

Great Ming 1131

Chapter 1131: Attack of the Demonic Ships

"This isn't right. This monster isn't right!"

"Ahhh! Quick! Shoot arrows into the water!"

The Qing soldiers panicked and actually did it. Arrows rained into the sea in frantic volleys.

But the moment the arrows struck the water, their force vanished. The current swallowed their momentum. Shafts drifted uselessly, bobbing like broken twigs. The shadow beneath the surface continued gliding effortlessly.

Even if they had struck it directly, it would not have mattered.

The underwater terror kept darting between boats, slashing, vanishing, striking again. The fleet descended into total chaos. Men shouted over one another. Oars splashed wildly. No one maintained proper formation anymore.

Their vigilance over the surrounding sea collapsed.

Of course, even if they had remained perfectly alert, it would not have changed the outcome. A swarm of small troop transports built for stealth landings could never contend with true warships.

Then it appeared.

On the distant horizon, looming against the darkness, a colossal silhouette rose from the sea.

The Wanli Sunshine.

The entire Qing fleet fell silent.

"What... is that?"

"A giant ship!"

"In the middle of the night... how can something like that be out at sea?"

"Is it a demonic ship?"

After being terrorized by something beneath the water, their minds were already poisoned with fear. So when a massive black hull emerged like a mountain from the darkness, their first thought was not the Ming navy.

It was demons.

"A demonic ship! Ahhh!"

On board the so called demonic ship, sailors worked efficiently.

Cannons were being loaded.

Since the enemy consisted entirely of tightly packed small boats, there was no need for solid shot. They switched entirely to shrapnel shells.

The sailors from Gao Family Village were highly familiar with this ammunition. The reformed pirates and newly recruited men were less experienced.

One reformed pirate picked up a shell, studying it with curiosity. He scratched his head and asked a Gao Family Village sailor beside him, "Brother, which side goes into the cannon?"

The sailor grinned. "Look carefully. One end has a wooden sabot. In the center of that sabot is the fuse. That end goes in first. When the cannon fires, the fuse ignites. By the time it reaches the enemy, the fuse burns down and the shell explodes at just the right moment."

The pirate's eyes widened. "So that's how it works! I understand now. Hahaha!"

He rubbed his hands eagerly. "I've been wanting to try these for ages. Finally it's our turn to show what we can do."

The reformed pirates were even more excited than the Gao Family Village sailors. They rammed the shells into the cannons with almost childlike enthusiasm.

Across the water, the Qing soldiers were still screaming.

"Demonic ship! There are monsters!"

"The monsters are coming! Ahhh!"

Boom!

A cannon roared.

The so called monster had fired.

The Qing soldiers were stunned.

Monsters... use cannons?

What kind of advanced demons were these?

The first shell arced beautifully through the night sky. With so many small boats crammed together, aiming was almost unnecessary. Missing would have required talent.

The shell landed among them.

Boom!

A second explosion.

Shrapnel burst outward in all directions. Metal fragments tore through wood and flesh alike. Soldiers on several boats screamed simultaneously. Bodies twisted and fell into the sea in grotesque poses.

"It really is a demonic ship!"

"These monster cannons even bloom!"

"Ahhh! Monster cannons!"

The Qing soldiers were brave against human enemies. They had fought countless battles on land.

But this?

Underwater demons. Floating mountains that fired blooming thunder.

Their courage dissolved.

General Samushika felt his scalp go numb.

"What is happening? Someone tell me!"

He looked around and finally realized something even more terrifying.

There was not just one massive ship.

There were many.

From all directions, enormous shadows advanced through the darkness. They were almost invisible, their hulls blending with the night, like black mountains drifting over black water.

Only when cannons flashed did their outlines become faintly visible for an instant.

Shrapnel continued raining down.

Samushika watched his elite army collapse in spirit. Men wailed. Orders were ignored. Morale plummeted to nothing.

If this had been a land battle, the troops would already be running in all directions.

But they were at sea.

The fleet was packed too tightly. Ships in front could not retreat because others blocked them from behind. The formation itself trapped them in place.

Outwardly, the fleet still existed.

Inwardly, it had already shattered.

Samushika made his decision in a heartbeat.

Run.

"Row back! Quickly! Retreat!"

The flagship's sailors strained desperately, trying to pull away, trying to reach land. On land, at least, they would not have to face these floating nightmares.

But the demonic ships were already surging forward.

Cannon fire alone was not enough. Artillery had limited precision. Some shells splashed into the water before detonating, wasting their destructive potential.

The musketeers shouted excitedly, "Let us fire too! The artillery cannot have all the fun!"

The helmsmen yelled, "We want in as well! Ram them!"

The reformed pirates drew their blades. "We want to board and—"

"You cannot."

The majestic voice of Dao Xuan Tianzun boomed across the deck.

"No boarding actions. Absolutely no boarding actions. The enemy vessels are too small. If you jump over and they shift even slightly, you will fall into the water."

The pirates protested, "If we fall in, we'll just swim back. We're not afraid."

Dao Xuan Tianzun replied calmly, "Just now, I pierced the bellies of several Qing soldiers underwater. The scent of blood has spread. Think carefully."

The pirates froze.

"The sharks..."

Blood in the sea was a summons.

Right at that moment, a Qing soldier who had fallen overboard tried desperately to climb back onto his boat. His hands gripped the edge.

Suddenly he stiffened.

Then he vanished downward.

A violent splash erupted. Blood bubbled to the surface. A shadow with a massive dorsal fin cut briefly through the water before disappearing.

The pirates quietly sheathed their knives.

"No boarding," one muttered. "In this situation, falling into the water means certain death."

It truly did.

For large ships, this was the perfect battlefield.

For small boats, it was a slaughterhouse.

The giant warships of Gao Family Village plowed forward.

Crash.

Wood splintered.

Several Qing boats flipped over entirely. Sailors tumbled screaming into the sea.

The fortunate ones were dragged under the hulls of the large ships and drowned quickly.

Others were caught by the propellers of the electric ships, their bodies torn apart in moments.

But the unluckiest were those who met the sharks.

The predators had already been drawn by blood. Now entire chunks of meat were falling from above.

If sharks could speak, they would have shouted, "Heaven's bounty! Dinner has arrived!"

In their excitement, perhaps they even imagined tying napkins around their necks. Of course, these were sharks of the Bohai Strait. Knives and forks were foreign concepts. Chopsticks were more appropriate.

They lifted imaginary bowls and chopsticks and swam happily toward the feast.

The naval battle had been decided from the beginning.

It was annihilation.

Samushika's soul nearly left his body as he roared, "Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!"

In this, he was luckier than Aobai.

Aobai had commanded only a small flotilla and had been surrounded easily.

Samushika, however, commanded hundreds of boats. Even Gao Family Village's fleet could not completely encircle such a vast number.

Amid chaos and destruction, he found a narrow path of escape.

Disheveled and shaken to his core, Samushika fled back toward land.

Chapter 1132: The Guanning Iron Cavalry's Tactics

The Qing army's two sneak attack fleets had already been annihilated.

But the Qing forces conducting the frontal assault knew nothing about it.

On the sea before Pi Island's main harbor, banners waved wildly. War cries rose and fell. They made a show of launching a full scale attack, drums pounding, horns blaring, every movement exaggerated for intimidation.

Ajige did not personally participate in the naval clash. He remained on the nearby coast, observing from afar and issuing orders through messengers. The man leading the frontal charge was Ma Futa.

Ma Futa had long handled Qing interactions and conflicts with Joseon. For this invasion of Joseon territory, he was appointed vanguard general.

At this moment, he stood commanding fifty Joseon warships as they launched a fierce assault against Pi Island's main harbor.

Shen Shikui, Regional Commander of Dongjiang, had concentrated his primary forces there. The main harbor was effectively the strongest defensive point on the island.

"Fire!"

The Joseon warships possessed only a limited number of cannons, but their gunners were competent. With a thunderous roar, a cannonball slammed into the bluestone wall beneath Pi Island's battery.

Stone shattered. A massive chunk blew apart.

The gunners stationed there were thrown backward in fright. They scrambled up in panic, patting themselves down. Realizing they were not actually injured, they cursed under their breath and rushed to reload.

"Damn those Joseon dogs!"

Another gunner shook his head. "Now isn't the time to curse Joseon. Deal with the Manchu first. We'll talk later."

Under cover of Joseon turtle ships, dismounted Qing cavalry had already begun landing at the harbor.

The defenders hastily rotated their cannons and fired toward the beach.

Solid cannonballs were notoriously inefficient against scattered infantry. A single shot might kill a handful at best. The cost effectiveness was abysmal. Meanwhile, the Joseon ships continued pounding the battery relentlessly from the sea.

The defenders were caught between hammer and anvil. They endured bombardment from the water while trying to suppress the landing troops on shore.

They were stretched thin.

"Musketeers!"

"Archers!"

Shen Shikui roared.

Matchlock muskets and three eyed arquebuses were brought forward. A hail of gunfire erupted toward the Qing troops scrambling ashore.

But the Qing had fought the Ming for years. They were no strangers to firearms. In small skirmishes or ambushes, they might suffer from surprise. In large engagements, they came prepared.

Large shields were erected at the front. Thick and sturdy. Matchlock shots and three eyed arquebus blasts struck and splintered but failed to penetrate reliably. Arrows were even more useless.

Behind the shields, Qing soldiers advanced methodically. Once enough men reached the sand, they began forming proper battle formations under cover.

Shen Shikui's face darkened.

This was dangerous.

If the Qing vanguard established a stable foothold, the Han and Joseon auxiliary troops waiting behind would gain courage and follow. Once that happened, Pi Island could truly fall.

At that moment, Cao Wenzhao stepped forward.

"Let us hold this position for a while."

Shen Shikui's eyes lit up. "If the Guanning Iron Cavalry are taking action, then there is no problem."

The Guanning Iron Cavalry were hardened veterans against the Qing. When it came to fighting Manchu troops, they were experts.

Shen Shikui stepped aside eagerly. He intended to observe carefully and learn their methods.

Cao Wenzhao asked, "Bianjiao, are the new weapons bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun ready?"

Cao Bianjiao nodded. "Every man carries them."

"Good. Guanning Iron Cavalry, advance!"

Shen Shikui widened his eyes.

He had long heard of the Cao uncle and nephew. Renowned fierce generals. The type who personally wielded spears and charged at the front, names that shook the battlefield.

He expected to see heroic spear charges and brutal close combat.

Instead, Cao Bianjiao reached into his breastplate.

He pulled out a strange black cylindrical object with a wooden handle attached.

A small question mark slowly formed above Shen Shikui's head.

With his other hand, Cao Bianjiao produced a tinder stick.

The question mark inflated instantly, growing into a massive symbol of confusion.

Cao Bianjiao lit the fuse.

Sparks hissed.

Then he roared, "To hell with you all!"

He charged forward and hurled the object into the Qing formation.

Shen Shikui blurted, "What is this tactic? What in the world is he doing?"

The Qing soldiers were equally confused.

The dark object flew through the air, struck a soldier's helmet with a clang, then bounced down and landed at his feet.

The soldier rubbed his head. "No pain at all. I thought it would be something impressive..."

He never finished.

Boom!

He was blasted skyward.

Several nearby Qing soldiers were knocked flat by shrapnel.

Cao Bianjiao shouted happily, "Direct hit!"

At the same time, the rest of the Guanning Iron Cavalry were doing exactly the same thing. Tinder sticks in one hand. Black spheres in the other.

"To hell with you all!"

Some even laughed wildly as they threw.

"Hahaha! Finally our turn to use these ourselves! When I saw the militia playing with them, I was so jealous!"

"It's like throwing giant firecrackers!"

One soldier tossed his grenade and made an extremely rude gesture toward the Qing line. "Die, you scum."

A sky filled with black spheres arced toward the Qing formations on the beach.

Then the explosions began.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

One after another without pause.

The carefully assembled Qing formation shattered instantly. Men screamed. Shields flew apart. Sand erupted in clouds of smoke and flame.

Only after the bombardment did Cao Bianjiao finally draw his long spear.

"Charge!"

Two thousand five hundred Guanning Iron Cavalry roared as one.

They drew Kaiyuan bows. Matchlock muskets. Three eyed arquebuses. Long spears. Great sabers.

"Charge!"

This was the true Guanning Iron Cavalry method.

Firearms first. Kaiyuan bows releasing arrows. Three eyed arquebuses blasting at close range. Spear formations thrusting relentlessly. Then blades drawn to finish the work.

Shen Shikui muttered in shock, "This is the Guanning Iron Cavalry. I must have imagined that earlier part. They were never like that before. Definitely not."

The Qing forces that had just struggled ashore were driven back into the sea almost immediately.

Ma Futa watched in disbelief.

Everything had gone smoothly at first. They had landed. They had formed ranks. Another push and they would have secured the beachhead. The auxiliary troops would have followed.

But a single maneuver from the enemy had overturned everything.

"Aaoo! I refuse to accept this!" Ma Futa roared. "Charge again, you bastards!"

He drew his long spear and personally led the charge.

Beachhead landing battle, year 1637. Version 2.0.

Cao Bianjiao grinned. "Excellent timing."

He lowered his spear and rushed forward.

The two fierce generals met on the beach.

Their spears collided with two heavy thuds.

Both felt their wrists tremble from the impact.

At the same time, each thought silently.

I have met my equal.

Chapter 1133: A Hidden Gambit Revealed

Cao Bianjiao and Ma Futa were both fierce generals.

The moment their spears met, the air itself seemed to fracture.

Steel flashed in tight arcs. Sand burst beneath their boots. Their movements blurred into streaks of afterimages. Onlookers could not even follow the sequence of strikes. It was as if two whirlwinds had collided on the beach.

Spear shadows crisscrossed in dazzling patterns.

They twisted, stepped, pivoted, lunged.

After more than a dozen rapid exchanges, Ma Futa's heart began to tremble.

Cao Bianjiao's spear technique was too agile. Every thrust flowed into another. Every feint concealed a real killing strike. His attacks layered over each other like waves, forcing Ma Futa to retreat step by step.

Panic crept into his chest.

He suddenly exposed a flaw in his guard.

Cao Bianjiao's eyes sharpened. He lunged forward.

But it was a trap.

Ma Futa spun, turned, and ran without hesitation.

"Damn it! Running when you can't win?" Cao Bianjiao snarled.

He took a long stride to pursue, but Ma Futa had already leaped into a small boat. He grabbed the paddle and rowed frantically toward open water.

Cao Bianjiao stopped.

Boarding a small boat and chasing recklessly was foolish.

He glanced left. Then right.

An idea flashed in his mind.

He reached into his robes and pulled out a hand grenade.

He lit the fuse calmly.

Then he took aim at Ma Futa's retreating boat.

With a powerful swing, he hurled it.

Ma Futa was just beginning to congratulate himself on his narrow escape when he heard a dull thump.

Something had landed inside the boat.

It rolled once. Twice.

He looked down.

That strange black ball.

"Ahhh!"

Boom.

The explosion blasted him backward inside the boat.

Ma Futa collapsed, unconscious.

"Qing forces are attacking the Left Harbor!"

The Vice Commander of Laizhou, Jin Riguan, roared. "I will go hold them off!"

"The Right Harbor has also been breached," Shen Shikui announced. "I will intercept them. General Cao, the Main Harbor is yours."

Cao Wenzhao nodded firmly. "Understood."

In an instant, every harbor on Pi Island erupted in battle.

Flames rose. Muskets fired. Cannons roared.

The Qing attacked wave after wave, but they could not secure a stable foothold. Unease began spreading among their ranks.

"Where is Aobai's sneak attack force?"

"Why hasn't Zhun Ta disrupted the Ming from behind?"

"And what about Gūsan Ejen Samushika's elite infantry? They should have stormed the island by now!"

"Why is there no signal?"

Even Ajige, the commander in chief, felt something was wrong.

"Why are both forces completely silent?"

As he pondered, a battered fleet approached.

Samushika's flagship.

Samushika himself stood at the bow, his face pale and miserable.

"Our flanking fleet encountered a mystical ship at sea," he cried out hoarsely. "We were annihilated. Hardly anyone returned."

Ajige felt as if ice had been poured down his spine.

"You returned," he said slowly, "but Aobai and Zhun Ta have not."

A terrible thought formed.

Before he could finish it, another fleet appeared on the horizon.

On the prow of the leading ship stood two youths.

One of them raised a severed head high into the air.

The distance was too great to clearly see its features.

The youth lifted a tin megaphone and laughed loudly, the sound echoing across the sea toward the Han and Joseon troops who had never been very enthusiastic to begin with.

"Behold! The head of Aobai, Manchu vanguard general!"

The reaction was immediate.

Fear rippled through the Han and Joseon ranks.

On the Joseon side, the Peaceful Province Army Commander Liu Lin did not hesitate.

"The Qing army is defeated! Retreat at once!"

The fifty Joseon warships faltered instantly.

They had always been timid. Now their retreat was simply a little more hurried.

As for Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi, the three infamous turncoats, they had been fighting half heartedly from the start.

Now they had a perfect excuse.

They quickly began pulling back.

With the Joseon and Han forces retreating, the Qing troops at the front found themselves isolated.

Their naval combat ability alone was frankly pitiful.

Without Joseon ships supporting them, they stood no chance.

Ajige clenched his teeth.

"Recall the troops!"

The Qing soldiers who had not yet landed sighed in relief and fell back.

Those already on the beach were not so fortunate.

They ran desperately toward the shoreline. Ming soldiers hacked at their backs. Muskets fired into their retreating ranks. Guanning Iron Cavalry hurled grenades into their clusters.

Explosions tore through them as they fled.

Their retreat was chaotic.

Their deaths were brutal.

Before long, the beach was carpeted with corpses.

Then, from Pi Island, a thunderous cheer erupted.

"We won!"

"The Qing have retreated!"

"Haha! Victory!"

"Pi Island is safe!"

"Long live Dongjiang Command!"

"Dongjiang! Dongjiang!"

The shouts seemed to shake the clouds.

On the mainland coast, Ajige gathered what remained of his forces.

The reports were devastating.

Aobai and Zhun Ta's entire detachment had been annihilated. Not a single man returned.

Samushika had escaped, but nearly half of his ten thousand elite troops were lost.

Ma Futa, the vanguard general, was dead.

In this single battle, the Qing had lost nearly ten thousand men.

There was an old saying.

If the Jurchens do not number ten thousand, they are not to be feared.

If they number ten thousand, they are invincible.

But what if ten thousand Jurchens were lost?

Ajige felt numb.

"We cannot attack this island again," he said quietly. "If we persist, we will doom our nation. Return to the capital. Inform the Emperor."

On Pi Island, celebration continued.

Shen Shikui approached Cao Wenzhao and Jin Riguan and performed a deep bow.

"Today Pi Island was saved entirely because of you two generals. That Chen Hongfan who deserted mid battle will surely regret it to death. His military merit is gone. He will be branded a deserter. I will personally impeach him before the Emperor."

Cao Bianjiao stepped forward laughing.

"No need. He is already dead. Chen Hongfan was intercepted by Qing forces while fleeing and was killed at sea."

Shen Shikui blinked. "Is that so? And how does Young General Cao know this?"

Cao Bianjiao pointed behind him.

Shi Lang.

Zheng Sen.

Yao Xingjuan.

"They brought the news from the sea."

Shen Shikui observed the trio.

One adult. Two youths.

Naturally, he bowed toward Yao Xingjuan.

"General, may I ask your honorable name?"

Yao Xingjuan smiled slyly.

"My name is Yao Xingjuan. I am merely a sea merchant."

Shen Shikui paused.

"A sea merchant? Isn't that simply a polite term for pirate?"

Still, a pirate who fought the Manchu was a good pirate in his book.

He laughed warmly.

"General Yao, we owe you greatly. You defeated the Manchu flanking fleet at sea and killed Aobai and Zhun Ta. Without you, if their forces had emerged from behind while the Qing attacked the Main Harbor, we would have been in grave danger."

He then turned to Cao Wenzhao.

"No wonder, General Cao, you said nothing when I suggested guarding against a Manchu flanking maneuver days ago. It turns out you had already arranged this brilliant gambit at sea."

The hidden move had been revealed.

Chapter 1134: Setting the Feast

Cao Wenzhao let out a low chuckle and chose not to explain.

The fleet had not been arranged by him. But he certainly could not announce to everyone that it was Dao Xuan Tianzun's arrangement. So he quietly accepted the credit. For a man who preferred charging straight at the enemy rather than weaving through schemes and politics, this felt slightly uncomfortable.

Still, discomfort was a small price to pay for victory.

Shen Shikui offered heartfelt thanks to the young strategists and the two youths. Just then, Jin Riguan, Vice Commander of Laizhou, exclaimed from the side:

"Good thing this humble officer did not flee with Chen Hongfan. I stayed behind to defend the island, ready to die here. I thought I would meet my end, yet instead I survived from the very jaws of death. And Chen Hongfan actually perished. But tell me, are the Manchu navy truly that formidable? To intercept him at sea? He has been a naval officer for years, always swift as a fish when escaping across the waves."

Zheng Sen stepped forward and answered calmly, "Manchu General Gūsan Ejen Samushika led several hundred small boats around the far side of Pi Island. By sheer coincidence, they ran straight into Chen

Hongfan's fleet. However fast Chen Hongfan could sail, once surrounded on all sides, there was no escape."

"So that was it." Jin Riguan shuddered. "Good thing I did not go along. But you wiped out Aobai and Zhun Ta's forces. Who destroyed Samushika's main fleet?"

Cao Wenzhao laughed. "Speak of him and he appears."

He pointed toward the sea.

The main fleet of Gao Family Village sailed into view, towering ships gliding toward Pi Island's main harbor. Their size dwarfed the port itself, as if mountains were drifting across the water.

Shen Shikui sucked in a sharp breath. "Those ships... they are that enormous?"

As the fleet drew close, the Pi Island garrison at the harbor panicked.

"Identify yourselves. Do not come any closer!"

The Guanning Iron Cavalry stepped forward at once. "Do not be alarmed. They are our allies."

Only then did the garrison relax. "So they are our own people. You nearly frightened us to death."

The massive ships docked with smooth precision. The water warfare specialized Dao Xuan Tianzun stepped ashore, accompanied by Jiang Cheng, the reformed pirate generals Bai Yang and Dao Ke, and a large company of sailors.

As he walked forward, he waved with a warm smile. "Comrades, you have all worked hard."

The Guanning Iron Cavalry were so moved that their eyes reddened.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun waved at me."

"He smiled at me."

"With one greeting from Dao Xuan Tianzun, all our hardships are worth it."

Shen Shikui stared, utterly baffled. "Who is that? Such presence. General Cao, even your Guanning Iron Cavalry show him such reverence?"

Cao Wenzhao coughed lightly. "He is a... great man."

He had nearly said immortal, but swallowed the word at the last moment. It was not easy.

Li Daoxuan walked directly toward Shen Shikui with a smile. "General Shen, I have long admired your name."

This was not empty courtesy.

While researching Pi Island days earlier, Li Daoxuan had learned much about Shen Shikui. Though his rise in officialdom was tied to family connections, his resistance against the Qing was unwavering. In history, even when escape was possible, he refused to abandon Pi Island. He fought until capture and, brought before Ajige and Ma Futa, was ordered to kneel.

"Why do you not kneel?" Ma Futa demanded.

"Why should I kneel?" Shen Shikui replied. "Kill me if you must."

Enraged, Ma Futa had him executed, his head displayed beneath the banner.

Such a man deserved respect.

Seeing Li Daoxuan's bearing and the deference others showed him, Shen Shikui dared not be careless. He cupped his hands respectfully. "May I ask your honored surname?"

"My surname is Li. Consider me a descendant of the Li clan of Longxi."

Shen Shikui was secretly startled. The Li clan of Longxi. The imperial lineage of the Tang Dynasty still lingering in the world?

Not impossible. Many great clans had faded into obscurity. Such families often possessed vast networks and hidden strength. Judging by the Cao uncle and nephew's attitude, Shen Shikui understood he should treat this man with utmost care.

"Today is a great victory," Li Daoxuan said brightly. "Everyone should celebrate. Gather all generals and soldiers. We will hold a grand feast."

Shen Shikui laughed. "Indeed. I had planned a banquet for the generals who came to aid us."

"I mean not only the generals," Li Daoxuan clarified. "The soldiers as well."

Shen Shikui hesitated, embarrassment flickering across his face. "Pi Island lies deep within Manchu territory, far from the Great Ming. We relied on King Li Zong of Joseon for provisions. But since Joseon was invaded, supplies have ceased. Food grows scarce. A banquet for several generals is manageable. But for over twenty thousand soldiers... our stores would vanish in days."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "A trivial matter. I anticipated this before sailing here. The fleet carries abundant grain. If Joseon cannot supply you, I will."

Shen Shikui's eyes widened. "Is this true?"

This concerned not merely morale, but survival itself.

"Not only grain," Li Daoxuan continued. "Weapons, armor, gunpowder, winter clothing. I will provide what you lack."

Shen Shikui dropped to his knees in a deep bow. "Mister Li, you are Pi Island's reborn parent."

Li Daoxuan waved lightly. "Enough ceremony. Issue the order. Prepare the feast. Let every soldier eat well tonight."

The news spread like wildfire.

Since Joseon's aid had ceased, the garrison had not eaten a proper meal in months. Now, hearing of new supplies and a grand feast, the entire island erupted in cheers. Laughter and shouting filled the air like festival drums.

Li Daoxuan felt rather satisfied.

Suddenly, Cao Wenzhao rushed off like a gust of wind. Moments later he returned, cradling an enormous sea turtle.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said earnestly, "I heard you enjoy seafood. Would you like this giant sea turtle?"

The turtle stared out with wide, innocent eyes, looking profoundly confused about how it had become part of military logistics.

Li Daoxuan fell silent.

Voices rose immediately around them.

"General Cao, we told you already, sea turtles are not delicious."

"They are spiritual creatures. Eating one brings misfortune."

"Release it at once."

The giant sea turtle blinked, as if silently agreeing with the crowd.

Chapter 1135: You're Lying

On Pi Island, the officers and soldiers threw a banquet grand enough to shake the heavens.

Fine wine flowed like a small river. Meat, noodles, fresh vegetables, seafood, everything that had been scarce for months now appeared in steaming abundance. Bowls clinked, laughter rose, and for the first time in a long while, the island felt alive instead of besieged.

Men who had braced themselves to die only hours earlier now sat cross-legged on the ground, chewing loudly and laughing even louder.

Yet before long, someone noticed something strange.

"The sailors from the fleet aren't here."

"They're still out there."

Indeed, beyond the harbor, the ships of Gao Family Village remained at sea. Lanterns glowed along their decks as they slowly cruised around Pi Island, maintaining patrol.

A Pi Island soldier ran to the shore and cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Brothers on the ships, why aren't you coming ashore to eat?"

A sailor leaned over the railing and grinned.

"If we all go drink, what happens if the Manchus turn back? Someone has to keep watch."

The soldier onshore froze.

The sailor continued in a relaxed tone, "You've guarded this island for years. Tonight, eat properly. Drink properly. Even get drunk if you want. We'll stand guard for one night. Tomorrow you wake up fresh and take over."

The island soldier's throat tightened.

"Brothers... thank you."

Behind him, another wave of cheers exploded into the night.

"Drink!"

"Fill it up again!"

The scent of wine and roasted meat drifted across the sea breeze.

Across the waters, outside Han City.

Huang Taiji listened to Ajige's report in silence, his face dark as iron.

Nearly ten thousand men lost in one engagement.

For the Qing, whose population was already thin compared to the vast Ming, that number was not merely statistics. It was bone and blood.

Huang Taiji felt as if someone had stabbed him directly in the chest.

After a long silence, he waved his hand.

"Leave Pi Island for now."

Ajige lifted his head.

"Until we possess a navy capable of true sea warfare, we will not touch it again. Another defeat like this... we cannot afford."

He paused, then suddenly pulled out a copy of Romance of the Three Kingdoms. He flipped through it and tapped a page.

"Observe. When Cao Cao marched south, he suffered a crushing defeat at Red Cliffs. He withdrew. Yet did the State of Wei fail to unify the realm in the end? No. A retreat is not surrender. It is consolidation."

Ajige blinked. "Even retreat requires... an operation name?"

"Of course," Huang Taiji said seriously. "Retreat is also an art. We shall call this Operation Cao Army Retreat."

Ajige's expression twitched slightly, but he nodded. "Your Majesty is wise."

Huang Taiji continued, "After Red Cliffs, Cao Cao left Zhang Liao to guard Xiaoyao Ford and stabilize the situation. I will do the same. Leave a garrison in Dandong to pin down Pi Island. Tie them in place."

Ajige bowed. "Understood."

Thus the Qing army withdrew.

News reached the Joseon court soon after.

When King Li Zong heard the report, he nearly leapt from his throne.

"They withdrew? Truly withdrew?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Pi Island still stands."

Li Zong's eyes shone.

"There is hope. We still have hope. If the Qing falter... perhaps we can return to Ming vassalage. Perhaps we still have a path."

For a king balancing between submission and survival, that glimmer of possibility was priceless.

Meanwhile, far to the west in the Xuan-Da region.

Huokou.

With the heavy financial backing of imperial merchant Tie Niaofei, the Huokou Horse Market was finally complete.

It covered several acres. Rows of sheds stood in orderly lines, practical and efficient. Gao Family Village's expertise in organizing markets had been fully applied.

Now came the crucial question.

What to trade for horses?

Lu Xiangheng still felt uneasy about the so-called egg-yolk pastries Tie Niaofei had previously suggested. Sweet pastries for warhorses? It sounded absurd.

So he prepared proper goods.

Salt.

Tea.

Iron pots.

The three eternal treasures of the grasslands. For generations, Mongol herdsmen had treated these items as hard currency. They were placed prominently at the market entrance, displayed proudly on the first row of stalls.

Tie Niaofei did not argue.

He quietly carried his egg-yolk pastries to the innermost corner.

Early the next morning, a scout burst into Xuan-Da Command headquarters.

"Bad news! Governor-General! The Mongol leader Qitan is advancing with cavalry spread forty li wide. They are clearly heading for Huokou. It looks like a raid to seize the market goods!"

Lu Xiangheng shot upright from bed.

"What?"

He barely had time to finish dressing before shouting orders.

"Notify all regional commanders. Mobilize immediately. Prepare to engage!"

The Xuanfu and Datong garrisons sprang into action. Nearly ten thousand troops assembled and marched toward Huokou at full speed.

As they advanced, Lu Xiangheng constantly demanded updates.

"Have the Mongols entered the pass?"

"Almost."

"Faster. Move faster."

Another report arrived.

"General Wang Pu of Datong has reached Huokou first and formed battle lines outside the north gate."

Lu Xiangheng exhaled in relief.

"Wang Pu is dependable. No wonder he once defeated the Manchus decisively. Record this merit."

He arranged for Yunyang and Jinyang to secure their own jurisdictions while remaining ready to reinforce.

Finally, Lu Xiangheng himself reached Huokou and deployed his forces outside the market.

The ground trembled.

From the northern horizon came the thunder of hooves.

An immense Mongol cavalry force approached, stretching beyond sight.

Each rider had one mount beneath him and two spare horses in tow, provisions tied behind the saddles. This was the configuration of a deep raid, the kind that plunged into enemy territory for weeks of plunder.

Lu Xiangheng raised his hand.

"Prepare for battle."

Sweat soaked through armor. Fingers tightened on crossbows.

The Mongol mass drew closer.

Closer.

Lu Xiangheng braced for a storm of arrows.

Then, suddenly, the vast formation halted.

Only one rider broke forward.

He galloped alone toward the Ming lines until within shouting distance.

It was Qitan.

He cupped his hands and roared, "Lu Xiangheng, you liar! You told us you opened a horse market here where we could buy egg-yolk pastries. My entire tribe came, families included, and instead you line up an army to ambush us? You Han are too cunning!"

Lu Xiangheng, who had been about to shout "Loose arrows," froze.

"What did you say?"

"You tricked us!"

"You came to invade, did you not?"

Qitan looked offended. "Invade? Do you think I have the courage to invade you Han? Have you forgotten your great iron chariots that run people flat?"

Lu Xiangheng stared blankly. "What iron chariots running people flat?"

Qitan pointed back at his forces.

"Look carefully at what my people are carrying."

Lu Xiangheng squinted.

Behind Qitan, the vast cavalry did not form attack ranks.

They carried bundles.

Children rode behind warriors. Women followed on spare mounts. Saddlebags bulged not with arrows ready for battle, but with trade goods.

Lu Xiangheng's mind stalled.

Qitan shouted again, "Are you opening a horse market, or are you planning to fight?"

Lu Xiangheng lowered his raised hand slowly.

"...This official is opening a horse market."

Qitan narrowed his eyes.

"You are not lying again?"

Chapter 1136: It Has Become Obsolete

Lu Xiangheng felt his head buzzing.

A subordinate beside him hurriedly handed over a pair of binoculars.

He had seen such things before. Nearly every major general serving Mister Li carried one. He took them, adjusted the focus, and looked carefully at the Mongol cavalry in the distance.

"...What?"

He blinked.

Those riders were not gripping bows, nor were sabers gleaming at their waists in battle readiness. The spare horses they led were not burdened with military supplies.

Instead, they carried... wool blankets.

Thick ones, clearly woven by Mongol women.

There were ox bone combs tied in bundles.

Sheepskin boots.

Handmade trinkets.

Lu Xiangheng lowered the binoculars slowly.

"What are these for?"

Qitan shouted back, "To trade for egg-yolk pastries, of course!"

For a long moment, Lu Xiangheng could not produce a single word.

So this enormous cavalry formation... was not a raid?

Just then, Qitan also seemed to realize the situation.

"You are not ambushing us?"

Lu Xiangheng snapped back, "Ambush you? You came forty li wide with cavalry. What was I supposed to think?"

Qitan snorted. "If I wanted to raid, would I bring my wives and children? Look again."

Lu Xiangheng raised the binoculars once more.

Now that he paid attention, he saw women riding spare horses. Children clung behind warriors. Trade goods were piled high, not arrows in ready bundles.

His raised hand, poised to order arrow fire, slowly lowered.

Qitan turned and shouted behind him, "The border market is open! Bring your best goods inside. Remember, Han merchants are clever. They will try to squeeze you for a bit more. Do not be fooled. Get as much as you can!"

Lu Xiangheng could only give a dry laugh.

"Our merchants are not cunning. They seek profit, that is all. And did you not just tell your people to get as much as they can? Is that not the same thing?"

Qitan paused, then barked out a laugh.

"Fair."

Minority tribes often complained that the Han were tricky and full of schemes.

The Han, meanwhile, often complained that the tribes were unreasonable and prone to bullying negotiations.

In truth, both sides were chasing benefit. No one wore a halo.

"Let the merchants handle the trading," Lu Xiangheng suggested. "Chief Qitan, shall we sit and speak?"

"That was my intention."

The two leaders dismounted and entered the market grounds. Tea was brought out. They sat facing one another, stiff at first, then gradually more relaxed.

Even if no major treaty emerged from their conversation, the mere sight of them drinking tea together signaled something important.

A shift.

Meanwhile, the horse market exploded into noise.

Mongols poured in like a flood.

The salt, tea, and large iron pots displayed at the entrance vanished first. Those were necessities, snapped up in moments.

Yet many Mongols were clearly searching for something else.

They rushed deeper into the market, scanning stall after stall.

Finally, in the innermost corner, they found them.

Egg-yolk pastries.

Not necessities.

Luxuries.

But even the poor crave sweetness.

A herdsman would lead forward a sturdy horse and exchange it for baskets of salt, bricks of tea, a heavy iron pot... and a bundle of pastries to take home for his children.

The market was an overwhelming success.

Within a single day, several hundred warhorses changed hands. In the following days, the number would only grow.

Lu Xiangheng, however, felt puzzled.

Warhorses were vital to the Mongols. Why were they selling them so readily?

He quietly sent spies to mingle among the tribes and gather information.

Before long, a report came back.

"The Mongols say that wars now revolve around the display of heavy armored cars. Warhorses only stand to the side and cheer. They are no longer decisive. So they are selling them."

Lu Xiangheng stared blankly.

Warhorses.

Obsolete?

The world truly had changed.

And it was not only horses whose prospects had dimmed.

Another creature had quietly fallen into economic despair.

Poultry.

At noon, Gao Yiye sat at her desk, eating while organizing her script for Gaojia News. She would record it later that afternoon for evening broadcast. Recently, Dao Xuan Tianzun had selected a male and female student from the News Department to gradually take over her duties, but she still oversaw the work personally.

She had just finished arranging her notes when Third Aunt Gao slipped inside, looking troubled.

"Yiye."

"Aunt, what is it?"

Third Aunt Gao lowered her voice. "You know I raise chickens, ducks, and geese. In recent years... their feathers have become harder and harder to sell. No one wants them anymore."

Gao Yiye looked up in surprise. "But feathers always sold well before, didn't they?"

"They did," Third Aunt Gao sighed. "Merchants used to collect them in large quantities. Even the government bought them. But now? No one in our area buys them at all."

It made sense.

For centuries, long feathers from chickens, ducks, and geese had been strategic materials. They were used to fletch arrows. During wartime, officials even assigned quotas to households, forcing villagers to hand over feathers. Families would scramble through hills catching pheasants just to meet requirements.

When Gao Family Village first formed its militia, hand crossbows were common. They consumed vast quantities of feathered bolts.

But ever since firearms had been introduced, and then upgraded generation after generation, crossbows gradually faded out of use.

Even factory militia units now carried old smoothbore muskets passed down from the regular militia.

Crossbows were no longer produced.

Arrows were no longer in demand.

Thus feathers piled up, unwanted.

Third Aunt Gao looked genuinely distressed.

"It feels wasteful to throw them away. Yiye, can you think of something? Some way to turn them into money?"

Gao Yiye clapped her hands suddenly.

"I have an idea."

"So fast?" Third Aunt Gao's eyes lit up.

"We can make feathered shuttlecocks. Children can kick them for fun. They should sell."

Third Aunt Gao hesitated. "How many toys can children buy? That will not use up mountains of feathers."

"Ah, true."

Gao Yiye paused, then brightened again.

"Feather dusters. We can make feather dusters."

"That uses more feathers," Third Aunt Gao admitted. "But who would buy so many?"

Gao Yiye smiled confidently.

"I know many merchants. I will find someone to sell them in the bazaar outside Xi'an. They will sell."

Third Aunt Gao's face finally relaxed into a smile.

"Yiye always finds a way."

Just then, another woman entered timidly.

"Saintess... at our poultry farm, the chicken, duck, and goose feathers have piled up like mountains. We truly do not know what to do with them."

Gao Yiye blinked.

Mountains?

She suddenly felt that shuttlecocks and dusters might not be enough after all.

Chapter 1137: Ask a Top Student

The woman who rushed in was the manager of the chicken farm in Gao Family Village.

She was one of the earliest beneficiaries of the women's liberation movement in the village. Back then, when Dao Xuan Tianzun had provided guidance on poultry raising, she seized the opportunity without hesitation. Starting from a handful of hens and a broken shed, she slowly built what she proudly called a "chicken farm."

Of course, the name was modest. The place also raised ducks and geese.

Year after year, under her careful management, the farm expanded. Coops multiplied. Incubators improved. Feed storage grew standardized. What had once been a humble yard was now a large-scale, well-organized operation that impressed even the male administrators.

Perhaps because of the difference in temperament between men and women, whenever a problem arose, she did not like reporting to San Shier or Tan Liwen. Instead, she preferred to speak directly with Gao Yiye.

And Gao Yiye always listened.

This time, she burst in like someone delivering wartime intelligence.

"There are mountains of feathers," she said dramatically. "Chicken feathers, duck feathers, goose feathers. They're piling up higher and higher. I have no idea what to do with them."

Gao Yiye blinked. "Ah? You too?"

She had just finished speaking with Mrs. San earlier that day.

"Even the small batch of feathers from Mrs. San's household can't be sold," Gao Yiye continued. "She just came to me complaining about it."

The chicken farm manager looked embarrassed. "My situation is worse. Much worse."

Feathers were a byproduct of prosperity. The more poultry they raised, the more waste they produced. What once had been a trivial matter had now become a logistical crisis.

Gao Yiye thought for a moment, then brightened. "It's fine. I've already discussed it with Mrs. San. We can make feather dusters and shuttlecocks. Sell them as handicrafts."

The manager coughed awkwardly. "Saintess... her household produces a small amount. That may work. But my farm..."

She raised both hands helplessly.

"There's simply too much. Making shuttlecocks won't even dent the pile."

That stopped Gao Yiye cold.

"Oh."

Silence fell between them.

Two capable women. Two leaders of industry. Completely defeated by feathers.

After a long pause, someone suggested, "Should we ask Tan Liwen?"

Another voice added, "Or the high school students. The smartest ones."

That idea lit up their faces.

Thirty-Two Middle School had already expanded into a high school department. The first batch of self-taught students had mastered the advanced curriculum. They became teachers themselves, passing knowledge onward.

Now, the intellectual ceiling of Gao Family Village had officially risen.

The smartest people were no longer middle schoolers.

They were high school students.

The women hurried over and cornered a top student in the high school section.

With the Saintess present, the boy stood ramrod straight.

After listening carefully, he pushed up his glasses and coughed lightly. "Saintess, I specialize in mathematics. This problem... falls outside my field."

They thanked him and went hunting for another.

The second top student listened, then gave an awkward smile. "Saintess, my major is mechanics."

Feathers, apparently, did not obey mechanical equations today.

They asked a third.

This one tilted his head and chuckled cheerfully. "I study history, geography, local customs, and cultural records. Regarding this matter... I do recall something."

Gao Yiye's eyes lit up. "Quickly. Tell us."

The student swayed slightly as he recited, as though delivering a lecture.

"Liu Xun of the Tang Dynasty, while serving as Sima of Guangzhou, recorded observations of Lingnan's products and customs in his book Lingbiao Luyi. It mentions that wealthy chieftains would select fine goose down, layer it between cloth, and sew it into quilts. When layered repeatedly, the warmth was no less than cotton-padded garments."

The three women stared blankly.

"What does that mean in normal speech?" the chicken farm manager asked.

"It means," the student translated patiently, "they stuffed goose down between layers of fabric to make quilts. Very warm."

Gao Yiye inhaled sharply. "So goose feathers can keep people warm?"

"Yes," the student nodded. "Goose down has excellent insulation. Duck down is slightly inferior but still good. Chicken feathers... less so."

He grinned mischievously. "You could make clothing. Compete with the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory."

Gao Yiye hesitated. "Compete with Handsome Enough to Bubble's wool sweaters? That feels wrong."

The student laughed. "Competition is healthy. His wool sweaters grow more expensive every year. If someone challenges him, prices may fall. Then common people can afford warm clothing."

There was logic in that.

The three women exchanged looks.

"Let's try."

They rushed to the textile factory.

The general manager there was Chun Hong, once Gao Yiye's secretary, one of the four redeemed courtesans. She had transformed into a capable industrial leader.

After hearing the proposal, Chun Hong clapped her hands. "We'll experiment."

She ordered a skilled young artisan, a recognized Labor Model, to sew a hollow cotton garment. The chicken farm manager delivered sacks of goose feathers and down. They stuffed them inside.

Soon, a bulky prototype emerged.

A "down jacket."

They admired it with excitement.

Then Gao Yiye put it on.

Her smile faded.

"It's uncomfortable," she admitted. "The feathers shift around. The quills poke. And... it's not even that warm."

They had stuffed everything randomly. No structure. No layering. No distribution control. Inside, it was chaos.

The three women fell into awkward silence.

That evening.

Li Daoxuan finished scanning the world with Co-sensing, confirming that no emergencies required divine intervention. Satisfied, he focused on Gao Family Village while slurping his black chicken broth rice noodles.

He casually tapped the move view option, checking development progress.

Then he paused.

On the third-floor balcony of the fortress watchtower, four women sat surrounding a strange, bloated garment.

His interest rose immediately.

He activated focus.

"Oh dear, still not comfortable," Gao Yiye said, shaking the jacket. "The feathers move everywhere."

"It feels like it should be warm," the farm manager added, "but somehow it isn't."

Chun Hong frowned thoughtfully. "The quills poking through remain a problem. Perhaps thicker fabric?"

They were so absorbed in research that they did not notice the mass-produced statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun in Gao Yiye's room twitch.

With a pulse of Co-sensing, Li Daoxuan descended into the box.

The statue flexed its hands and feet and came alive.

The women were still arguing about fabric density when Li Daoxuan walked up beside them.

Only then did they sense someone standing there.

All four jumped.

"Ah! Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"You startled us!"

Chapter 1138: Steal His Business

The moment Li Daoxuan appeared, Gao Yiye's mood shot up as if someone had added three hundred percent extra brightness to her soul. The smile on her face softened instantly, no longer carrying the weight of the Saintess.

With Dao Xuan Tianzun present, she was no longer the highest authority in the room.

She could relax.

"Tianzun!"

She skipped over and grabbed Li Daoxuan's arm without hesitation.

A young woman clinging to his arm. Even for a man who had long grown used to divine worship, that subtle warmth still sent a small ripple through his chest.

"What are you all researching?" he asked with a smile.

Gao Yiye pointed at the bulky garment. "We heard duck and goose feathers can make very warm clothes. We're trying to develop something. But no matter what we do, it just isn't warm enough."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "That's because you stuffed too many feathers and too little down."

All four women blinked at him.

"Down is what keeps you warm," he explained patiently. "Feathers are mostly quills. If you add too many feathers, it won't insulate well and it will poke you. Shake everything out. This time use ninety percent down and ten percent feathers."

They obeyed immediately.

The garment was ripped open. The chaotic stuffing was pulled out. This time, they carefully measured the ratio, adding a large quantity of goose down and only a small amount of feathers.

When Gao Yiye put it on again, her eyes widened.

"It's much warmer!"

The improvement was immediate and dramatic.

However, as she moved her arms, she frowned again.

"The down is still sliding around."

Indeed, with even slight movement, the goose down migrated to one side, leaving thin patches elsewhere. Warm in one spot. Cold in another.

The women exchanged awkward looks.

Li Daoxuan smiled calmly. "Simple. After stuffing the down evenly, stitch the garment into many small squares. Trap the filling inside separate compartments. Then it won't move."

There was a moment of silence.

Then four pairs of eyes lit up simultaneously.

"So that's how!"

Third Aunt Gao immediately fetched needle and thread. As the best tailor in the village, her hands moved swiftly and decisively. She stitched horizontal and vertical lines across the garment, dividing it into neat little grids.

Each square captured its portion of down securely.

When Gao Yiye lifted the coat and shook it—

Rustle.

The down stayed evenly distributed.

A proper down jacket was born.

Its design principle was already astonishingly close to modern down jackets. The only difference lay in the outer material. Instead of synthetic waterproof fabric, it used thick cotton cloth.

Waterproofing was still beyond Gao Family Village's chemical industry capabilities. Polyester and synthetic fibers were dreams for the future.

But that was fine.

Such expensive clothing would not be worn in the rain anyway.

Li Daoxuan nodded with satisfaction. "Good. Now work hard and mass-produce it as soon as possible."

The women immediately began planning.

Chun Hong's textile factory would produce the outer shells. The chicken farm would provide the down. Third Aunt Gao would establish a new workshop to assemble the finished products.

Third Aunt Gao's eyes sparkled. "My son earns a fortune drawing comic books. I'll invest that money into building this factory."

Li Daoxuan laughed. "Excellent. Go deal a heavy blow to Liu Maopao wool sweaters."

The chicken farm manager raised her hand timidly. "The goose and duck feathers are handled. But what about chicken feathers? They aren't very warm. Must they all become feather dusters?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head. "Open your mind. Chicken feathers can fill pillows, mattress toppers, vests. Even military sleeping bags. By the way, isn't the militia short on sleeping bags?"

The manager's eyes widened. "Yes!"

"With that in mind," Li Daoxuan continued, "develop military-grade sleeping bags. Focus on durability and warmth."

The two female entrepreneurs immediately began whispering excitedly.

With Dao Xuan Tianzun's endorsement, sales were guaranteed. The militia would purchase them in bulk. The only real requirement was quality. They would not dare produce inferior equipment for their own soldiers.

Several days later.

Gaojia News began broadcasting.

As usual, before the news started, an advertisement played.

The "Warm and Sleepy" wool sweater commercial had aired so many times that villagers could recite it backward. People were already rolling their eyes in advance.

The screen lit up.

Everyone prepared to hear Chen Yuanyuan's classic line.

Sure enough, she appeared.

But the clothing she wore—

Was different.

No wool sweater.

Instead, she stood wrapped in a puffy, rounded jacket that made her look adorably bundled, like a soft dumpling.

The audience froze.

The rehearsed slogan died in their throats.

Chen Yuanyuan smiled sweetly. "Third Aunt Gao Brand Down Jacket. A different level of warmth."

The scene shifted.

Gao Sanwa, who now used the pen name Gao Family Third Young Master, appeared hunched over a desk, wearing a down jacket while drawing comics. He glanced at the camera and smiled. "Warmth helps me concentrate. My works improve."

Another cut.

Little Gao Zhengjing stood beside her mother, Xing Honglang. Xing Honglang smiled gently. "Warmth keeps Gao Zhengjing from getting a runny nose."

Another cut.

Gao Yiye herself bounced in place, wrapped in her down jacket. "So warm! I'm sweating!"

Finally, the Village Chief appeared, grinning broadly. "I'll try one too."

The entire audience exploded.

This advertisement was terrifyingly powerful.

Chen Yuanyuan. The famous writer. The Saintess. The Village Chief.

None of these people lacked money. No amount of silver could have bought their endorsements so easily.

Yet here they were.

The message was clear.

This down jacket had divine backing.

"Buy one! Hurry and buy one!"

In his residence, the Prince of Fu leapt up in front of his Divine Mirror. "Send someone! Secure them immediately!"

The eunuch behind him coughed nervously. "Your Highness... with your figure... it will require custom tailoring. Even if we rush, ready-made ones will not fit."

The Prince of Fu froze.

Then he roared, "Then commission it at once! I refuse to lose to Liu Maopao!"

Chapter 1139: The New Economy

Third Aunt Gao's down jackets became an overnight sensation.

The moment they appeared in the store, word spread like wildfire. Wealthy households, minor gentry, merchants with quick noses for trends, all rushed over as if a treasure chest had been opened in broad daylight.

But their excitement lasted only a few breaths.

There were barely a hundred jackets in stock.

Before some people even squeezed through the door, the shelves were empty. Those who arrived a little later could only stare at the vacant display stands with disbelief, as if someone had stolen spring itself.

The down jackets were more expensive than the wool sweaters from Liu Maopao factory. That alone would have made them luxury goods.

Yet the real cruelty lay not in the price, but in the scarcity.

"When will they restock?" someone demanded.

The clerk bowed with an apologetic smile that did not change no matter how many times the question was asked.

"There is currently no fixed date."

The crowd nearly exploded.

Only after prolonged questioning did the truth emerge.

A single goose could produce only about one tael of goose down.

A duck yielded even less, merely two qian of usable down.

And the Saintess herself had endorsed the highest standard: ninety percent goose or duck down for premium jackets. Even the more affordable versions required seventy percent.

This was not cotton. It could not be grown in fields in vast quantities.

It had to be plucked from living creatures.

Feather by feather.

The wealthy patrons gradually understood.

They could complain about the price, but they could not complain about arithmetic.

Raw materials were limited.

Therefore the finished product was limited.

But human greed is a powerful thing.

Some people left disappointed.

Others left thoughtful.

At Horseshoe Lake near Bai Family Fortress, one man stood by the water that afternoon, staring at the rippling surface.

He had always considered the lake ordinary.

Now it looked like a silver mine.

Ducks and geese loved water.

He had water.

The thought settled quietly in his mind.

If he raised geese, sold down to Third Aunt Gao's factory, perhaps he would not need to bow to anyone again.

He was not alone in this realization.

Across villages, wherever there was a pond, a stream, or a marsh, similar calculations were taking place.

Individual households could only raise a few birds.

But merchants began to think on a larger scale.

Why not organize farms?

Why not contract villagers?

Why not create entire flocks dedicated to down production?

The shortage of down jackets was quietly reshaping agricultural planning.

This was no longer merely about warmth.

It was about supply chains.

It was about capital.

It was about a new economy forming around feathers.

Meanwhile, far to the southwest.

Sichuan.

The Standard Avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun stood at the bow of a riverboat, watching the current guide them toward Chaotianmen Pier in Chongqing.

After traveling extensively within the diorama world, Li Daoxuan had returned to the city where he had once lived in another lifetime.

Ming Dynasty Chongqing was smaller, rougher, and far less crowded than the sprawling metropolis he remembered.

In modern times, towering steel and glass structures dominated Chaotianmen. Here, the ancient gate itself was the most magnificent sight.

Chaotianmen was not merely architecture.

It was ceremony.

For more than a thousand years, imperial envoys had sailed up the Yangtze, disembarked at this pier, and proclaimed edicts beneath its arch. Authority flowed through this place like the river itself.

It had to be grand.

And it was.

Li Daoxuan stepped ashore.

Cheng Xu followed closely, accompanied by a disciplined escort of militia.

Their formation was impressive enough that the dockworkers immediately sensed the arrival of an important figure.

Several porters instinctively retreated.

Ordinary people had learned caution through generations of hardship.

Officials and powerful men often meant trouble.

Just as they were shrinking away, a voice rang out in thick Chongqing dialect.

"Brothers, are you free? A few of you come help me unload."

The porters froze.

The tone did not match the imposing procession.

Li Daoxuan waved casually.

"Ten copper coins each. I pay what I promise. If even one coin is missing, you can take my head."

The dialect was warm, almost playful.

The dockworkers looked at one another.

Then they grinned.

Fear dissolved quickly in the presence of fairness.

They rushed forward enthusiastically and began unloading the cargo.

Cheng Xu stood slightly behind, listening to the Heavenly Lord speak fluent Chongqing dialect without the slightest hesitation.

In Shaanxi, he had never once used the local accent.

Now he sounded like a native dockside youth.

Unable to suppress his curiosity, Cheng Xu stepped closer and asked carefully, "Heavenly Lord, you seem very familiar with this place."

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly.

"I used to spend a lot of time here."

Cheng Xu's heart trembled.

So it was true.

This land must be one of Dao Xuan Tianzun's former cultivation grounds.

Perhaps he had once meditated in the mountains of Shu.

Perhaps he had ascended here.

The thought filled Cheng Xu with reverence.

Li Daoxuan, however, was not thinking about immortality.

He was studying the city.

The walls stretched along the riverbank, climbing the uneven terrain. Inside and outside the walls, houses clung to slopes in irregular clusters.

Too many of them were empty.

Especially outside the walls, nearly nine out of ten homes stood abandoned.

As someone who had lived in Chongqing in another era, he understood why.

Only a few years earlier, She Chongming, the Yongning Pacification Commissioner and an Yi chieftain, had rebelled and seized Chongqing.

Later, Qin Liangyu led reinforcements to assist. Together with Governor Zhu Xieyuan, they retook the city.

But the conflict had left scars.

And worse was yet to come.

Zhang Xianzhong would arrive in the future.

Then the Daxi Army.

Then Qing forces.

Then Southern Ming forces.

Occupation would follow occupation.

Slaughter would follow slaughter.

Nineteen years of turmoil.

By the early Qing era, only three thousand people would remain in Chongqing's main urban area.

The rest would vanish into history.

Li Daoxuan watched the dockworkers laughing as they competed to lift heavier crates.

If he failed here, these living, breathing men would become statistics.

That thought weighed heavily on him.

At that moment, an official figure emerged from Chaotianmen.

From a distance, he cupped his hands respectfully.

"Esteemed guest, forgive my delayed welcome."

Wang Xingjian, Prefect of Chongqing, had arrived.

He was young, barely past twenty-five. Fresh from the imperial examinations. Originally destined for a comfortable post in Nanjing.

But Sichuan was chaos. Bandit armies roamed freely. Few officials with connections were willing to come.

So he had been sent instead.

A shield.

He approached without arrogance, speaking politely.

"Master Li, your arrival could not be more timely. A bandit force has been lingering outside Jiangbei City. I stationed militia there to deter them, but they are poorly trained. If the main rebel force attacks, I cannot guarantee we can hold. I have no regular troops, only local militia. I scarcely sleep."

His voice carried genuine anxiety.

"With your militia here, I finally feel some relief."

Li Daoxuan returned the courtesy.

"You have held the city under difficult circumstances. That is no small merit."

He glanced toward the countryside beyond the walls.

"But the villages outside likely suffer. Many common people may already have been coerced into joining bandit ranks."

His tone grew firmer.

"I did not come merely to defend walls."

"I came to restore the land beyond them."

Chapter 1140: The Chongqing Problem

Chongqing was a city unlike any other.

It sat precisely at the sharp bend where the Yangtze River met the Jialing River, cradled between two vast waterways that wrapped around it like twin dragons coiling protectively around a pearl. Unlike the flat, orderly cities of the plains, which stretched out in neat squares as if drawn by a ruler across a farmer's map, Chongqing had surrendered itself to the terrain. Its shape followed the rivers. The city walls curved and slanted, forming an irregular rhombus that looked almost accidental from above, yet perfectly natural from within.

Zhu Yujian stood upon the height near Chaotianmen and let his eyes travel along the two rivers. The water was wide, restless, glinting under the light. He studied the city walls, the gates, the slopes stacked with houses clinging to the hillsides.

After a long silence, he spoke slowly.

"The two rivers form natural moats. Vast ones. No human army could possibly fill them. Almost every city gate faces the water. That makes this city exceptionally easy to defend and extremely difficult to attack. Even a small force could hold against an overwhelming enemy."

He paused, clearly puzzled.

"For such an excellent stronghold, why has it not been chosen as a capital in recent centuries?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"To become a capital, geography alone is not enough. A capital must also be a political center. An economic center. A place that feeds power, and is fed by it in return."

He looked toward the mountains that embraced the city like uneven walls of stone.

"Chongqing lacks economic strength."

Zhu Yujian blinked, then nodded as realization struck him.

"Of course."

The surrounding terrain was mountainous. The fields were limited. There were no vast plains suitable for large-scale rice cultivation. In an era where agriculture determined survival, population, taxation, and military logistics, this was not a minor weakness.

It was fatal.

He frowned again, thinking deeper.

"Then another matter troubles me."

He turned to Li Daoxuan.

"Such a formidable city. How was it taken by the Yi chieftain She Chongming just a few years ago? My humble understanding cannot reconcile this. Give me three thousand disciplined men, and I could repel a hundred thousand attackers here."

Li Daoxuan exhaled softly.

"For a city like this to fall, it is never breached from the outside."

Zhu Yujian's brows knit together.

"Not from the outside?"

Li Daoxuan did not answer immediately. Instead, he pointed toward the docks below. Laborers strained beneath cargo loads, their clothes worn thin, their movements heavy with exhaustion. Then he tapped his own chest lightly.

Understanding dawned slowly in Zhu Yujian's eyes.

"The people's hearts."

Chongqing had long been poor. Its common people struggled merely to survive from one day to the next. When hardship became constant, loyalty became fragile.

Under such conditions, when enemies attacked from beyond the walls, the impoverished populace did not feel united with those who ruled them. The officials were distant. The gentry extracted what they could. The city had few regular troops and relied heavily on local militia.

If even that militia did not stand firmly with the authorities, then the walls, no matter how thick, were hollow.

Zhu Yujian fell silent, troubled.

"This problem..." he murmured. "It does not belong to Chongqing alone. It plagues the entire realm."

He lowered his head slightly.

"With my limited wisdom, I do not know how to resolve such a matter. I beg you, Dao Xuan Tianzun, teach me."

Li Daoxuan spread his hands in a gesture that was almost casual.

"It is simple to say. Develop the economy. Allow the common people to prosper."

He gave a small smile.

"But simple words are the hardest to implement."

Zhu Yujian absorbed this quietly.

Now he understood why, wherever Dao Xuan Tianzun traveled, he first concerned himself with work. With wages. With factories. With trade. With ensuring that ordinary men and women could earn their daily bread with dignity.

It was not charity.

It was foundation.

As the two continued their serious discussion of governance and the fate of cities...

Not far away, another Zhu was having an entirely different experience.

Zhu Cunji had already scrambled up onto the Chaotianmen city gate. He leaned forward excitedly, peering at the hillsides covered in layered buildings.

"This place is marvelous!" he laughed. "Look at these houses. Built into the slopes, stacked on top of each other, winding up and down like a maze. It is like walking inside a puzzle box. Zhu Yujian, let us go explore those old houses. It must be delightful."

He was the only one present who had arrived purely as a tourist.

Zhu Yujian sighed deeply.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, please forgive our family's embarrassment. We have produced such an incorrigible fellow."

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"This is not entirely a bad thing. If every prince in your esteemed Zhu family were obsessed with affairs of state, would that not create succession struggles every few years? That would hardly benefit the common people."

Zhu Yujian found himself momentarily speechless.

At this moment, Wang Xingjian stepped forward again, seizing the opportunity to return to urgent matters.

"Master Li, regarding the rebel forces in Jiangbei..."

Li Daoxuan nodded calmly.

"You mentioned Jiangbei City. My men will station there at once."

He turned his gaze slightly.

Cheng Xu understood instantly.

"This subordinate will proceed to Jiangbei City immediately to assess the situation."

Jiangbei District. Longtou Mountain. Longtou Temple.

Longtou Mountain was modest in height, barely a hundred meters tall. At its peak stood Longtou Temple, a small structure where an elderly monk and two young acolytes once lived quiet days chanting scriptures and tending incense.

Now the chanting had ceased.

The old monk and the two boys lay lifeless, their blood long dried upon the cold stone floor.

The temple halls were crammed with bandits who had drifted down from Shaanxi like a dark current of their own.

Their leader was a man called Er Zhi Hu.

He sat cross-legged upon a prayer mat before the Buddha statue, as if mocking it, surrounded by a ring of subordinate commanders.

His face was stern.

"Our provisions are running low," he said bluntly. "If this continues, our ten thousand men will starve. We must seize a proper city and secure enough grain."

One subordinate hesitated before speaking.

"Brother Hu, are we truly planning to attack Chongqing? That city is formidable. All its gates face the river. We would have to cross the river first and then assault the walls. The difficulty is enormous."

Er Zhi Hu waved a hand dismissively.

"A direct assault on the main city would indeed be troublesome. That is why we begin with Jiangbei."

He leaned forward slightly.

"Jiangbei stands separated from the main urban area. Its northern gate faces land. The militia there are not strong. It is far easier to take. Once Jiangbei is ours, we seize civilian vessels, organize a fleet, cross the river, and then strike the main city."

The commanders exchanged uneasy looks.

"Even so... it will not be easy."

A cold smile crept across Er Zhi Hu's face.

"There are many poor people in Chongqing. I have already sent men to contact certain members of the Jiangbei militia. When we attack, they will open the gates from within. Jiangbei will fall in a single blow."

He continued, almost lazily.

"I have also reached out to laborers at Chaotianmen docks. Those men are hungry. Hungry men listen."

The junior commanders brightened immediately.

"As expected of Brother Hu. Your strategies are unmatched."

Just then, a young bandit rushed into the hall in panic.

"Brother Hu! Something has happened."

Er Zhi Hu frowned.

"What now? Why such agitation?"

The young man gulped.

"A new militia has arrived in Chongqing. They appear disciplined and strong. They have already entered Jiangbei City. If we attack Jiangbei now, we may have to face them."

Er Zhi Hu snorted.

"Another militia? There is nothing to fear. As long as our insider remains in place, the gates will still open."

The insider he spoke of was named Jiang Daliang.

Jiang Daliang was a native of Jiangbei City.

But he did not love it.

His family had always been desperately poor. Since childhood he had rarely eaten his fill. By the time he was barely ten, he was already hauling cargo at the docks, his thin shoulders bent under loads far too heavy for his age. Each day he labored for a handful of copper coins, barely enough for a proper meal.

Under such circumstances, expecting him to cherish the city was unreasonable.

A few days earlier, a notorious local foreman from the gentry, infamous for exploiting dockworkers, had organized a militia to defend against the rebels. Jiang Daliang had been conscripted into it.

What the foreman did not know was that Er Zhi Hu's men had already contacted Jiang Daliang by the riverside.

They had reached an agreement.

When the rebels attacked, Jiang Daliang would open the city gates from within.

And Jiangbei would fall not because its walls were weak.

But because its people were hungry.