

"Absolutely not!" Zhu Huakui snapped without hesitation. "Bandit spies will certainly be among them. Once inside, they could open the gates at night. Was that not how Wang Jiayin broke Hequ County years ago?"

The Prefect pressed on despite the danger. "Even if a few spies are mixed among them, we can monitor the refugees. Increase patrols. Guard the gates more closely. But to leave tens of thousands to be slaughtered for fear of a handful of infiltrators... how can we justify that?"

Zhu Huakui sneered.

"Womanly sentimentality. What do their lives matter to this prince? Why should I take such a risk for a pack of worthless wretches?"

Silence fell.

The militias on the wall stared straight ahead. The village guards pretended sudden fascination with their own boots.

The air grew heavy.

The Prefect opened his mouth again, but Zhu Huakui cut him off sharply.

"Guards. Seize this Prefect."

The Prince's personal guards moved immediately.

Two officers grabbed the Prefect and dragged him toward the edge of the wall. Without ceremony, they shoved him down the steps. One even added a kick to his backside, sending him tumbling several times before attendants rushed to lift him and brush dust from his robes.

No one spoke.

But anger simmered like coals beneath ash.

Other princes across the realm were often useless, indulgent, soft-handed men who wasted silver and recited poetry poorly. They were parasites, perhaps, but rarely lethal.

Zhu Huakui was different.

He was dangerous.

He had once dared to have a Huguang Governor beaten to death and had suffered no consequences. Power had not restrained him; it had emboldened him.

After that display, no one dared speak further.

The gates of Wuchang were sealed tight.

The Prince's guards stood above them, eyes cold.

Outside the city, Zhuge Wangchan, Zhu Cunji, and Zhu Yujian arrived with the fleet and the sea of refugees that followed like a tide of despair.

Wuchang was not enormous in size, spanning only a few li, but its position was extraordinary. It commanded the meeting of the Han River and the Yangtze, a strategic throat of the waterways. Easy to defend. Difficult to conquer.

The Gao Family Village fleet had no need to enter the city. It could simply pass by. Ordinarily, the imperial River Patrol navy would be stationed here to regulate traffic, but now that navy had withdrawn into the city, unwilling to risk engagement.

The river lay open before them.

Their intention had been simple: escort the refugees safely inside, then continue downstream calmly.

Instead, they found the gates barred.

From the wall above, guards shouted down at the refugees.

"Leave at once! Wuchang will not open its gates! Go elsewhere!"

The refugees wept openly.

"Sirs, we have nowhere to go! The bandits are everywhere. They burn the fields, they kill in the hills. Even the mountains are not safe!"

"Enough!" the guards shouted back. "Leave now, or we will loose arrows!"

On the wall, bows were drawn.

Cannons were even turned toward the crowd. Though unloaded and meant only for intimidation, the gesture alone was cruel.

Wailing filled the air.

A few braver souls stepped forward cautiously, gambling that the guards would not truly fire on their own people.

They advanced a few steps.

No arrows flew.

Encouraged, they moved closer.

Then Zhu Huakui's voice exploded from above.

"Why are you not shooting?"

The guards hesitated.

"But... they are our people."

Zhu Huakui snatched a bow and attempted to draw it. His sixty-five-year-old body, softened by years of indulgence, failed him. His arms trembled.

Irritated, he grabbed a crossbow from a nearby guard, aimed at the foremost civilian, and pulled the trigger.

Thwack.

The bolt struck.

A civilian collapsed.

The crowd erupted in screams. People dragged the wounded man back, scrambling away in terror.

On the riverbank, the eyes of the Gao Family Village logistics soldiers burned red.

Zhu Cunji's face twisted in fury. "Damn it. That Prince of Chu is a monster."

Zhu Yujian stared at the wall, stunned. "Are there truly princes like this? Does he not consider these people his own subjects?"

At that moment, a presence stirred.

On the deck of the ship, the Heavenly Lord, who had remained seated in stillness for days, suddenly opened his eyes.

"This man deserves to die."

Every member of Gao Family Village dropped to their knees at once.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan's voice was calm, but it carried a weight that made even the river seem to pause.

"Send someone to call back the civilians. Gather them at a place distant from the city walls. The logistics team will remain here tonight to ensure their safety. Tonight, I shall personally intervene and deal with the Prince of Chu. The gates will be opened for the common folk."

A ripple of shock passed through the kneeling men.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun will personally intervene?"

In their minds, they saw it already: a colossal hand descending from the heavens, flattening the city wall and the prince alike.

Li Daoxuan spoke again.

"My true body is traveling across the four seas and cannot be bothered to return. I will use an avatar."

An avatar.

The mass-produced Heavenly Lord models.

Everyone from Gao Family Village knew how terrifying those were in action.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun was intervening, then this matter was already decided.

A boat was dispatched to the shore.

"Everyone, come back!" the soldiers called to the sobbing refugees. "We will find a safe place upstream to rest tonight. Do not fear. We will protect you."

With no other choice, the refugees followed.

They withdrew upstream to a stretch of open riverbank far from the city walls. There, under the cold sky, tens of thousands gathered together, huddling for warmth and clinging to the grain they had been given.

Around them, the Gao Family Village logistics team formed a perimeter.

Firearms ready.

Supplies distributed.

Eyes sharp in the dark.

And somewhere above, unseen by ordinary mortals, judgment was preparing to descend.

Chapter 1098 I'll Deal with the Princ

That night, the moon hung high and painfully bright, scattered stars pricking the winter sky like shards of broken porcelain.

It was already the ninth year of the Chongzhen Emperor's reign, deep into winter, and the cold had teeth.

The riverbanks were merciless. Wind swept down the water's surface unhindered, slicing through cloth and bone alike. The refugees huddled together in tight clusters, shoulders touching, children wedged between adults for warmth. Even so, their bodies trembled uncontrollably.

Cold was honest. It did not shout like bandits. It simply waited.

The Gao Family Village logistics team moved with quiet efficiency. Boats were unloaded. Bundles were carried. Soon, bale after bale of cotton-padded jackets appeared on the shore.

The elderly received them first. Then the sick. Then women. Then children.

The soldiers did not toss them carelessly. They helped people put them on. Children too small for properly sized jackets were wrapped in adult ones, sleeves dangling absurdly past their fingers, hems dragging in the dirt. Once bundled up, they looked round and stiff, like little dumplings standing upright.

Some even managed shy smiles.

The refugees from Hubei were overwhelmed.

"These are cotton-padded jackets!"

"Good quality too!"

"Each one costs five taels of silver!"

"So many... this must be thousands of taels..."

They looked at the jackets as if they were gold armor.

Zhu Cunji happened to pass through the crowd at that moment and was immediately surrounded.

"Great benefactor!"

"Living Bodhisattva!"

"Blessed lord!"

The old prince's face flushed a deep red beneath his beard. He coughed twice, attempting composure, but the swelling pride in his chest was obvious. His back straightened. His steps gained weight.

He did not dislike being called a benefactor.

Zhu Yujian stood apart.

His gaze swept slowly across the refugees, and what settled inside him was not pride but heaviness. Each trembling figure felt like a question pressed against his ribs.

The Prince of Chu.

His relative.

A member of the imperial clan.

Blood ties, whether one acknowledged them or not.

To see the people rejected at the gates while they froze outside... shame was too mild a word.

He walked in a slow circle around the gathered refugees, then another, thoughts tangled and sour.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun said he would deal with the Prince of Chu after dark," he murmured at last. "It is dark now. How will he do it?"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the figure who had been seated in unmoving meditation for hours slowly stretched.

Li Daoxuan rose to his feet.

The motion was unhurried, almost casual, yet the air seemed to shift around him.

Zhu Yujian still did not fully understand the Dao Xuan Tianzun capabilities. He knew of power. He had seen power. But understanding and witnessing were different things.

Tonight, curiosity overpowered caution.

He followed.

Not too close. Not too far.

Li Daoxuan walked toward Wuchang City.

The walls loomed ahead, tall and solid, their battlements blazing with torchlight. Braziers burned. Oil lamps flickered. The ramparts were bright as day, for bandits might appear at any moment.

Soldiers lined the walls, alert and tense.

Zhu Yujian stopped well before bow range and dropped to the ground, pressing himself low.

Li Daoxuan did not stop.

He walked forward as though taking an evening stroll.

A soldier on the wall spotted him.

"Who goes there? State your business!"

No answer.

Li Daoxuan kept walking.

"Halt! Or we will loose arrows!"

Still he walked.

In wartime, a lone figure advancing toward a city at night without responding was no innocent traveler.

Bows were drawn.

Arrows loosed.

Thud.

The first arrow struck Li Daoxuan square in the chest. The shaft quivered faintly.

Zhu Yujian sucked in a sharp breath.

But Li Daoxuan did not falter.

Another arrow flew.

Thwack.

It struck him as well.

Still he advanced.

The soldiers hesitated, confusion rippling along the wall.

"He's wearing heavy armor!"

"The arrows aren't piercing!"

"Hold!"

More soldiers rushed to the battlements. Bows remained raised, but no further arrows were released. They stared down at the unmoving figure below with grim expressions.

Li Daoxuan reached the far side of the moat.

He lifted his head and studied the wall.

Quite tall.

Without haste, he reached to his chest and unlatched a small concealed hatch.

From within, he removed something palm-sized.

It resembled him only in the face. The body was entirely metallic, skeletal, jointed, unsettling. Under dim torchlight it appeared merely as a dark shape in his hand. Had the soldiers seen clearly that he had opened his own chest, several might have fainted outright.

He held the reconnaissance unit in his right hand, drew his arm back, and hurled it with force.

The tiny metallic figure cut through the night air with a sharp whistling sound, arcing cleanly over the battlements and disappearing into the city.

The soldiers stared.

"What did he throw?"

"Something small."

"Sounded like iron."

Men scrambled down from the wall to search.

Across the moat, Li Daoxuan simply turned and walked away.

Within moments, his silhouette dissolved into darkness.

On the city side, the reconnaissance Li Dao Xuan unit struck the ground.

At that instant, Li Daoxuan activated Co-sensing.

The small metallic figure sprang upright with a nimble flip, let out a faint, wicked little chuckle, then darted into a nearby alley and concealed itself behind a large stone.

Soldiers searched briefly but found nothing.

When they returned to the wall, the mysterious intruder was gone.

"What was he here for?"

No one had an answer.

Back at the riverside camp, Li Daoxuan resumed his seated position. His perspective shifted seamlessly to that of the tiny avatar.

The reconnaissance unit crawled out from hiding and stretched its thin metal limbs.

"Now then," it thought, scanning the streets, "where would the Prince of Chu's residence be?"

It did not ponder long.

In ancient cities, princely estates traditionally faced south. Therefore, one headed north.

Simple.

The small metallic figure moved through streets and alleys with surprising agility. Before long, an enormous compound came into view.

The Prince of Chu's mansion.

Guards stood at the main gate.

Irrelevant.

The reconnaissance unit slipped into a drainage ditch, wriggled forward through cold, foul water, then emerged into a garden pond inside the estate.

It crawled out onto stone.

A brief pause.

"Oh dear. Slightly wet. Hopefully I won't rust."

A minor concern.

It began wandering deeper into the residence. To find the Prince's chambers, one needed only to locate the most extravagant structure in the rear courtyard. Grandeur betrayed its owner.

Inside, Zhu Huakui lay awake.

At sixty-five, indulgence had weakened him. Sleep came lightly and left quickly. Though it was deep night, his eyes remained open.

He feared the sound of sudden battle cries.

He feared the words: "The bandits have entered the city."

He feared ruin.

"Is someone there?" he called toward the door.

The guard captain answered immediately. "Your Highness, this subordinate is present."

Zhu Huakui exhaled.

"Good. Guard carefully. Do not allow spies to infiltrate and harm this Prince."

The guard captain replied with confidence, "Rest assured, Your Highness. It is absolutely impossible for any spy to—"

His words froze in his throat.

Something was walking toward him.

Small.

Metallic.

Barely larger than a palm.

Its head bore a miniature human face.

Its body was a visible iron framework, joints flexing openly with each step.

The guard captain's voice began to tremble.

"Wh-what... what are you?"

The tiny metal figure smiled.

A slow, sinister curve of its miniature lips.

"I'm here," it said softly, "to deal with the Prince."

Chapter 1099 Entry Granted

The guard captain let out a shriek that cracked in the cold night air.

"Ah! Assassin! A demon assassin!"

Even as he shouted, instinct took over. His saber flashed free of its scabbard and came down in a vicious arc toward the tiny metallic figure at his feet.

The blade cut nothing but air.

The small figure had already slipped forward, nimble as a rat darting through grain sacks. It passed between the captain's boots before the man even realized he had lost sight of it.

Li Daoxuan, in truth, had once been nothing more than a city couch potato. Fighting ability? Practically none. If danger appeared, his first instinct would have been to close the curtains.

But years of controlling avatars in real combat had changed him. Practice, even secondhand, leaves traces. He was no martial hero, but neither was he helpless anymore.

One might say he had upgraded.

From useless homebody to combat-ready homebody.

As he slid past the guard captain's legs, there came a sharp metallic clink. A blade appeared in his tiny hand.

For a figure no larger than a palm, it was enormous, practically a "greatsword." If he had stood beside the protagonist of Berserk, he might have felt a strange kinship.

To the guard captain, however, it looked like nothing more than a fruit knife.

The "greatsword" swept horizontally.

Thud.

The blade struck the guard captain's Achilles tendon with brutal precision.

Anyone who knows anatomy knows that once that tendon is severed, the foot is useless.

The guard captain collapsed with a heavy crash.

The surrounding guards recoiled in terror.

"What kind of monster is that?"

"He's going to kill His Highness!"

"Captain!"

The captain was still conscious. Pain flooded him, white and blinding, but survival instinct burned hotter. He rolled frantically across the floor, scrambling away in a humiliating sprawl, terrified the tiny creature would leap onto his throat next.

Li Daoxuan did not chase him.

Instead, he turned.

Two swift flashes.

Thud. Thud.

Two more guards cried out as fruit-knife-sized blades buried themselves into their insteps.

That kind of pain was unforgettable. Sharp, electric, humiliating.

They hopped backward on one leg, clutching their feet, faces twisted in disbelief.

By then, Li Daoxuan had already slipped between them and entered the Prince of Chu's bedchamber.

Inside, Zhu Huakui had heard everything.

The screams.

The strange metallic sounds.

The word "demon."

His courage dissolved instantly.

He scrambled off his bed and wedged himself underneath it, trembling violently. From a tall man's perspective, perhaps that hiding place would suffice.

From Li Daoxuan's tiny vantage point, however, the Prince might as well have been standing in the open.

Every wrinkle.

Every trembling jowl.

Perfectly visible.

"Your Highness, Prince of Chu," Li Daoxuan said, stepping closer, his tiny metal face curved into a smile, "hiding under the bed will not save you."

Zhu Huakui's eyes bulged.

"What are you? What kind of demon are you? Stay back!"

Li Daoxuan tilted his head slightly.

"I am the vengeful spirit of the common people. You barred us from the city. We were slaughtered by rebels outside your gates. Our grievances gathered, our hatred fused, and thus I was born."

"Aaaaah!" Zhu Huakui shrieked. "Save this prince! Someone save this prince!"

Outside the door, the guards heard him.

If this had been a human assassin, they would have rushed in, even at the cost of their lives. That was duty. That was tangible.

But this was a demon.

Humans are curious creatures. Many claim they do not fear death. Very few can say the same about ghosts.

The guards did not move.

Not one step.

Li Daoxuan advanced slowly.

Step by step.

He raised his "greatsword" and pointed it toward the trembling old man.

"Prepare to die."

The Prince of Chu let out one final strangled cry.

"Ah—!"

His head lolled sideways.

His body went slack.

Before Li Daoxuan could even swing, the old man had already died.

Fear had done the work.

He was sixty-five, weakened by indulgence, burdened by paranoia. His heart simply gave out.

Li Daoxuan clicked his tongue softly.

"Tch."

Well. That saved effort.

He turned and walked out of the chamber.

The guard captain still sat on the ground, clutching his ruined tendon, face pale as ash. The two other guards trembled nearby. None dared move. They simply watched the tiny metal figure walk past them as though escorting their own nightmare.

After traveling a full street's length, the reconnaissance Heavenly Lord unit found a secluded nook and hid.

There was no rush.

The city would take care of itself now.

Back at the riverside camp, Li Daoxuan opened his eyes.

The soft weeping of refugees still drifted through the cold night air.

Zhuge Wangchan, Zhu Cunji, and Zhu Yujian were all staring at him, eyes wide, expressions tense.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"It's handled. Tomorrow morning, have the common people go to Wuchang again. They will be allowed in."

Zhuge Wangchan's face lit up. "Understood. I will inform those still awake."

He immediately walked among the refugees who had not slept, those who sat hunched in silence or sobbed quietly into their sleeves.

"Do not cry," he said gently. "Go to Wuchang again at dawn. You will be admitted."

A refugee shook his head miserably. "Benefactor, please do not comfort us with empty words. We know we will not be allowed inside."

Zhuge Wangchan smiled faintly.

"If the Heavenly Lord says you may enter, then you may enter."

"The Heavenly Lord?" the refugee asked blankly.

Without ceremony, Zhuge Wangchan pulled out a copy of The Heavenly Lord Dao Xuan's Demon Extermination Saga and tapped the cover.

"This is the Heavenly Lord," he said. "He has spoken. By dawn, the gates will open."

The refugees stared.

Who could believe such a thing?

Zhuge Wangchan spent half the night offering reassurance, yet words alone could not dissolve dread. Soft sobs continued until nearly dawn. Fear of the unknown is not easily soothed.

Fortunately, the rebels did not attack that night.

That alone was mercy enough.

At first light, before the sun fully rose, the refugees stood.

Without prompting, they began walking once more toward Wuchang.

As they approached the walls, something felt different.

The ramparts were manned, yes, but not by a single resplendent guard of the Prince of Chu.

Instead, there were only garrison soldiers, yamen runners, local militia, and even ordinary citizens who had volunteered to help defend the city.

Atop the wall stood the Prefect of Wuchang, beard whipping wildly in the winter wind.

The moment he saw the refugees approaching again, he did not hesitate.

"Open the gates!" he shouted. "Let the common people enter!"

No one opposed him.

The gates creaked.

Then slowly, heavily, they opened.

A stunned silence lasted only a heartbeat before it shattered.

"We can enter!"

"We're saved!"

Tears flowed openly as the refugees turned toward the fleet in the river. They bowed deeply to the Gao Family Village logistics team, then ran toward the city, clutching their children and bundles.

Zhuge Wangchan exhaled long and slow.

"Good. They are finally safe."

Zhu Cunji snorted. "That hateful prince wasted half a day of ours. How irritating."

Zhu Yujian gazed at the open gates, expression complicated.

"Let us go," he said at last. "We continue toward Sichuan."

The fleet moved from the Han River into the Yangtze, then began sailing upstream.

Shipping along the Yangtze was well developed. In theory, one could travel all the way to Chaotianmen Pier in Chongqing.

In practice, the Three Gorges were another matter entirely.

The currents were swift and violent. Hidden reefs lurked beneath the surface like silent predators. Sailing upstream using only sails and oars required both strength and luck.

It did not take long for the Gao Family Village cargo ships to stall.

"Reporting, Captain!" a sailor shouted. "The boats cannot advance! No matter how hard we row, the current pushes us back!"

Zhuge Wangchan frowned slightly as he watched the churning water.

The ships shuddered, strained, and drifted sideways.

"Our celestial ships did not accompany us this time," he murmured. "These are wooden vessels prepared in Hanzhong. They cannot contend with such force."

The river roared in answer.

Ahead lay Sichuan.

Between them and it stood the river itself.

Chapter 1100 Will You Really Pay Us?

Zhu Yujian frowned as he stared at the violent rush of the river ahead.

"This is bad," he said slowly. "We were careless. None of us properly accounted for the Yangtze Three Gorges. If these vessels cannot be hauled upstream, our transport fleet will be stranded here."

The current roared in agreement, slamming against the hulls as though to mock their planning.

Zhuge Wangchan rubbed his temples.

"Do we turn back to Anqing and ask Shi Kefa to lend us divine river boats?" he muttered. "But a round trip would cost far too much time. Sichuan will not wait for us."

The two of them stood there worrying like scholars who had miscalculated an examination question.

Meanwhile, Zhu Cunji was doing something entirely different.

He was admiring the scenery.

The cliffs of the Three Gorges rose steep and magnificent, wrapped in mist, layered like brushstrokes from a divine painter. The river carved through the mountains like a blade of light. The phrase "picturesque rivers and mountains" felt almost inadequate.

"Magnificent," Zhu Cunji breathed.

Beside him stood a Puppet Tianzun, equally transfixed.

Li Daoxuan, viewing everything through the box, felt a surge of satisfaction. He had once seen advertisements for seven-day Yangtze cruises costing over five thousand yuan. Now he was touring untouched Three Gorges scenery for free.

Five thousand yuan saved.

Absolute profit.

He was still savoring this triumphant calculation when something tugged at his awareness. In the midst of this majestic natural landscape, there was a small but jarring discord.

Movement.

On the riverbank.

Zhu Cunji pointed. "Look. Someone is waving at us."

Everyone turned.

Near the swiftest stretch of current stood a thin man in ragged clothes and straw sandals. His garments were barely fit for autumn, much less winter. One glance was enough to understand his condition.

A laborer.

He waved both arms frantically.

"Come closer! Quickly, come closer!"

Zhuge Wangchan did not hesitate. "Bring the boats nearer. Let us hear him."

The fleet edged toward the bank.

The man's face lit up at the sight of so many vessels.

"Sirs!" he shouted. "Do you need porters? We can pull your boats upstream!"

A collective realization struck the deck.

"Porters."

Of course.

The Yangtze Three Gorges had relied on boat trackers since as early as the Sui Dynasty. It was an ancient, brutal profession carved into the riverbanks themselves.

Zhuge Wangchan's eyes brightened. "Timely indeed! Yes, we require your services. How do you charge?"

The man grinned, revealing uneven teeth.

"A small boat costs thirty-three copper coins. A medium boat sixty-six. A large boat ninety-nine. Most of your fleet appears to be small boats, so most will be thirty-three."

Zhu Cunji nearly jumped.

"What? Thirty-three copper coins?"

His tone startled the man.

"Is... is it too expensive?" the man stammered quickly. "Ten men pull one small boat. Thirty-three coins split among ten men. Each gets three coins. Sir, truly, it is not expensive."

Zhu Cunji stared at him.

"Did I say it was expensive? I was about to say it's absurdly cheap."

The man blinked.

Zhuge Wangchan tilted his head thoughtfully.

"Ten men split thirty-three coins," he said slowly. "That is three coins each. What of the extra three coins?"

The man scratched his head awkwardly.

"Well... those are mine."

Understanding dawned.

A middleman.

Zhuge Wangchan's brows knitted. He was about to rebuke the man for skimming earnings from laborers when Li Daoxuan stepped slightly forward and spoke in a low voice.

"The existence of middlemen is necessary."

Zhuge Wangchan paused. "Necessary? Is he not profiting from their labor?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head gently.

"Most porters are illiterate and poor communicators. They cannot negotiate terms or seek out clients effectively. This man connects labor to opportunity. He organizes them, brings work, coordinates payment. If he did not exist, they might earn nothing at all. If his cut were excessive, then yes, that would deserve criticism. But three coins? That is equivalent to one porter's share. He is one of them. He handles the talking. They handle the pulling."

Zhuge Wangchan nodded slowly.

"I see."

He waved toward the man.

"Very well. The job is yours. Gather your people."

The man's face lit up with relief and excitement. He cupped his hands and shouted toward a crevice in the nearby rocks.

Moments later, men began emerging.

Dozens of them.

It was winter, yet they wore only thin layers. When they reached the riverbank, they stripped without hesitation, wrapping their meager clothing around their waists. Their bodies, darkened by sun and wind, gleamed bronze under the pale light.

One of them shouted in Sichuan dialect, "Ropes ready!"

Thick ropes were tossed down.

The sailors hurried to secure them to the bows. On shore, ten men grouped together for each small boat. They lifted the ropes onto their shoulders in practiced motion.

The middleman stood aside, shouting instructions.

"Keep close to the bank!"

"Steer carefully!"

"Slow and steady!"

The chant of the porters rose rhythmically as they leaned forward, muscles straining, straw sandals digging into the mud.

On the boats, the sailors coordinated carefully, keeping tension balanced.

Slowly.

Painfully.

The vessels began to move.

The current fought them every step, but man and rope and wood persisted together.

At last, they cleared the most violent stretch of water.

From the decks, those watching could see the red marks carved deep into the porters' shoulders. Faces contorted with effort. Breath coming in ragged gasps.

"This work..." someone muttered. "It is inhuman."

Three copper coins.

For that.

Silence settled across the fleet.

But on shore, the porters were smiling.

They had completed one boat. That meant three copper coins per man. Enough for six large steamed buns. Enough for a family dinner. And this fleet was enormous.

Today, perhaps they would earn one hundred copper coins total.

They would not starve for several days.

They ran back upstream to their starting point, shouting eagerly.

"Another boat! Another!"

Zhu Yujian leaned over the railing.

"Aren't you exhausted?" he called out. "You were gasping just now. How are you back already?"

The porters grinned but struggled to articulate the answer.

The middleman answered instead.

"A fleet this large is rare. They wish to seize the chance while it lasts. Better to be tired today than hungry tomorrow."

No one on the boats spoke.

Zhu Cunji suddenly straightened.

"Raise the price."

The middleman blinked. "What?"

Zhu Cunji's voice boomed.

"I will pay from my own purse. Raise their wages."

The middleman looked confused.

Zhu Cunji shouted toward the porters.

"For each small boat, you will receive one hundred and ten copper coins. Each man will get ten coins!"

For a heartbeat, the porters froze.

Then joy erupted across their faces.

Ten coins each.

More than triple.

But just as quickly, that joy flickered.

Their expressions shifted.

Excitement gave way to something else.

Anxious disbelief.

A few even turned pale.

Zhu Cunji frowned. "What is wrong? Are you not pleased?"

One porter swallowed nervously and asked in a small voice,

"Sir... will you really pay us?"