

Great Ming 1101

Chapter 1101 Through the Three Gorges

"You'll really pay us?"

That single question struck Zhu Cunji harder than any insult could have. He had stepped forward with what he believed was magnanimity, intending to raise wages in public view so that he might bask for a brief moment in gratitude and perhaps patch the small, unspoken emptiness that followed him like a shadow. Instead of admiration, he was met with suspicion. Instead of cheers, doubt.

For a young man who had grown up surrounded by rank and ceremony, the reaction felt strangely humiliating.

He stomped his foot on the deck and leaned over the rail, his voice ringing across the river.

"What kind of person do you think I am? Do I look like someone who would cheat you out of a few coins? Take a proper look at me. I am the most..."

Before he could finish, Zhu Yujian darted out from behind him, clapped a hand over his mouth, and dragged him down to the deck with surprising force.

"Lower your voice. Do you want the whole river listening?"

Zhu Cunji froze, then blinked as reason returned to him.

"Oh. Right."

Zhu Yujian released him and spoke more calmly. "In times like this, loud declarations are useless. If you want trust, offer advance payment."

Realization dawned on Zhu Cunji's face.

"Right. Advance payment."

He sprang up again, fished out a silver ingot weighing at least five liang, and tossed it toward the shore with exaggerated flair.

"Five liang upfront."

The ingot landed with a dull thud near the boatmen's feet. None of them moved. They stared at the silver as though it might explode.

"It is not fake, is it?"

Zhu Cunji swayed slightly and collapsed onto the deck, staring at the sky as though the heavens themselves had betrayed him.

Zhuge Wangchan laughed without restraint, though there was more understanding than mockery in his expression. Zhu Cunji simply did not comprehend the instincts of men who had survived by caution all their lives. Those at the bottom of society were not accustomed to unexpected generosity. Good fortune did not fall from the sky. If something descended from above, it was usually trouble.

Without further comment, Zhuge Wangchan signaled a few logistics soldiers. They leaped ashore, retrieved the five liang ingot, and returned to the ship to bring out several strings of copper coins. When they came back to the riverbank, they placed the coins directly into the intermediary's hands.

"The money will remain with your people. You pull the boats, and you will be paid according to what you pull. The gentleman just now was not wrong. Small boats, one hundred ten wen. Medium boats, two hundred twenty wen. Large boats, three hundred thirty wen. We thank you for your effort."

Copper coins spoke a language that silver could not. They were heavy, tangible, immediate. Even if poorly cast, they could still purchase grain.

The hesitation dissolved almost instantly. Cheers rose from the riverbank as the boatmen shouldered their tow ropes once more, their earlier wariness replaced by renewed vigor. Muscles tightened, feet

braced against stone, and the long line of vessels crept forward through the current with steady determination.

As their spirits lifted, so too did their voices. A chant began, rough yet rhythmic, carried by breath and effort rather than artistry.

"Feet push stone, heave ho.

Hands scoop sand, heave ho.

Bare backs strain, heave ho.

Climb higher, heave ho."

They might not have been skilled with rhetoric, but song required no education.

From the decks, the militia soldiers watched in silence, some of them feeling an unfamiliar heat rise behind their eyes. A few instinctively rolled up their sleeves, as though compelled to jump down and share the burden.

Zhuge Wangchan's voice stopped them.

"Hold your positions. Why do you carry those flintlock rifles? If rebels attack at this moment while you are busy pulling ropes, will you run back to retrieve your weapons? And if you are too late, what then?"

The reminder settled heavily. Reluctantly, the soldiers resumed their posts, rifles in hand, eyes scanning the forested slopes and jagged cliffs lining both banks of the Yangtze.

There are many ways to defend a nation. Some stand in the front lines with guns. Some manage supplies in the rear. Some transport provisions through treacherous terrain. Others labor in workshops, refining weapons and tools. The crucial thing is not glory but responsibility.

With the tireless effort of the boatmen, the fleet gradually made its way through the formidable Three Gorges and continued westward toward Sichuan.

The sharp crack of flintlock fire shattered the air at Yunyang County.

At the northern gate, waves of rebels surged forward in chaotic fury, convinced that the city's defenses were thin. Their scouts had confirmed that only one thousand militia garrisoned the county, and boldness born of desperation pushed them into a reckless assault.

What they met instead was Cheng Xu.

As the general commander of the Gao Family Village expeditionary force into Sichuan, Cheng Xu had dispatched his four principal generals, Flat Rabbit, Zheng Gouzi, Gao Chuwu, and Zheng Daniu, each leading a thousand men to secure surrounding counties. He himself remained in Yunyang with one thousand troops, anchoring the defense.

The rebels had expected weakness. They collided with discipline.

A militia soldier steadied his aim and fired. A rebel fell before he had even grasped what had happened. The soldier worked the bolt swiftly, the angled mechanism ejecting spent residue and fragments of burned paper from the chamber before a spring fed a fresh round into place. He raised the rifle again and pulled the trigger, only to find it stubbornly unresponsive.

"The cartridge residue has jammed the breech."

His frustration broke into his voice.

The squad leader beside him did not soften his tone.

"Were you not drilled on emergency procedures? If it jams, step back and clear it. Do not shout."

Chastened, the soldier retreated several paces and cleared the obstruction with practiced hands, while others seamlessly filled the gap in the firing line.

Bolt action rifles loaded with paper cartridges were prone to jamming, especially under sustained fire. Yet even if several hundred weapons functioned properly, their combined force was overwhelming against opponents armed with blades and spears.

The rebels never reached the walls. Bodies littered the ground before the low ramparts of Yunyang, and what remained of the attacking force retreated in disarray toward the mountains.

Cheng Xu considered pursuit only briefly before dismissing the idea. The mountains of Shu were vast and treacherous. One thousand men entering them in search of scattered rebels would vanish without leaving a ripple.

He turned back toward the city and felt his brow tighten.

Yunyang was overcrowded with refugees, pressed shoulder to shoulder in every street and courtyard. County towns in that era were modest in size, often stretching only two li along a single wall. Under ordinary circumstances they felt sufficient, because farmers lived dispersed across the countryside. Now, driven by rebellion, those same farmers had flooded into the town.

The sudden swell in population had driven grain prices upward at an alarming rate.

Cheng Xu could do little but wait anxiously for the logistics fleet.

At that moment, the embroidery of Dao Xuan Tianzun upon his chest spoke.

"Cheng Xu. Go to the riverside. The logistics team has arrived."

Joy flashed across his face.

"They are here."

When Dao Xuan Tianzun delivered news personally, doubt had no place.

He hurried to the southern gate overlooking the rushing river, where a vast flotilla of cargo boats was steadily approaching the county. The sight stirred a deep relief within him that no battlefield victory could quite replicate.

"The shipping route is open."

Orders spread quickly through the city.

"Dockworkers needed to unload grain. Strong men, come. Wages are good."

Refugees who had feared starvation surged forward, desperate not only for food but for work that restored dignity.

Soon, great quantities of supplies were carried ashore, and the militia began distributing hot gruel to the waiting crowds.

In Yunyang County, beneath walls still stained by smoke and blood, the scent of gunpowder gradually mingled with the humble fragrance of boiling grain. It was not triumph, nor was it peace, but it was something far more precious in troubled times.

It was stability returning, one bowl at a time.

Chapter 1102 Didn't Dare to Believe a Single Word

Kaixian County.

Ran Ke, the Pacification Commissioner of Kaixian, studied Flat Rabbit with an expression that hovered somewhere between admiration and headache.

After several days of interaction, he had confirmed something undeniable. The man before him possessed real military capability. His musketeers were not decorative soldiers meant to look

intimidating from a distance. They were terrifyingly effective. Not once had the rebels managed to break through their formation. Every charge had ended in smoke, thunder, and bodies falling before they ever reached the walls.

More impressively, these musketeers were disciplined. They did not panic. They did not scatter. They reinforced weak points in the defenses before those weaknesses could even be exploited. Several times the rebels had attempted flanking maneuvers under cover of night, only to discover that the angles they had chosen were already fortified and waiting.

With Flat Rabbit commanding the defense, Kaixian stood as steady as a mountain.

And yet.

Ran Ke pressed his fingers to his temple.

The general himself was unbearable.

Flat Rabbit rarely spoke without exaggeration. His tone carried natural swagger. His gestures were wide. His voice rose and fell like a storyteller performing in a marketplace teahouse. Even when stating something mundane, he sounded as though he were bragging about conquering the world before breakfast.

There is an old saying that a cowardly soldier ruins one man, but a cowardly general ruins an entire army. By logic, a man who sounded this unreliable should have led an equally unreliable force. Yet reality stubbornly contradicted the proverb. His army was solid. Efficient. Reliable.

Ran Ke found it profoundly unfair.

As if on cue, Flat Rabbit was speaking again, completely unaware of the complicated gaze fixed upon him.

"General Ran, I am not exaggerating at all. Once our new crops are introduced to your mountain villages, your people will never worry about hunger again. Potatoes, corn, sweet potatoes, and Celestial Fertilizer. With these in place, Kaixian's Tujia population will eat their fill every year. I guarantee it."

Ran Ke's smile did not waver, but inwardly he sighed.

If I believed that so easily, I would deserve to be fooled.

Outwardly, he nodded politely.

"These new crops sound remarkable. I would very much like to see them."

Inside, however, his thoughts were merciless.

I have never heard of these things in my life. Potatoes. Corn. Sweet potatoes. They sound like curiosities brought by traveling peddlers. And this so called Celestial Fertilizer. If it truly exists, why has no one in Sichuan ever seen it? Even if they grow, will they taste like anything worth eating? I do not believe a single word.

Flat Rabbit continued, entirely at ease.

"My logistics team will arrive soon. When they do, they will bring food, clothing, all sorts of supplies. We will help you arrange everything properly. Your Tujia people do not need to hide in the mountains forever. Come out. Trade with us. Live side by side with the Han. Everyone prospers together."

Ran Ke's smile remained steady.

"That would be most welcome."

In his heart, he scoffed again.

Logistics team. In Sichuan? Through this terrain? With rebels running wild in every direction? Moving goods on a large scale here is nearly impossible. And even if it were possible, no one sends large quantities of supplies without expecting something in return. Free generosity does not exist in this world.

He was still complaining silently when the County Magistrate rushed into the hall, face flushed with excitement.

"Master Tu! Your logistics team has arrived. They are here. There are so many carts. So much grain. It is unbelievable."

Flat Rabbit shot to his feet, laughter bursting from his chest.

"They finally made it? Excellent. Come, come. Let us show the refugees something worth celebrating."

Ran Ke blinked several times.

They actually came?

He had not expected that the man's boast would materialize into reality. With a dazed expression, he followed the County Magistrate and Flat Rabbit up to the southern city wall.

From atop the wall, the official road stretching southward revealed a sight that made him momentarily forget how to breathe.

The convoy extended beyond vision.

Horse drawn carriages, ox carts, single wheeled handcarts, and every imaginable contraption designed to move goods crept forward in an unbroken line. In Sichuan's rugged terrain, the humble single wheeled cart was a marvel of practicality, but its capacity was limited. When used in large numbers, however, even modest loads accumulated into something magnificent.

The front of the column had already reached the city gate.

The tail still wound its way out of distant mountain paths.

Ran Ke inhaled sharply.

"This is truly a large scale transport convoy. Master Tu, you were not deceiving me after all?"

Flat Rabbit froze for a moment.

Only then did he realize that Ran Ke had not believed him even once.

The discovery stung more than he expected.

Without another word, he strode toward a nearby cart and lifted the covering cloth.

"What are you carrying?"

The logistics soldier grinned.

"Corn, Master Tu."

"Good."

Flat Rabbit grabbed a sack weighing roughly ten catties, carried it up to the wall, and dropped it in front of Ran Ke and the Magistrate.

"This is one of the new crops. Corn."

Ran Ke crouched, untied the sack carefully, and withdrew a golden ear. He held it in both hands, turning it over slowly, studying the neat rows of kernels.

"One ear is this large?"

"Exactly."

The simplicity of the answer made it more convincing.

Ran Ke felt a ripple of genuine surprise. If one ear truly contained this many kernels, then the yield per mu could be astonishing. Even without knowing precise calculations, he understood abundance when he saw it.

Flat Rabbit continued, warming to the subject.

"Corn is not delicate like rice. It does not demand rich paddies or perfect irrigation. Even poor soil will do. Even rocky slopes. Your region's landform makes rice cultivation difficult, does it not?"

Ran Ke frowned slightly.

"Rocky slopes, yes. The soil is thin."

"There you have it. Corn will grow where rice struggles."

"You are certain?"

"Why would I lie about something like that?"

Ran Ke did not answer immediately. He stared again at the bright yellow kernels and finally voiced the doubt that still lingered.

"Even if it grows, it surely cannot taste very good."

Flat Rabbit waved a hand dismissively.

"Whether it tastes good or not, we will know once we cook it. Steam it. Steamed corn is sweeter."

Curiosity, once awakened, is difficult to suppress. Orders were given. Large steamers were prepared.

The convoy had not yet finished entering the city when the first batch of corn was ready. When the lid of the steamer was lifted, a wave of warm, sweet fragrance drifted outward.

Ran Ke inhaled.

"So fragrant."

The Magistrate nodded eagerly.

"The air itself smells sweet."

Each of them took an ear.

They bit down slowly.

The kernels burst under their teeth, releasing natural sweetness and a soft, satisfying texture.

Their expressions shifted almost imperceptibly at first, then openly.

"This is delicious."

"Truly delicious."

They looked up at Flat Rabbit.

"Master Tu, were you actually telling the truth earlier?"

"You were not merely boasting?"

Flat Rabbit threw up his hands.

"Every word I speak is the truth. Why do you all assume I am fabricating things?"

Ran Ke could not help but laugh.

"Master Tu, the way you speak invites suspicion. Your tone, your gestures, your confidence. You sound like a man who survives on bluster alone. Anyone would think you are a street rogue spinning tales."

Flat Rabbit opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Ran Ke's expression softened.

"But now I see that you are a man who stands by his word. A true hero of the martial world. The Tujia people of Kaixian are honored to forge friendship with you."

Flat Rabbit rubbed the back of his head.

"Why does that sound like an insult?"

High on the city wall, under the drifting scent of freshly steamed corn, laughter finally replaced suspicion.

And for the first time, Ran Ke began to believe not only in the crops, but in the man who had brought them.

Chapter 1103 Too Many to Maintain

While Gao Family Village was boldly advancing into the southwestern regions, Former Shaanxi Governor Lian Guoshi, after a long and exhausting journey, completing entry procedures, searching for a residence, relocating his household, and settling various tedious affairs, finally arrived at the Nanjing Ministry of Revenue.

At last, it was time for him to formally assume office.

The moment he stepped into the Ministry's office hall, Lian Guoshi immediately sensed the atmosphere. Several officials glanced at him with faintly resigned expressions, as though silently remarking, Another unfortunate soul has arrived.

Lian Guoshi respectfully bowed to everyone present with proper courtesy.

"Greetings, gentlemen. I am Lian Guoshi. From today onward, I will serve as the Left Vice Minister of Revenue. I humbly request your guidance."

"Oh?" replied one official lazily. "I am the Right Vice Minister. One on the left and one on the right, we shall stand like twin guardians. Let us cooperate well in the future."

The words themselves were polite and perfectly proper, yet the man's eyes never left the book in his hands, and he did not even bother to look up at Lian Guoshi.

Suppressing his irritation, Lian Guoshi glanced at the title of the book. The cover read *Slapping the Table in Amazement*, a collection of popular vernacular stories that had gained fame only in recent years.

Reading storybooks during working hours?

Was this truly how a dignified Right Vice Minister conducted himself?

Before Lian Guoshi could react further, another voice called out from behind a desk.

"I am the Minister of Revenue, Minister Lian. I have long admired your reputation. Though you are the Left Vice Minister and I hold the senior post, let us not fuss over such trivial formalities. Think of us as brothers—let us simply enjoy ourselves."

Hearing the voice but seeing no one, Lian Guoshi was startled. He walked around the desks and found the speaker sprawled across a massive sheet of paper spread over the floor. Instead of official robes, the man wore a Daoist gown and was completely absorbed in painting with a brush.

Painting during working hours?

Was this truly how a Minister of Revenue behaved?

Sweeping his gaze across the hall, Lian Guoshi observed that some officials were writing calligraphy, others were painting landscapes, a few were humming tunes, and several were leisurely sipping tea. The entire ministry resembled a gathering of idle scholars rather than a central government office.

Although Lian Guoshi had long heard that the Six Ministries in Nanjing were little more than comfortable retirement posts for officials, witnessing the reality with his own eyes left him speechless.

"Gentlemen," he asked carefully, "is the Ministry of Revenue always so... unoccupied?"

The Minister of Revenue added another satisfied brushstroke before replying without lifting his head.

"There is truly nothing for us to manage, Minister Lian. You are new, so it is natural that you are full of enthusiasm. When I first arrived, I was even more energetic than you. Unfortunately, after searching diligently, I discovered there was simply nothing to do. If you doubt it, feel free to try. Handle whatever you like. We certainly will not interfere."

Lian Guoshi fell silent.

"So I may do as I wish?"

A faint smile curved his lips as he began examining the Ministry's records.

Before long, he found documents related to Gao Family Village.

Near Nanhui Fangcheng, an emerging marketplace had formed, officially recorded as the "Nanhui Mouth Maritime Merchant Market." Over time, it was gradually becoming a critical hub for north-south trade. Goods transported along the Yellow River and Yangtze River converged there with commodities arriving by sea. Ming merchants, Western traders, and Nanyang merchants all conducted business in the area, and its prosperity was quietly beginning to rival that of Quanzhou Port.

However, Nanhui Mouth itself was not ideal for constructing a true harbor. The coastline lacked a natural deep-water port, the seabed was shallow, and vessels frequently risked running aground. Merchants were actively searching for a more suitable anchorage.

As Lian Guoshi reviewed the documents, a clear strategy began to take shape in his mind.

These so-called merchants were, in truth, people from Gao Family Village. They were searching for a proper deep-water harbor.

Since Zhoushan's Dinghai Port was already being developed into a military harbor, it was only logical to establish a commercial port elsewhere. Shanghai, with its advantageous position, was clearly more suitable than Zhoushan Island for such a purpose.

He allowed himself a soft chuckle.

"The first task I shall undertake here is to assist the Heavenly Lord in establishing a proper trade port—one where ships from Gao Family Village, Western vessels, and Nanyang traders may freely dock and conduct commerce."

"In the Heavenly Lord's words, we must learn to exploit foreign markets."

"Very well. I shall see it done."

He quietly transferred the Nanhui documents to his own desk. Even if the other officials noticed, it likely would not matter—none of them appeared inclined to concern themselves with anything substantial.

In that moment, Lian Guoshi suddenly realized that working among a group of idle bureaucrats had its advantages. With no one obstructing him, he could proceed entirely according to his own designs.

Huangpu River, Shanghai Port – Ming Navy Camp

Cui Weihua, Military Preparations Commissioner for Suzhou and Songjiang, was conducting an inspection of his fleet.

It was, without exaggeration, a fleet.

Only a few years earlier, he clearly remembered commanding a modest force of 402 militiamen, 400 Zhejiang soldiers, 1,003 sailors, seven Fujian Cangshan ships, thirty sand ships, five paddle boats, and sixteen small Hu boats. Of these vessels, only the Cangshan ships could be considered respectable warships; the rest were little more than dilapidated relics barely fit for service.

Their combat capability had once been pitiful.

Now, however, as he conducted a full tally, something felt wrong.

Twenty junks. Eighteen Red Seal ships. Each was no smaller than his former Cangshan vessels. When combined with various cargo ships, armed merchantmen, and other auxiliary craft, the total exceeded two hundred ships.

It could now be called a super fleet.

Cui Weihua scratched his head in confusion.

"Since when did I acquire so many ships?"

A subordinate stepped forward to report.

"On a certain date, Lord Shi Kefa's forces delivered five small boats seized from Huangmei river bandits."

"On another date, Imperial Merchant Tie Niaofei presented four junks captured from pirates."

"On yet another occasion, Imperial Merchant Tie Niaofei gifted five Red Seal ships taken from Japanese pirates."

The list continued.

Cui Weihua had never paid much attention before. Whenever ships were gifted, he simply ordered his sailors to take possession and begin training. Only now, seeing the grand total, did he realize the scale of the problem.

"With so many vessels," he asked slowly, "can we even afford to maintain them?"

The subordinate wiped sweat from his brow.

"Minister Cui, I was about to raise this concern. We have reached the limit of what we can sustain. Our sailors are limited in number, yet every additional ship requires a full crew. We are severely understaffed."

"Moreover, each newly acquired vessel requires repairs and refitting, which consumes considerable funds."

"In addition, the hulls must regularly be scraped clean of barnacles and marine growth. In the past, when we had fewer ships, the sailors could manage easily. Now, with such numbers, we simply cannot keep up. Several ships are already heavily fouled."

Cui Weihua's eyes widened in alarm.

"Damn it..."

At that very moment, another subordinate hurried over.

"Report! The newly appointed Left Vice Minister of Revenue, Lian Guoshi, has arrived. He requests to inspect the coastal situation."

Chapter 1104 What Use Is Your Navy Anyway?

The moment Lian Guoshi's name was mentioned, Cui Weihua let out a soft sigh.

"So he has finally arrived. Lian Guoshi... an eighth-generation descendant of the renowned minister Lian Zining."

His subordinate blinked in surprise. "Such a distinguished lineage? Then how did someone so formidable end up transferred to one of the Six Ministries in Nanjing?"

Everyone understood that appointments to the Nanjing ministries were often little more than honorable retirements. Cui Weihua's subordinate was no exception.

Cui Weihua explained in a low voice, "I heard that during his three years as Governor of Shaanxi, Lian Guoshi never once submitted the full quota of taxes to the court."

"Not even once?" the subordinate exclaimed.

Cui Weihua nodded gravely. "Although Shaanxi suffered severe drought at the end of the Tianqi era, there have been no reports of major drought in recent years. The disaster shifted to Shanxi and Henan. Yet even without drought, he failed to collect and remit the full taxes. Either he was incompetent, or he

deliberately neglected his duties. When His Majesty wished to promote Sun Chuanting after the defeat of the Dashing King, there was no suitable vacancy, so Governor Lian was moved aside."

Only then did the subordinate understand.

"No wonder he was reassigned to Nanjing."

Cui Weihua straightened his robes and gathered himself. "Come. We will receive him. He is probably just putting on a show as a newly appointed official—he will inspect the area and leave."

With that, he led his men out of the naval camp.

Cui Weihua offered Lian Guoshi a perfunctory bow, the sort exchanged merely for form's sake.

"Lord Lian, we were unaware of your honored visit. May I ask what brings you here?"

"I have come to inspect the geographical location of this naval camp," Lian Guoshi replied calmly.

Cui Weihua looked puzzled. "And why inspect this location?"

Lian Guoshi gestured toward the river. "The Huangpu River here does not appear shallow at all. I see rather large vessels anchored along its banks."

At once, Cui Weihua brightened.

"Indeed! During the Yongle era, Minister of Revenue Xia Yuanji dredged and regulated the waterways of Suzhou and Songjiang, connecting the Suzhou River with the Huangpu River. The Suzhou River became a tributary, increasing the Huangpu's water volume and greatly improving its navigability. Although this is merely an inland river, it can accommodate massive seagoing ships—better than some coastal harbors. That is precisely why I established the naval base here. You see how extensive our fleet has become? This entire stretch is filled with our ships."

Lian Guoshi surveyed the area carefully, glancing left and right, taking in every anchored vessel before nodding.

"It is indeed an excellent location."

Cui Weihua smiled broadly, clearly pleased with the praise.

Then Lian Guoshi's tone shifted.

"Such a fine location, yet wasted on a naval base. Since the navy will not be needing it, this place should instead be converted into a commercial dock."

Cui Weihua froze.

"What do you mean, 'will not be needing it'?"

Lian Guoshi regarded him steadily. "Tell me, Lord Cui, what use is your navy? Can you sail north to strike the Japanese? Can you venture south to confront the Franks?"

Cui Weihua faltered. "I... that..."

Lian Guoshi's smile carried a trace of irony.

"As I understand it, most of these ships were not captured by your fleet's own strength. They were... gifts, were they not?"

The words struck like a blow. Cui Weihua instinctively clutched his chest and took several steps back.

Lian Guoshi continued evenly, "This location allows ships from the sea to sail directly into the inland river and unload cargo. It is far more convenient than Nanhui Mouth. From here, goods can be

transported easily to Suzhou and Nanjing. Likewise, merchandise from those cities can be shipped here with equal efficiency."

"Lord Lian, you... you..." Cui Weihua sputtered, struggling to respond.

"How about this," Lian Guoshi proposed calmly. "Relocate your naval base to a more secluded location. Let me consider... yes, Chongming Island would suffice."

Cui Weihua was speechless.

This was beyond outrageous.

Though his official rank was lower, he could not tolerate being pushed around so blatantly. Anger surged within him, and he prepared to unleash a fierce rebuttal. If necessary, he would summon support from his network of colleagues, fellow provincials, classmates, and mentors. He could even seek help from Shi Kefa, who was rumored to be thriving in office and on the verge of promotion to Governor of Anqing and Lu Prefecture. With such backing, why should he fear a mere Vice Minister relegated to Nanjing?

Just as he was about to explode, Lian Guoshi added calmly,

"Once this site becomes a commercial dock, I intend to levy two parts tax on foreign ships and one part on domestic merchants. If trade flourishes, revenue will increase accordingly. With greater funds available, we can allocate more to your military."

Cui Weihua's fury halted mid-breath.

"Increased military funding? You... you can make such a decision?"

"The Ministry of Revenue here has no effective leadership at present," Lian Guoshi replied evenly. "I am overseeing matters. Yes, I can decide."

"You will not report to the capital?"

Lian Guoshi let out a soft scoff.

"Local revenue should serve local needs. Why send it to the capital for those grand officials to siphon away?"

Cui Weihua felt as though thunder had struck him.

No wonder Lian Guoshi had never submitted full tax quotas during his tenure in Shaanxi. He had kept the funds for local use.

Such conduct bordered on treason in orthodox eyes—grounds for dismissal, even execution.

He had employed this tactic in Shaanxi, been reassigned to Nanjing for it, and now intended to do the same here.

And yet...

When Lian Guoshi spoke of capital officials embezzling funds, the words resonated deeply.

Collecting taxes locally was an arduous task that often pushed commoners toward rebellion. Yet once the silver reached the capital, it vanished into the hands of powerful ministers, each taking their share until little remained. The capital grew prosperous while local soldiers went unpaid.

Would it not be better to keep the money here?

His vast fleet desperately required maintenance funds.

In that moment, Cui Weihua found himself viewing Lian Guoshi in a different light.

"Lord Cui," Lian Guoshi said mildly, "shall we consider this agreed? You will transfer Shanghai Port for civilian administration."

Although Cui Weihua commanded ships, he was fundamentally a civil official. In matters of governance, his mind was sharp.

"You intend to relocate the Nanhui Mouth market here?" he asked quietly.

"Precisely. Nanhui Mouth lies at the tip of a peninsula, inconvenient for land transport. Moving the market to the Huangpu River will transform it into an inland port, greatly improving efficiency."

Cui Weihua nodded, but lowered his voice.

"I worry that Western and Southeast Asian merchants may hesitate to enter an inland river port. They are accustomed to the open sea. They may fear being trapped or exploited once inside."

Lian Guoshi smiled faintly.

"If our goods are superior enough, they will come regardless of risk."

Cui Weihua had no answer to that.

After a brief pause, Lian Guoshi continued,

"Although my earlier words were harsh, consider this carefully. Once the Imperial Merchants' massive ships begin to arrive regularly, what role will your small wooden vessels play in future naval warfare?"

Cui Weihua fell silent.

Lian Guoshi concluded decisively,

"Let your fleet transform into the Huangpu River Patrol. Maintain order along the river. Protect merchant shipping. Ensure a stable trading environment. Only by fostering secure commerce can we attract more Western traders and claim a share of their profits."

Chapter 1105 The Tujia People's Flowery Coverlet

After taking over Cui Weihua's naval base, Lian Guoshi immediately began implementing his plan to attract merchants and investment.

This method was something he had learned from Dao Xuan Tianzun. When Dao Xuan Tianzun developed the suburban market outside Xi'an's East Gate, he first built rows of simple houses, then invited merchants to settle there. Once the shops opened, the entire area quickly flourished.

Now Lian Guoshi intended to follow the same approach.

He personally went to the riverside to wait for a cargo ship traveling from Gao Family Village to Anqing Prefecture. After meeting the crew, he explained his ideas in detail and asked them to relay a message back to the village, requesting materials and personnel to support the construction of a new port.

Gao Family Village responded without hesitation.

The new harbor would greatly benefit their shipping routes and help advance Dao Xuan Tianzun's maritime strategy. Full support was the only reasonable choice.

Not long afterward, a large shipment of supplies, disguised as Lian Guoshi's "family property," arrived in Nanjing and was delivered to him. Several middle school graduates came as well, along with a team of Blue Hats to assist with organization and construction.

Thus, the initial construction of Shanghai Harbor officially began.

The arrival of the logistics team also energized Cheng Xu.

With supplies secured, his forces could continue advancing deeper into Sichuan.

Led by the White Pole Soldiers, Cheng Xu's thousand men sailed upstream along the Yangtze River. After passing Wanzhou, they learned that rebels had caused trouble in the region. However, as a prefectural city, Wanzhou's defenses were far stronger than those of an ordinary county, and it had not fallen.

The prefect stood on the city walls with garrison troops and militia.

When he saw a large fleet approaching, filled with soldiers carrying flintlock rifles, he was startled. He immediately ordered the gates closed and the alarm bells rung.

The White Pole Soldiers rode forward to the base of the wall.

"Prefect, do not panic. We are the Shizhu White Pole Soldiers."

Only then did the prefect relax.

"So it is you. But where are your white pole spears? Why have you switched to firearms?"

"Times have changed."

Perhaps that was true.

The prefect did not question further.

Cheng Xu's forces passed through Wanzhou without incident and continued upstream to Zhongzhou. There they disembarked and proceeded south on foot, trekking through dense mountain forests for many days.

Eventually, a strange and magnificent sight appeared before them. A single massive stone pillar rose straight into the sky, towering like a spear piercing the clouds.

They had reached the Stone Pillar.

At the foot of Wan Shou Zhai, Qin Liangyu and Zhao Sheng, also known as Dian Dengzi, were already waiting.

Zhao Sheng stepped forward enthusiastically.

"General Qin, this is the chief instructor of Gao Family Village's militia. His name is He Jiu."

Qin Liangyu clasped her fist in greeting and carefully observed him. Although part of his face was concealed by a black scarf, his bearing was composed and disciplined. He clearly was not a common bandit. His movements suggested someone who had once served in official circles.

She quickly guessed that he was likely a former military officer using an assumed name.

Her gaze shifted to the thousand soldiers behind him.

She drew a quiet breath.

Each man stood upright and steady, radiating discipline and confidence. Every soldier carried a long, unusually shaped flintlock rifle. Armor could be glimpsed beneath their simple cloth robes. They wore the robes to avoid drawing too much attention, but the protection underneath was obvious.

After a single glance, Qin Liangyu understood their strength.

"Instructor He, your militia is formidable."

"You flatter us. We only serve the common people."

"I heard five thousand of your men entered Sichuan. You brought only one thousand here. The other four thousand are stationed in Northern Sichuan?"

"Yes. The rebels split their forces, so we must do the same. Four commanders each lead a thousand men. They defend key counties and prefectures while protecting the surrounding areas."

Qin Liangyu nodded, though she sighed softly.

"Sichuan is vast. A dozen cities are not enough."

"We know. Our goal now is to gain local support and mobilize the tribal levies. If the native forces rise, resisting the rebels will be far easier."

Qin Liangyu looked thoughtful but did not argue further.

At the same time, in the Baren Stockade within the Bashan Grand Canyon, a grand welcoming ceremony was being held.

This was the ancestral home of Ran Ke, Pacification Commissioner of Kaixian.

Young Tujia men and women formed a large circle and performed a lively hand-in-hand dance. Their movements were full of mountain spirit and vitality.

Flat Rabbit stood at the center.

One by one, beautiful Tujia maidens danced before him and offered him cups of wine.

Unfortunately, the wine was far too mild.

Flat Rabbit was accustomed to drinking strong fifty-two-proof Wuliangye bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. Compared to that fiery liquor, the wine of this era tasted almost like lightly boiled water.

The ceremony continued for half an hour. Cup after cup was drained.

When it finally ended, Flat Rabbit remained perfectly sober.

The Tujia people were astonished.

What astonishing capacity. A thousand cups without getting drunk.

Ran Ke stepped forward, laughing.

"Rabbit Lord, you are truly a hero. I have never seen such drinking ability."

Flat Rabbit burst into hearty laughter.

"I have tasted celestial wine. Mortal liquor cannot shake me. Your Baren Stockade is an excellent place, General Ran."

Ran Ke smiled proudly.

"This stockade is easy to defend and difficult to attack. In Northern Sichuan, only Qin Liangyu's Wan Shou Zhai can compare."

Flat Rabbit surveyed the surrounding land carefully.

"This terrain is perfect for growing potatoes, corn, and sweet potatoes. I can see it clearly. If you plant our new crops, next year no one in your stockade will go hungry."

Ran Ke's face lit up with joy.

"If that is so, when we harvest next year, I will select beautiful women and send them to your residence in gratitude."

Flat Rabbit's expression immediately turned serious.

"What are you saying? Women are not gifts to be traded. I do not want beauties. If you insist on giving something, just offer a local specialty as a souvenir."

He laughed loudly.

Ran Ke fell into deep thought.

Local specialty? What could this poor mountain region possibly offer?

Suddenly, he seemed to recall something and beckoned to a nearby young woman.

"You are skilled at weaving Xilankapu brocade, are you not?"

She nodded shyly.

"Bring the finest piece from your household and present it to Rabbit Lord."

The woman hurried away and soon returned carrying a beautifully woven coverlet. Holding it respectfully with both hands, she stepped forward.

"Rabbit Lord, this is a specialty of our region, called Xilankapu. In the words of the Han people, it is known as the Tujia People's Flowery Coverlet."

Chapter 1106 Total Mobilization

The moment Flat Rabbit laid eyes on the Xilankapu, something inside his chest rose like steam from freshly cooked rice, warm and unstoppable, because even though he had been sent here on official duty under the will of Dao Xuan Tianzun to investigate the cultural specialties of the Tujia people and open pathways for exchange between mountain and plain, between Ba and Han, he had not expected beauty to ambush him so directly in the hands of an ordinary village girl.

He reached out and took the patterned coverlet carefully, almost ceremonially, as though he feared rough handling might insult the spirit woven into it.

"Little sister," he said with an easy grin, "this Xilankapu is truly excellent. The thread feels coarse. Is it linen? The stitches are wide, but steady."

The young woman nodded, a little shy but not timid. "Cotton thread costs too much. We cannot afford it. So we use coarse linen."

Flat Rabbit ran his fingers across the surface again, studying the geometry of its patterns, the rhythm of its colors, the stubborn sincerity of its craftsmanship. What struck him was not refinement in the Han sense, but character. The fabric did not try to flatter the eye. It simply declared what it was.

"Even with coarse linen," he said slowly, searching for words he did not quite possess, "it is exquisite. The thickness gives it strength. The wide stitching gives it... presence. I do not know how to describe it properly. But it is beautiful. Truly beautiful."

Such was the curse of the unlettered man who could feel beauty with precision yet lacked the language to dissect it. He stood there for a while, staring at the cloth as though it might explain itself to him.

After a brief silence, he lifted his head.

"Seeing this," he said, "I suddenly thought of a business opportunity."

Ran Ke blinked. "Business? What business?"

"We trade grain and celestial fertilizer for your Xilankapu."

The air seemed to pause.

Ran Ke stared at him as though he had just suggested exchanging gold for pebbles from the riverbed, and the surrounding Tujia girls were no less stunned. Xilankapu was beautiful to them, yes, but it was also undeniably rustic, woven from coarse linen, bearing patterns inherited from ancestors who cared more for symbolism than for fashionable elegance. The Han people, with their obsession for delicacy and polished refinement, rarely valued such earthy craftsmanship.

This was why Xilankapu was woven mostly for their own beds, earning its quiet nickname as the Tujia rustic coverlet.

To trade grain for it felt almost absurd.

Flat Rabbit did not seem bothered by their silence.

"Besides this," he continued, "what other specialties do you have?"

An elder quickly stepped forward before Ran Ke could answer, clearly unwilling to let this opportunity slip away.

"We have water bamboo mats," he said eagerly. "Woven from water bamboo. Cool as mountain shade. Perfect for sleeping in summer."

Flat Rabbit's eyes brightened.

"That is excellent. The north is suffering severe drought. Summer heat there is merciless. Your mats will be cherished. We will trade for those as well."

Excitement began to ripple through the crowd.

"We also make fragrant silk fans," another voice added. "From phoenix-tail bamboo grown in mountain streams, combined with fine silk. Seventy-two traditional steps. Carving, drilling, scraping, bleaching, sizing. Then hand-painted and inscribed. Even gentry in the capital admire them. But silk must come from Jiangnan, and because of the wars, merchants no longer bring it. We cannot produce them now."

Flat Rabbit laughed softly, as though the problem were no more troublesome than a misplaced coin.

"That is simple. We have connections in Jiangnan. Transporting silk here is a minor task. We sell the silk to you. You craft the fans. Then we purchase them back and sell them to wealthy gentry elsewhere. Everyone profits."

The joy that followed was unrestrained and genuine, the kind that spreads quickly through a mountain village where opportunity rarely knocks twice.

Ran Ke felt the warmth of it too. If the entire village prospered, then as Kaixian Pacification Commissioner and mountain chieftain, his own position would only grow stronger.

"Lord Rabbit," he said sincerely, "I am deeply grateful."

Flat Rabbit waved his hand.

"A small matter."

Then his expression shifted, subtle but deliberate.

"However," he continued, "bandits run rampant across Sichuan. They hide in these mountains. If caravans must pass through valleys and ridges to reach your village, what happens if they are ambushed? What if grain and silk are stolen before they arrive? What then?"

The celebration cooled instantly.

Ran Ke's face darkened.

Until now, he had preferred distance. Let chaos burn outside as long as it did not scorch his own doorstep. But trade required roads. Roads required security. Prosperity required order.

If the bandits remained, commerce would choke.

If commerce choked, the Ba people would remain trapped in poverty among their own mountains.

The logic was brutal and clear.

Ran Ke straightened.

"Lord Rabbit," he said gravely, "if we are to speak of the future, then we must act for it. As Kaixian Pacification Commissioner, I will issue a general mobilization order. All nearby mountain villages will rise. We will drive the bandits from these mountains."

In the past, he had hesitated. That hesitation had nearly cost Kaixian County its walls.

But once he committed fully, the situation would be different. These mountains were not merely geography. They were inheritance.

Soon, the mobilization order spread across the Ba Mountains.

Village after village answered.

"Drive out the bandits!"

"We want to do business!"

"We want to earn silver!"

"We want to prosper!"

Deep within the Ba Mountains Grand Canyon, a defeated bandit army hid inside a small cave, licking wounds from their earlier clash with Flat Rabbit's forces. They had fled here believing rugged terrain to be their shield.

Their chief snorted.

"That strange arquebus unit may be strong," he said, "but they cannot fight in the mountains."

Another bandit laughed.

"Exactly. Guns are useless in ravines. Once we close the distance, we stab them."

The chief grinned broadly.

"As long as we stay in the mountains, they cannot touch us. We strike when we wish. We retreat when we wish. We are invincible here."

"We are not afraid!"

One bandit shouted loudly, attempting to harden his own courage.

The answer came not from his comrades but from the forest.

An arrow flew from behind a distant tree and struck cleanly into his throat. The sound was short and wet. He clutched the shaft, eyes wide, and collapsed without finishing his breath.

"Enemy attack!"

Weapons were seized in panic.

Only then did they realize they were surrounded.

A large group of dark-skinned young men stood among the trees, dressed without uniformity, straw sandals on their feet, clothing practical and mismatched. Yet they shared one common feature, long wooden-shafted spears gripped with steady hands.

They resembled White Pole Soldiers at first glance, but a closer look revealed the difference. Their spear shafts were not white.

At their front stood Ran Ke, clad in lamellar armor, posture steady as stone.

"I am Ran Ke, Kaixian Pacification Commissioner," he declared. "You believe you are safe because you ran into the mountains? These are the Ba Mountains. Our ancestors were the Ba people. We have lived here for thousands of years. You think you can hide from us in our own home? You are too green."

The bandit chief scowled.

"The mountain I crossed yesterday was also called Ba Mountain. Can you people not invent better names?"

Ran Ke's eyes hardened.

"Kill."

The Tujia soldiers surged forward, wooden-shafted spears thrusting as one, and the mountains that had once sheltered the bandits now echoed with the sound of a people reclaiming their ground.

Chapter 1107 A New Market

Fighting mountain warfare in the Bashan region against the people who had been born and raised there was, in hindsight, a kind of suicidal optimism on the rebels' part, because mountains are not merely terrain but memory, and memory belongs to those whose ancestors are buried beneath the soil.

It did not take long before the mountainous belt around Ba County was swept clean.

Flat Rabbit's main force of flintlock riflemen handled the open engagements with ruthless efficiency, their disciplined volleys breaking rebel formations before courage could gather properly in the enemy ranks. Once those formations shattered and the rebels scattered into smaller, desperate groups, the Tujia warriors took over, moving through ridges, gullies, and hidden paths with the calm familiarity of men walking through their own courtyards. The rebels discovered very quickly that hiding in the mountains only works if the mountains do not speak the language of your pursuers.

Within half a month, the region around Kaixian felt almost unreal in its calmness. Villagers who had fled to the county seat began to consider returning home. The fear of sudden slaughter in the fields, of rebels appearing from treelines without warning, slowly loosened its grip on their hearts.

Yet winter had already settled over the land.

Even if they returned, no crops could be planted. Many homes had been burned to blackened frames. Some villages were nothing more than ash and collapsed beams. Returning meant facing cold walls and empty granaries, which was hardly better than staying in crowded temporary shelters.

It was at this delicate moment that a voice rang through the streets of Kaixian.

"Road construction! Recruiting workers to build roads! Three catties of white rice per day! Report to the county yamen now! Hurry, or there will be no positions left!"

That final sentence struck harder than the promise of rice.

Hurry, or there will be no positions left.

Scarcity is more persuasive than generosity.

The common folk did not debate long. They surged toward the yamen in waves, afraid not of labor but of missing opportunity.

Soon, Kaixian entered a frenzy of large scale road construction.

There is an old saying that prosperity begins with roads, and although the people of Sichuan at the time were as impoverished as those of Shaanxi, they understood instinctively that silver does not walk across mountains on its own. It needs paths.

It was the winter of the ninth year of the Chongzhen reign of the Chongzhen Emperor, the slack farming season, and the rebels had just been cleared. If one did not seize such a window, then when would fortune next knock?

Three catties of white rice per day was an astonishing wage in a province where hunger had become routine. News spread from Kaixian to surrounding mountain villages faster than smoke on dry wind. Even those who had not fled earlier now descended from the hills, tools slung over shoulders, determined to claim their share of this unexpected winter harvest.

Between Kaixian and Wanzhou there had long existed a narrow and poorly maintained official road. It twisted unnecessarily, dipped sharply, and forced freight carts to crawl like injured animals.

Now the task was clear.

Widen it. Reinforce it. Flatten it. Straighten it where possible. Reduce steep gradients. Prepare it not merely for foot traffic, but for bulk transport.

While Kaixian built toward Wanzhou, Wanzhou simultaneously built toward Kaixian, as though two hands were reaching for each other across rugged land.

Beyond Kaixian, other forces were also in motion.

Zheng Gouzi, Gao Chuwu, and Zheng Daniu each launched operations in their own territories. The Tujia Pacification Commissioners from neighboring mountain strongholds, having been thoroughly persuaded by Gao Family Village's relentless trade offensive, issued general mobilization orders of their own. Village after village rallied.

The rebels had once believed that mountains guaranteed invisibility.

That illusion collapsed quickly.

Hiding from government troops might work, but hiding from locals who knew every ridge, every cave, every water source was another matter entirely. A man born in those mountains could track footprints across stone and sense smoke where no flame was visible.

The Gao Family Village Militia handled the brutal frontal engagements. Once resistance fractured, local fighters swept through and erased what remained.

It was an efficient division of labor.

Across northeastern Sichuan, rebel forces lost footholds one after another, driven steadily westward. Each time the militia completed its work in an area, clearing rebels and stirring local enthusiasm, it moved again without hesitation, pushing the tide further toward the interior.

War cleared space.

Roads prepared the future.

And far away from the mountains, a different kind of transformation was underway.

At the Nanhui Mouth Market, a merchant named Yao Xingjuan stood before a wool sweater shop, calculating profit in his mind.

Yao Xingjuan was not what one would call a legitimate merchant. On land, dressed respectably, he was Yao Xingjuan. At sea, operating in quieter waters and murkier arrangements, he was Yaoxing Juan, half trader, half pirate, entirely pragmatic.

He had come to purchase wool sweaters branded by the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory, goods known for their quality and distinctive minority weaving patterns, which had begun gaining popularity in coastal cities. Japanese nobles in particular had developed a fondness for them. Japan's climate was cold, and wool production there was limited, forcing reliance on imports.

Yao Xingjuan intended to buy in bulk, sail to Nagasaki, and sell at several times the purchase price, extracting silver with a smile.

Lost in pleasant arithmetic, he suddenly noticed something unsettling.

The shop was closing.

Assistants were packing goods into crates. Shelves were being dismantled.

"Shopkeeper!" he called out. "Why are you closing? Are you no longer trading here?"

The shopkeeper smiled calmly. "Correct. The beaches here at Nanhui Mouth are too shallow. Large ships cannot dock conveniently. Business is inconvenient. We are relocating."

Yao Xingjuan felt a flicker of panic. "If you move, where will I buy wool sweaters?"

"Follow the coastline toward the mouth of the Yangtze River," the shopkeeper replied. "Then sail into the Huangpu River estuary. There are signboards along the way. You will find the new market easily."

Yao Xingjuan frowned. "An inland river port? Can sea vessels even enter?"

"They can," the shopkeeper said with a laugh. "The Huangpu River is far more convenient for docking than this place. You will understand when you see it."

Yao Xingjuan hesitated. "Why should I go now? Your shop has not fully closed. Sell me several large bundles. I will visit the Huangpu River next time."

"You may buy now," the shopkeeper agreed. "But you truly should see the new Shanghai Port on the Huangpu River. It is newly built. The Assistant Minister of Revenue in Nanjing invested considerable effort into it. Goods from Suzhou, Nanjing, and beyond are gathered there. It is far larger than Nanhui Mouth. Items you could not find here are available there."

Interest replaced irritation.

Yao Xingjuan purchased several large bundles of wool sweaters and loaded them onto his vessel. Steering north along the coast, he passed Chongming Island, and soon the mouth of the Huangpu River came into view.

What he saw surprised him.

On both sides of the river mouth stood small stone fortresses. Atop each, a rudimentary lighthouse had been constructed. Workers bustled below, clearly intending to refine and beautify the structures.

Long cloth banners hung from the temporary towers.

One read: "Merchants from all nations are welcome to trade here."

The other read: "Honest dealings, fair for all."

Yao Xingjuan narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

So the authorities had finally understood something about maritime commerce.

As his ship approached the river mouth, two government patrol boats intercepted him.

"Who goes there?"

Yao Xingjuan immediately prepared silver fragments, expecting routine extortion. As he gave his name, he discreetly extended the offering.

The sailors recoiled as though he had handed them poison.

"No!" one exclaimed. "The new Assistant Minister of Revenue is extremely strict. If we accepted even one copper coin, we would be dead men when we returned."

Yao Xingjuan blinked.

"There is such a thing?" he murmured.

Unable to contain his curiosity, he asked, "If you do not accept offerings from merchants, how do you manage your livelihoods?"

The sailor grinned.

"Our military pay has been increased. It is sufficient now. Losing our positions over a few pieces of silver would be foolish. Show your travel permit."

After a brief inspection, the sailor waved him forward.

"You may enter."

As Yao Xingjuan guided his ship into the Huangpu River, he realized that something fundamental was shifting along these waters. This was not merely a new dock. It was the birth of a new market order, one that might prove more profitable than smuggling ever was.

And for a man who measured loyalty in silver weight, that possibility was worth careful attention.

Chapter 1108 The Pirate Demon Star

This time, Yao Xingjuan was not merely impressed. He was genuinely shaken.

As his ship glided into the Huangpu River, he found both banks lined with banners that fluttered proudly in the winter wind, their messages painted in bold characters as if the river itself had decided to learn how to speak.

"Welcome to Shanghai."

"We strive to ensure every merchant finds fair trading opportunities here."

"Proceed fifty zhang forward, then turn right."

And then the one that made him blink twice.

"Warm and Sleepy wool sweaters, keeping you warm all winter long."

The official slogans were already unusual enough, but that final banner struck him like a clever slap to the face. A commercial advertisement displayed openly alongside government proclamations, without shame, without secrecy, almost as if profit and policy had decided to shake hands in broad daylight.

"Incredible," he muttered to himself. "This advertisement is hanging right next to official notices. No wonder those wool sweaters sell so well."

For a man who measured the world in margins and arbitrage, this was artistry.

He followed the directional signs carefully, steering deeper into the river traffic. Ships of varying sizes moved in disciplined order, and the entire scene felt less like chaos and more like design.

Then a voice rang out from a nearby vessel.

"Well, well. Isn't that the Demon Star Yao Xingjuan? You, a pirate, pretending to be a respectable merchant?"

Yao Xingjuan jolted and turned sharply, instinctively scanning for danger. When he saw the speaker, his tension melted into amused recognition.

It was Zheng Zhihu, second in command of the powerful Zheng clan.

"Ah, Python Two," Yao Xingjuan called back with a grin. "As if your Zheng clan is any different. Merchant on land, pirate at sea, official when convenient. You people cover all three realms."

Zheng Zhihu laughed heartily but did not deny it.

"What brings you here?" Yao Xingjuan asked. "Anything you consider worth buying must be top tier. Give a brother some guidance."

Zheng Zhihu snorted. "Do you take me for a fool? If I tell you how to make silver, you will steal my profits."

Yao Xingjuan clasped his hands theatrically.

"How can one man swallow the entire ocean? Second in Command, with your legendary generosity, teach me a little trick. I will remember your kindness for life."

Zheng Zhihu shook his head in mock exasperation.

"Fine. I am buying soy sauce."

"Soy sauce?" Yao Xingjuan frowned. "What kind?"

"Specialty seafood soy sauce."

With a flick of his wrist, Zheng Zhihu tossed a porcelain bottle toward Yao Xingjuan's ship. Yao reacted instantly, scooping it up with his robe before it could strike the deck.

"Careful!" he protested. "If it shattered, that would be a tragedy."

"Boil some shrimp," Zheng Zhihu said calmly. "Dip them in that sauce."

Yao had no shrimp at hand, and no patience either. He uncorked the bottle, dipped a finger in, and tasted.

His eyes widened.

"Well?" Zheng Zhihu asked.

"It is excellent," Yao admitted. "This will sell fiercely in Japan."

Zheng Zhihu nodded. "Their cuisine is similar to ours. They adore soy sauce. Transport this there, and you can sell it for three to five times the price. But remember, commoners there are poor. The Daimyo, the generals, the samurai are the ones with silver. Do not bother with cheap bottles. Buy the expensive ones, packaged in exquisite porcelain. Those self proclaimed cultured lords will happily pay for the bottle alone."

Yao Xingjuan bowed slightly.

"I have learned."

They docked while continuing their conversation, and once Yao set foot in Shanghai Port, he understood immediately that the shopkeeper at Nanhui Mouth had not exaggerated.

This market dwarfed the old one several times over. Goods from inland provinces were stacked in organized rows, each stall loudly declaring its specialty, each merchant hungry yet disciplined.

"What is this?" Yao asked at one stall.

"Embroidery from Chengcheng County in Shaanxi," the shopkeeper replied cheerfully. "Horse cloth. Beautiful draped across a fine steed. High officials adore it."

"I will take it."

He knew well that Japanese Daimyo loved to display prestige through their horses.

"And this silk fan?"

"A scented silk fan from Sichuan. Seventy two intricate steps in its making. Newly arrived."

"I will take that as well."

Ming silk had long enchanted foreign elites. There was no reason these would not follow the same path.

Another merchant beckoned eagerly.

"Esteemed sir, come look. Immortal Wine from the heavens."

Yao laughed.

"Do you think I am some country fool who believes in immortals?"

Before finishing his sentence, he took a small sip of the 53 proof sauce fragrance liquor, an unbranded specialty from Maotai Town.

The effect was immediate.

He froze, eyes unfocused for a heartbeat.

"This... what is this?" he whispered. "The aroma is overwhelming."

"As I said," the shopkeeper replied with a mysterious smile, "Immortal Wine. Rare. Not much left."

"I will take all of it."

The price was named. Yao did not haggle. Some things were clearly worth their silver.

As he supervised the loading, a group of Westerners approached, accompanied by a Ming translator. They asked the price for a bottle of the same liquor.

The figure quoted was significantly higher than what Yao had just paid.

He raised an eyebrow but remained silent.

After the foreigners left, he turned to the shopkeeper.

"You are not entirely honest. The price for me and the price for them differ. I know adjusting prices by buyer is common, but this port claims fair dealing. Be careful, or the supervising officials may expel you."

The shopkeeper smiled calmly.

"You misunderstand. The different pricing is based on regulation. Our local Left Vice Minister Lian set the tax rates."

"Tax rates?"

"Ten percent for Ming buyers. Twenty percent for Western buyers. We simply add the tax into the final price. Naturally, we cannot absorb it ourselves."

Yao blinked.

"So ten percent of what I paid was tax?"

"Indeed. But even with that, you will double or triple your investment elsewhere. Why quarrel over such a small fraction?"

Yao said nothing. He calculated quietly and concluded the man was right.

He finished loading a substantial cargo. After bidding farewell to Zheng Zhihu, he guided his vessel down the Huangpu River toward open sea. Ships flowed constantly in both directions, and on the banks countless carts delivered goods toward Shanghai Port, transforming it into a beating commercial heart.

This place was no temporary experiment.

It was a system.

Once his ship exited the river and passed beyond the effective jurisdiction of the Ming naval patrols, Yao Xingjuan changed.

He removed his merchant robes and donned martial attire. He fastened an eye patch over one eye for dramatic effect. A flintlock pistol rested at his left hip, a curved saber at his right.

The respectable trader vanished.

In his place stood the Pirate Demon Star.

"Nagasaki," he roared toward the horizon, laughter echoing over the waves, "here I come!"

And far across the sea lay Nagasaki Port, waiting unknowingly for a storm wrapped in silk, soy sauce, and Immortal Wine.

Chapter 1109 The New Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da

Meanwhile, at the Xuan-Da Command, the air itself seemed soaked in grease and ambition.

Wang Pu, Regional Commander of Datong, was hosting yet another grand banquet, and by this point even the cooks were beginning to suspect that if the Qing army ever decided to invade during dinner hours, they would first have to wade through three layers of braised pork and two rivers of wine before reaching any actual soldiers.

Ever since returning from the capital, Wang Pu had become a man of rising momentum, the sort of official whose footsteps suddenly sounded heavier not because of iron boots but because of expectation, as everyone across Xuan-Da knew that he had been personally summoned by the Emperor, praised with warm imperial words, and informally promised promotion and ennoblement once the Ministry of War untangled its own bureaucratic paralysis.

In late Ming officialdom, that kind of promise was better than silver and almost as intoxicating as real power.

Naturally, people rushed to curry favor.

Officials of every rank arrived bearing smiles that were slightly too wide and compliments that were slightly too rehearsed, and for days on end the feasting did not stop, because today a brigade general would host, tomorrow a regional commander, the day after that someone else eager to attach their name to a future marquis would open their treasury.

Wang Pu had eaten so much rich food that even his reflection in polished bronze seemed to glisten.

Yet for all the wine and flattery, Wang Pu was not a man entirely hollow inside, because he had not forgotten who had truly carried the battles on their backs while he stood in the correct place at the correct time.

He knew perfectly well that the victories near the capital had not been spun from his own genius, but rather forged by Wang Xiaohua, the Pingyang garrison commander whose flintlock riflemen had spoken louder than any memorial, and by the lesser known General Ma Shouying, whose cavalry charges had turned chaos into slaughter.

So he prepared two lavish gifts and sent them to Pingyang Prefecture without hesitation, because in this era gratitude was rarer than gold and therefore worth spending.

In short, the music played, the sleeves danced, and the wine flowed like policy promises.

Then the door burst open.

A soldier staggered in, breath ragged, eyes wide.

"Generals! Stop eating! To your camps! The new Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da has arrived!"

The effect was immediate and almost miraculous, as several men sobered on the spot with the terrifying clarity that only career anxiety can produce, their drunken haze evaporating faster than spilled liquor on a summer courtyard.

Armor clattered.

Boots thudded.

Within moments, officers who had been debating the merits of different sauces were sprinting back toward their camps, strapping on armor with hands that still smelled of wine, lining up at the gates in what they hoped looked like disciplined anticipation rather than panicked improvisation.

Soon, from the distant road, a formation appeared.

Orderly.

Silent.

Steady.

Lu Xiangheng had arrived, leading his Tianxiong Army.

Earlier he had been summoned to the capital by imperial decree, forced to abandon the rebels he had nearly encircled in the Dabie Mountains, only to discover upon arrival that Ajige's forces had already withdrawn, leaving him with nothing to fight and no enemy to display before the throne.

He had answered the summons for nothing.

Yet in the eyes of the Chongzhen Emperor, that "nothing" did not erase years of real victories, because Lu Xiangheng was known as a man who actually won battles instead of merely describing them well, a commander who had pushed bandits to the brink and almost sealed their fate entirely.

After careful thought, the Emperor had decided such a man should remain closer to the capital, positioned where he could both defend and be watched, and so Lu Xiangheng was appointed the new Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da.

As for Yang Sichang, the former commander, filial mourning was a respectable curtain behind which many inconvenient figures could remain undisturbed.

Thus Lu Xiangheng arrived at a frontier that smelled faintly of wine.

When he reached the camp gate and saw flushed faces, half concealed hiccups, and the unmistakable scent of collective indulgence, his expression hardened.

"No drinking in the army. Do you not understand this basic rule?"

"There was no battle."

"We were not on campaign."

Their answers were careful.

Short.

Almost pleading.

Lu Xiangheng felt irritation rise, yet he restrained it, because he knew they had recently answered the imperial summons and that a celebratory meal was not in itself a crime, especially in a world where tomorrow was uncertain and pay was perpetually delayed.

Still, one name interested him more than the rest.

"Is Wang Pu here?"

"Your subordinate is here!"

Wang Pu stepped forward, slightly unsteady but still smiling, his face flushed with either wine or ambition.

Lu Xiangheng studied him briefly.

"I heard you won every battle near the capital."

"A trifle."

"You made the Manchus scream for their mothers."

"A small matter."

"You earned immense contributions."

"Effortlessly easy."

Wang Pu chuckled, the alcohol loosening his tongue.

Lu Xiangheng's eyes sharpened.

"Explain your strategies."

"Strategies?"

"Yes."

"What strategies?"

"The tactics."

"Oh that."

Wang Pu waved lazily.

"I stood back."

"You stood back?"

"Nonchalant."

"And then?"

"Wang Xiaohua charged."

"With?"

"Flintlocks."

"And?"

"Bang bang bang."

Lu Xiangheng stared.

"And Ma Shouying?"

"Charged."

"How?"

"Like hell."

With that final declaration of battlefield doctrine, Wang Pu collapsed to the ground and began snoring with the serene confidence of a man who had already secured his future.

For a long moment, Lu Xiangheng simply stood there, speechless, confronted with the strange reality that military glory sometimes emerged from the most inelegant descriptions.

Absurd though it sounded, a clue had surfaced.

Flintlock riflemen.

Pingyang garrison commander Wang Xiaohua.

A name worth remembering.

As the thought settled, another name flickered briefly in his mind, Luo Xi, Military Commander of Shangnan County, associated in whispers with unusual firearms and stranger tales, yet Lu Xiangheng dismissed the connection for now, unwilling to chase shadows before securing what lay directly before him.

He entered the Supreme Commander's yamen and took his seat.

His first decree came without hesitation.

"I will open a horse market at Humakou."

Silence.

"To connect with the northern Mongols."

Murmurs.

"The Tumed and the Khalkha."

Eyes widened.

"We will trade for horses to fight the Qing."

The local officials bowed deeply.

"An excellent idea."

"However?"

"Yes."

"The Mongols have been acting strangely."

"In what way?"

"E'zhe has issued a punitive edict."

"Using what authority?"

"The imperial seal passed down from Genghis Khan."

That changed the tone entirely, because on the grasslands, seals mattered as much as swords.

"All western tribes have united," the official continued. "They have marched east and attacked the Khorchin tribes aligned with the Manchus."

Lu Xiangheng leaned forward.

"The Manchus responded?"

"They sent troops."

"So the grasslands burn."

"Yes."

"And the Mongols need horses."

"Yes."

"So they will not sell."

"Likely not."

For a moment, Lu Xiangheng felt disoriented, caught between opportunity and frustration, because a divided enemy was always welcome, yet an unavailable supplier was less so.

"It is still good," he said at last. "If the Mongols entangle the Manchus, that benefits us. The horse market must open regardless. However many horses we can obtain, we will obtain. Trying is better than surrender."

"Understood."

"But?"

"Yes."

"What now?"

"We have no money."

There it was.

The eternal enemy.

Silver.

Or rather, the lack of it.

"Wang Pu and the others have not received pay for nine months," the official added quietly. "Without money or grain, how can we buy horses?"

Lu Xiangheng felt a familiar ache behind his temples, the same one that had accompanied him through Yunyang, through Huguan, through every posting where titles were impressive but treasuries were empty.

Why was it always like this?

When he governed Yunyang, there was no money.

When he governed Huguan, there was no money.

Now at Xuan-Da, still no money.

"It seems we must rely on agricultural garrisons," he said slowly. "With grain we can trade. But to establish agricultural garrisons requires clearing land, buying seeds, purchasing draft cattle, acquiring tools. Everything costs money."

The irony was almost poetic.

To make money required money.

Before anyone could sink deeper into that spiral, a soldier burst in, eyes shining with the reckless joy of someone carrying news that might postpone despair.

"Report! Imperial Merchant Tie Niaofei has arrived! He brings many supplies!"

For the first time that day, the room fell silent not from fear, not from embarrassment, but from something dangerously close to hope.

Chapter 1110 It's Li Patron Again

Lu Xiangheng narrowed his eyes slightly, studying the soldier whose face was glowing with unconcealed excitement, and he found it faintly ridiculous that a hardened border soldier who had likely faced cavalry charges without blinking was now smiling like a child promised sweets.

"A merchant arrives," Lu Xiangheng said calmly, "and you look as if reinforcements from heaven have descended. What makes this man so special?"

The soldier grinned wider.

"Every time Tie Patron comes, he brings food, clothing, supplies. More than the court sends."

Lu Xiangheng said nothing.

"The court rarely pays us," the soldier added bluntly. "We live off Tie Patron now."

That sentence lingered in the air like a quiet accusation aimed not at Lu Xiangheng personally, but at the entire structure of the late Ming state, which prided itself on ritual precision while quietly defaulting on its own army's wages.

Lu Xiangheng felt genuine astonishment rise within him, not the theatrical kind used in court, but the kind that comes when reality becomes stranger than rumor.

A merchant sustaining border armies.

Absurd.

Yet the soldier continued without irony.

"When Governor Yang Sichang was here, he hired laborers to build roads, open mines, fortify cities, train troops. He spent enormous sums. Most of it came from Tie Patron."

Lu Xiangheng's brows lifted again, this time not in surprise alone but in recalculation, because that meant this merchant was not merely charitable but deeply embedded in frontier infrastructure.

Yang Sichang had relied on him.

Now Xuan-Da relied on him.

And the court, officially supreme, had become a distant rumor.

Soon enough, Tie Niaofei entered.

He moved with the relaxed confidence of a man accustomed to entering military yamen without being treated as an outsider, and as soon as he saw Lu Xiangheng, he clasped his hands respectfully.

"Master Lu. I have long admired your reputation."

"I have done nothing worth mentioning."

"You are too modest."

Tie Niaofei's smile was warm but measured.

"When you governed Yunyang, your Tianxiong Army became renowned. You suppressed bandits efficiently and cared for the people. The region prospered."

Compliments from merchants were never free of calculation, but Lu Xiangheng had been praised before and did not let it sway him easily.

He gestured for Tie Niaofei to sit.

"I hear you have long supported the border armies," Lu Xiangheng began directly. "Even Yang Sichang relied on your funds."

"Every loyal subject should contribute to the Great Ming," Tie Niaofei replied smoothly. "I have no special talents. I only know how to earn some money."

Lu Xiangheng could not help but exhale softly.

"Providing funds in such times is no small matter."

Tie Niaofei leaned forward slightly.

"Master Lu, you are newly appointed. You must have ambitions. If you face difficulties implementing your policies, please speak freely."

It was an open offer.

Silver.

Supplies.

Support.

Lu Xiangheng felt an uncomfortable tightening in his chest, because he was not naïve enough to believe that money flowed without direction, and accepting assistance from someone one barely knew was never a trivial choice.

No reward without reason.

No silver without expectation.

He hesitated.

Then Tie Niaofei casually brushed a speck of dust from his own chest, a small, almost unconscious gesture, and smiled.

"Do not be shy. We are practically old friends."

Lu Xiangheng's gaze followed that motion.

On Tie Niaofei's chest, embroidered in gold thread, was a familiar celestial figure, serene and otherworldly.

Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Recognition struck like lightning.

He had seen that emblem before.

Luo Xi of Shangnan County wore it.

Zheng Gouzi wore it.

Flat Rabbit wore it.

They all spoke of a mysterious benefactor known as Li Patron.

Suddenly everything aligned.

"You," Lu Xiangheng said slowly, "are connected to Li Patron?"

Tie Niaofei smiled.

"That is why I said we are old friends."

Emotion surged unexpectedly within Lu Xiangheng, not merely gratitude but something close to awe, because Li Patron had funded Shangnan, supported Yunyang during his own tenure, assisted in suppressing bandits, and now sustained the border armies as well.

"How," Lu Xiangheng murmured, "could such a person remain unknown for so long?"

"Better that way," Tie Niaofei replied quietly. "Good deeds do not require fame."

Those words struck deeply.

Lu Xiangheng understood the wisdom in remaining unseen, especially in turbulent times when visibility could attract suspicion as easily as praise.

"In that case," Lu Xiangheng said at last, "I will not refuse."

He had already accepted Li Patron's support in Yunyang. Accepting again here merely continued an existing thread.

"I plan to establish a horse market at Humakou," he continued. "To trade with the Mongols. I also intend to develop agricultural military colonies extensively so that Xuanfu and Datong troops can sustain themselves instead of starving whenever the court fails to send pay."

"I understand," Tie Niaofei nodded. "You need funds for land reclamation, tools, seeds, oxen. And you need goods to trade for warhorses."

"Exactly."

"I can provide both."

Tie Niaofei stepped outside briefly and returned with an iron box from one of the carts.

He set it down and opened the lid.

A sweet aroma drifted out immediately.

Lu Xiangheng blinked.

"What is this?"

"It is called an Egg Yolk Pie."

"It smells like an egg pastry."

"It is more than that."

Tie Niaofei's eyes gleamed faintly.

"The Mongols love it. They crave it daily. If we stock these in large quantities at Humakou, they will come eagerly to trade."

Lu Xiangheng stared at the pastries, struggling to reconcile the image of hardened steppe riders with a weakness for sweet baked goods, and although something about the entire proposition felt faintly absurd, the logic of demand and supply was difficult to refute.

If war could be influenced by appetite, then perhaps history itself had a sweet tooth.

"We will try," he said finally.

Meanwhile, far from Xuan-Da, in Taiyuan of Shanxi, another quiet transition was unfolding.

San Shier had packed his belongings and stood before Wu Shen, Governor of Shanxi, bowing respectfully.

"Governor Wu, Shanxi now runs smoothly. I can no longer contribute much here. Dao Xuan Tianzun has summoned me to Sichuan. I must depart."

Wu Shen's reluctance was genuine, because although San Shier often spoke in peculiar idioms that hovered dangerously close to impropriety, his administrative ability was undeniable, and Shanxi under his coordination had become remarkably efficient.

"If you leave," Wu Shen sighed, "I must hire a private secretary. An ordinary one would never match you. I would constantly fear deception or corruption."

San Shier smiled calmly.

"The personnel who came with me from Gao Family Village will remain. They were trained in modern management methods. They understand systems and accountability."

"You are confident?"

"Very."

Wu Shen looked at him for a long moment, aware that men like San Shier did not simply appear in every generation, and that beneath his strange phrases lay a disciplined mind shaped by influences far beyond traditional bureaucracy.

The world was shifting quietly.

Merchants funded armies.

Egg pastries courted Mongols.

Frontier commands survived on unseen patronage.

And somewhere behind the curtain of events, Li Patron continued to move without seeking applause.