

Great Ming 1171

Chapter 1171 Soul Soaring in the Heavens

A colossal figure descended outside Hanzhong Prefecture.

In the real world, it was only about as tall as a soy sauce bottle.

In this world, it was a mountain that walked.

The giant stood beside the walls of Hanzhong and looked down at more than seventy thousand marauders below.

Li Daoxuan's Field of View Expansion had just reached Hanzhong.

Somewhere, people had been saved. Perhaps in Sichuan. Perhaps on Pi Island. Perhaps in some forgotten village he did not even know existed. The Salvation Index had been rising quietly in the background like an unnoticed tide.

Now his sight covered Hanzhong.

So he brought out the silicone figure Cai Xinzhi had custom made for him and attached his own face to it. It was the same type he had used in Jishan County before, only larger. More imposing. More theatrical.

Li Daoxuan did not enjoy using giant avatars to scare ordinary people.

But this was not an ordinary situation.

The core forces of Chuang Wang had been captured. Among them were hardened bandit chiefs who had rebelled for ten years straight. They had surrendered before. Accepted pacification. Taken silver and oxen. Promised to farm.

Then rebelled again the moment the guards relaxed.

These were not starving peasants looking for survival.

These were men who believed the world could be seized.

Who says kings, nobles, generals, and ministers are born to rule?

For such people, kindness alone was meaningless.

Benevolence must walk hand in hand with authority.

So Li Daoxuan decided to use his ultimate move.

The moment he appeared, tens of thousands of militiamen exploded into cheers.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is mighty and majestic!"

"Surely this is only a reduced form. The true body must be even larger!"

Their voices rose and fell like waves.

In contrast, the seventy thousand marauders froze where they stood.

They could not move.

Mantian Xing, who had been bold just moments ago, turned pale. His lips trembled. He stared up at the towering face and could not speak.

Prince Rui was no better.

Zhu Changhao stood stiff as wood.

Regional Commander Zhao Guangyuan's legs nearly gave out beneath him.

Only the Hanzhong Prefect, who had heard rumors of Xi'an, looked slightly less shattered. He muttered to himself.

"So it is true. Dao Xuan Tianzun truly exists."

The giant lowered his gaze.

First, he looked at Prince Rui.

"Just now," the voice rolled down like thunder, "were you mocking Sun Chuanting?"

Prince Rui began trembling.

Not lightly.

Violently.

His entire body shook like a leaf in a storm.

His eunuch confidant jabbed him desperately.

"Your Highness, answer quickly. If you delay, it will be seen as disrespect. We are finished."

Prince Rui snapped back to awareness. A deity was speaking to him. Trembling without replying was also disrespect.

He stammered, "This Prince was wrong. This lowly one was wrong. I will never dare mock Senior Official Sun again. Please show mercy, great deity."

Sun Chuanting cleared his throat.

"What great deity? His venerable title is Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Prince Rui swallowed.

"Forgive me, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The giant's gaze shifted.

Now it settled upon Mantian Xing.

Mantian Xing's body shook just as violently.

"State your name," the thunderous voice commanded.

"Mantian Xing," he stuttered.

"You seemed quite dissatisfied with the road construction."

Mantian Xing collapsed to his knees.

"I would not dare."

"You seemed daring a moment ago."

At that moment, Li Daoxuan briefly exited the diorama.

Back in his original body, he typed Mantian Xing into a search engine and pressed enter. The information appeared instantly. A veteran rebel. Previously pacified under Yang He. Took silver. Took oxen. Rebelled again.

Li Daoxuan scanned quickly.

Then he returned to the box.

His voice grew stern.

"Mantian Xing. You once accepted pacification under Yang He. You took silver and oxen. Instead of farming, you rebelled again. Now Sun Chuanting arranges for you to build roads, and you harbor ill intentions once more. Were you planning to wait for lax supervision and rise again?"

Mantian Xing's heart stopped.

Every word struck the center of his thoughts.

As expected of a deity, he thought in terror. He even knows what I am thinking.

His soul nearly left his body.

He slammed his forehead against the dirt.

"This lowly one dares not. My thoughts were foolish. Before Dao Xuan Tianzun they are nothing. I will never dare harbor such intentions again. I only wish to build roads. I will build immediately."

The giant lifted one foot.

Then brought it down.

Boom.

The stomp landed several meters in front of Mantian Xing.

The earth shook violently.

Had Mantian Xing not already been flat on the ground, he would have been thrown off balance.

His mind shattered.

Tears and mucus streamed across his face.

"Mercy, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"Undergo Labor Reform properly," the giant said. "Diligently reform. Cleanse your sins as soon as possible."

"I understand. I understand. From now on, I will not harbor even a shred of disloyalty."

Mantian Xing wept openly.

Only after a long moment did the giant withdraw his foot.

"I will now sit atop Mingyue Gorge and watch you work."

With that, he turned.

Step.

Boom.

Step.

Boom.

Each stride covered dozens of meters. The earth trembled with every movement. Mountains seemed to shiver as he walked toward the Mingyue Gorge plank road.

Soon, the colossal figure vanished from sight.

Silence swallowed the world.

For a long time, no one spoke.

At last, Sun Chuanting broke it.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun now sits upon Mingyue Gorge, observing your Labor Reform. If any of you harbor devious thoughts, you would be better off ending your lives now while your bodies remain intact. If that venerable one crushes you with a single step, you will not even leave behind a human shape."

The souls of the seventy thousand captives were still soaring in the heavens.

Who would dare scheme now?

They knelt properly.

Accepted their orders.

The tens of thousands of militiamen finally relaxed. There was no need for suffocating vigilance anymore.

Sun Chuanting waved his hand.

Supplies transported from Xi'an were distributed.

Gao Family Village needed only a small number of militia to escort the prisoners. Food was issued. Tools were handed out. Each man, fed and equipped, reentered the mountains to cut roads and build bridges.

From their work sites, they could look up.

On the peak of Mingyue Gorge sat a colossal figure.

Dao Xuan Tianzun watched all beings with majestic eyes.

Under that gaze, not a single convict dared entertain treachery.

They worked carefully.

Diligently.

The mountain echoed not with rebellion, but with the sound of chisels and hammers shaping a road that would change history.

Chapter 1172 Have Him Chopped Up for Me

Li Zicheng, the Chuang Wang, did not die at Zengjia Mountain.

He was crushed, yes. Routed, scattered, humiliated.

But not dead.

His Old Eighth Squad still had a little over a hundred men left. A pitiful number compared to the armies he once commanded, but enough to keep a banner breathing.

Going back to Sichuan was suicide. A force that small would not survive a single charge from the pole soldiers.

Entering Shaanxi was even worse. Wang Er had secured the region, and that strange firearms unit of his was something Li Zicheng did not dare test again. One encounter had been enough to carve the lesson into his bones.

A small force had only one advantage.

It was hard to see.

So he led his remaining men through the mountains like ghosts. At dawn each day, he would look at the rising sun, fix the direction of east, and move. No fires at night. No villages if they could avoid them. They deliberately bypassed the mountaintop watch posts of Gao Family Village, threading through ravines and dense forest like hunted wolves.

After days of grinding travel, they finally crossed the Qinling Mountains and entered Shangluo.

Even there, Li Zicheng did not dare breathe loudly.

Shangnan County was guarded by Luo Xi, a man the rebels had already learned to fear. By now it was obvious that Luo Xi and Wang Er were cut from the same cloth. Both commanded those uncanny musketeers.

With barely a hundred starving men, Li Zicheng had no intention of testing them.

They survived on bark. On wild roots. On whatever could be dug up from frozen ground. When thirsty, they drank from mountain springs. When exhausted, they leaned against trees and slept sitting up.

Eventually, they slipped near the Danjiang Estuary by the Han River.

By then, the Old Eighth Squad was close to collapse.

Then they saw it.

A fleet of boats, heavy with cargo, moving downriver.

Li Guo's eyes lit up. He lowered his voice.

"Uncle, those boats are loaded. We lure one ashore, rush it, seize supplies. Quick and clean."

Li Zicheng nodded.

They hid.

Only Li Guo walked to the riverbank. He lay down dramatically, clutching his stomach, and began to wail.

"I'm starving. Please. Anyone. Help me. I'm dying."

His voice drifted across the water.

The fleet belonged to Zhuge Wang Chan's logistics unit, transporting supplies toward Sichuan.

A sailor reported the crying youth to his captain.

Zhuge Wang Chan stepped to the rail and glanced over the side.

"He looks half dead. Send one boat ashore. Give him food. The rest keep distance. Muskets ready. This smells like a trap."

One cargo boat peeled away and moved cautiously toward shore.

Behind rocks and trees, Li Zicheng and the Old Eighth Squad tightened their grips on their blades.

Then Li Zicheng saw it.

Every sailor on that boat carried a long, unfamiliar musket. Not slung casually. Held properly. Alert. Disciplined.

They did not look like men delivering charity.

They looked like men waiting to fire.

Li Zicheng's heart dropped.

"Stop," he whispered sharply. "No one moves."

The Old Eighth Squad froze.

The boat docked. A soldier stepped off with a sack of grain and handed it to Li Guo.

"Eat slowly," the soldier said kindly. "Use this grain as travel funds. Go to Shangnan County. Find Commander Luo Xi. He will arrange work."

Li Guo understood immediately that the plan was aborted. He accepted the grain with a grateful bow.

"Thank you, sir."

The soldier returned to the boat. The vessel pushed off.

Only after they had gained distance did the sailors relax and lower their muskets.

From behind the rocks, Li Zicheng exhaled.

"This army is different," he murmured. "Even for a starving youth, they maintain full vigilance. No openings. No slack. Impeccable discipline."

Li Guo returned.

"No chance?"

Li Zicheng shook his head.

"Too many muskets. Too alert. We cannot afford that fight."

Li Guo clicked his tongue.

"Those strange soldiers again. Who are they?"

"I do not know," Li Zicheng replied. "And for now, it does not matter. Surviving matters."

The Old Eighth Squad fell into silence.

It was Liu Zongmin who finally stepped forward, cupped his fists, and spoke.

"Brother. With this small force, we cannot achieve anything. We must join another righteous army."

Li Zicheng looked at him.

"Which one?"

Liu Zongmin answered without hesitation.

"The Eight Great Kings."

Zhang Xianzhong.

"He should still be in Hubei. Last I heard, near Wuchang. We go to him."

Li Zicheng did not like Zhang Xianzhong. The man was bloodthirsty, temperamental, impossible to predict.

But choices were limited.

"Fine," he said.

They waited until midnight at the Danjiang Estuary. When a fisherman brought his small boat ashore to rest, they rushed him, blades at his throat, and forced him to ferry them across the Han River.

Then they disappeared into the night.

They went to seek the Eight Great Kings.

At this time, Zhang Xianzhong was at the height of his momentum.

Months earlier, he had marched out of Qianshan and captured Taihu, Qizhou, Huangzhou, and more.

At Fengjia Inn in Taihu, he fought a decisive battle against the Ming army.

The Hubei garrison troops were weak. They shattered quickly under the assault of tens of thousands of rebel soldiers.

Shi Kefa, the Anlu Provincial Governor, had tried to reinforce them, but he was too far away. Zhang Xianzhong sent a detachment to ambush him mid-march, delaying his arrival.

By the time Shi Kefa reached the battlefield, it was over.

More than six thousand Ming soldiers were annihilated. Over forty generals were beheaded, including Pan Keda.

Victory piled upon victory.

Zhang Xianzhong pressed eastward, seizing Hezhou, Hanshan, and Liuhe. Though Shi Kefa eventually repelled him there, the momentum remained his.

He rampaged across Hubei like a storm.

And when storms win too often, they grow arrogant.

In his camp, Zhang Xianzhong was drinking, studying maps, deciding which city to strike next, when a confidant rushed in.

"Big Brother. A group requests audience. They claim to be the Chuang Wang. They say they were defeated in Sichuan, lost most of their men, and have come to seek refuge."

Zhang Xianzhong burst into laughter.

"The Chuang Wang seeks refuge with me?"

He wiped wine from his mouth, grinning coldly.

"The man whose wife keeps running away now needs my protection?"

His eyes darkened.

"If he joins me, who will be greater? Him or me? Will the heroes of the realm follow him or follow me?"

Silence settled in the tent.

Zhang Xianzhong waved his hand dismissively.

"You. Take some men."

His voice turned flat.

"Chop him up for me."

Chapter 1173 A King Not Meant for the Pond

Li Zicheng stood outside the camp of Zhang Xianzhong with what remained of his Old Eighth Squad.

A little over a hundred men.

Wind-worn. Mud-stained. Hungry.

Waiting to be received.

The feeling sat poorly in his chest.

He had served under others before. Under Wang Zuogua. Under Bu Zhan Ni. He had once commanded the Eighth Squad. Later he followed Gao Yingxiang, the former Chuang Wang, acting as the Dashing General.

By reason alone, seeking refuge should not have been difficult.

But reason does not rule a man who has once been at the top.

The moment he inherited the title Chuang Wang, something inside him shifted.

He could no longer tolerate standing beneath another banner.

Perhaps this was the curse of all former leaders. Once you have sat in the main seat, even a fine second chair feels like humiliation.

He looked at the camp ahead.

Inside, ragged rebel soldiers leaned on spears and sabers, grinning openly at him. Their eyes carried mockery. Ten zhang away and he could still feel it.

They were enjoying this.

The once mighty Chuang Wang, reduced to begging protection.

Li Guo leaned close.

"Uncle. A great man knows when to bow and when to rise."

Liu Zongmin added quietly, "Endure this. We will rise again."

Before Li Zicheng could respond, men emerged from Zhang Xianzhong's camp.

At the front was a general, arms spread wide in exaggerated warmth.

"Brother Chuang Wang! We have awaited you for so long!"

The smile was too wide.

Li Zicheng did not look at the man's face.

He looked at the soldiers behind him.

Every hand rested on a saber hilt.

Every stance was tight.

This was not a welcome.

This was an execution formation.

The realization struck like cold water.

"Old Eighth Squad!" Li Zicheng shouted. "Run!"

He spun and bolted without hesitation.

The Old Eighth Squad reacted as one body. No confusion. No questioning. They had followed him through fire before. They followed him now.

Behind them, Zhang Xianzhong's men froze for a heartbeat.

Then came shouting.

"Damn it! They saw through it! Chase them!"

But they had barely taken a few steps when more soldiers poured out of the camp to watch.

Zhang Xianzhong's confidants stiffened.

They could not openly slaughter Li Zicheng in full view of their own men.

Nominally, Li Zicheng was still one of the foremost figures among the greenwood heroes. If they assassinated him quietly, that was one thing. If they butchered him publicly after he came seeking refuge, their reputation would rot.

The pursuit stopped.

One of the generals forced a laugh and turned back toward the watching soldiers.

"A misunderstanding! We only wished to greet Brother Chuang Wang properly. He panicked for no reason. Does our Big Brother look like someone who betrays allies? Truly, he judges a gentleman's heart with a villain's mind."

No one answered.

By then, Li Zicheng and his men were already gone.

They fled north.

If Zhang Xianzhong wanted them dead, Hubei was no longer safe.

They crossed into Henan.

The grain they had received by the Han River was long gone. Hunger clawed at their insides. Their legs trembled from exhaustion. Every step felt stolen from collapse.

Then, ahead, they saw a large manor.

Li Guo's eyes hardened.

"Let's take this household."

Li Zicheng nodded.

They rushed forward.

Before they reached the gates, a scholar stepped out.

He wore plain robes. His expression calm. His eyes sharp.

He looked at the banner with the character Chuang and sighed.

"So. The Chuang Wang has fallen this far. A hundred men left, and now even a small estate like mine tempts you. I expected this outcome long ago. With your way of doing things, how could it end otherwise?"

Li Zicheng halted.

"Who are you?"

The man replied evenly, "My name is Li Yan. You may also call me Li Xin."

Li Zicheng studied him carefully.

A scholar. Not afraid.

"You think I cannot achieve greatness?"

Li Yan did not hesitate.

"You are a bandit. When in history has a bandit achieved greatness?"

Silence.

The Old Eighth Squad bristled.

Li Zicheng raised a hand, stopping them.

"If I wish to achieve greatness," he asked, "what should I do?"

Li Yan answered clearly.

"Honor the virtuous. Respect scholars. Remove tyrants. Care for the people. Practice benevolence and righteousness. Forbid your soldiers from wanton killing and plunder. Win the hearts of the people. Only then can you plan for great undertakings."

"The hearts of the people?" Li Zicheng repeated.

"With the hearts of the people, you will have endless soldiers," Li Yan said. "Without them, you only gather rabble."

Li Zicheng frowned.

"I once commanded over a hundred thousand."

Li Yan gave a faint smile.

"You call that an army? Those men followed whoever fed them. Lose one battle and they scatter. If separated during a march, would they search for you? Would they refuse another leader and wait faithfully for your return?"

Li Zicheng had no answer.

Li Yan's voice sharpened slightly.

"You never possessed their hearts. That is why one defeat turned a hundred thousand into dust."

Li Zicheng bowed deeply.

"Teach me. Be my military advisor. Let us seek great things together."

Li Yan sighed.

"This world needs saving. I see no one more suitable than you. Very well. I will follow you."

Thus, Li Zicheng gained more than a strategist.

He gained direction.

The first thing Li Yan did was not draft battle plans.

He wrote songs.

"Open wide the gates to welcome the Chuang Wang. When he arrives, no grain shall be surrendered."

"Open early and greet the Chuang Wang. All under heaven shall rejoice."

"The Chuang Army stands for benevolence and righteousness. It neither kills nor plunders."

He spread these songs through villages.

Then he turned to Li Zicheng.

"You have only a hundred men. Good. Easier to reform. From today onward, no plundering commoners. We take from corrupt officials, not from the people. Discipline is the foundation. Only then can you build a true righteous army."

It was the tenth year of the Chongzhen era.

Pressed by forces from Gao Family Village on one side and Zhang Xianzhong on the other, Li Zicheng had been driven into a corner.

And there, at the edge of ruin, he met Li Yan.

A true king is not meant to remain in a pond.

The moment he met Li Yan, he began to change.

From that day forward, the Chuang Army slowly abandoned blind slaughter and chaotic plunder.

It began to transform.

No longer merely a wandering band of brigands.

But something far more dangerous.

A peasant uprising army.

Chapter 1174 Instructor He Recruits Militia

The fighting in Sichuan had finally come to an end.

Local chieftains returned to their territories with their private troops in tow, spirits high and steps light. This campaign had felt different. Fighting alongside the Gao Family Village Militia was like leaning against a mountain.

Strongholds that once seemed impossible to crack had collapsed like rotten wood. Bandit nests that had plagued the region for years were swept away in days.

After the vagrant rebels were crushed, the aid teams from Gao Family Village did not withdraw. Instead, they moved deeper into Sichuan, centering operations around Chongqing and extending assistance to surrounding ethnic minority communities.

Specialty goods were developed. Local products were standardized and scaled.

Then came the factories.

Cement plants. Coal mines. Steel mills. Textile workshops. Pig farms. Chicken farms.

All were first established in Chongqing as model enterprises. Once stable, they would be expanded into the mountainous minority regions.

Sichuan was changing.

Quietly. Methodically.

Meanwhile, a merchant arrived before Wang Weizhang, the Governor of Sichuan, bearing astonishing news.

"At the Shaanxi-Sichuan border, along the most treacherous stretch of the Shu Road, atop the peaks of Mingyue Gorge, sits a colossal deity. I saw it with my own eyes."

Wang Weizhang did not even blink.

"Guards. Ten planks."

The merchant was dragged down and beaten.

Afterward, clutching his swollen backside, he protested, "Governor, I transported goods along the ancient plank road to Hanzhong and back. Both times I saw the giant deity seated on Mingyue Gorge, looking down into the valley. Not a single word of mine is false."

"Ten more," Wang Weizhang said calmly.

After twenty planks, the merchant bowed his head.

"I saw nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Wang Weizhang nodded in satisfaction.

"Next time you fabricate stories, choose your audience more wisely."

The merchant limped away, muttering. Officials truly were the most unreasonable creatures under heaven.

On the ancient plank road of Mingyue Gorge, Gao Family Village transport teams advanced carefully.

The road clung to cliffs. Beneath them yawned endless void.

Only the smallest carts could pass. Each carried pitiful amounts of goods.

Above, on the peak of Mingyue Gorge, Dao Xuan Tianzun sat watching.

No one dared ask for his help directly. They labored carefully, trying not to trouble His Venerable Self.

Yet when one transporter slipped and nearly fell into the abyss, a massive hand reached down in an instant and steadied him.

After days of effort, the first shipment arrived.

Two hundred copies of The Legend of the Dao Xuan Tianzun Demon Slaying.

Two hundred.

Hardly enough.

In Guangyuan, they were snapped up instantly. Not a single copy reached the Chengdu Plain by land.

Fortunately, there was still the river.

Zhuge Wangchan moved the books by water to Chongqing, where they spread quickly through the city.

Night fell over Jiangbei Dock in Chongqing.

Jiang Daliang, a dockworker born and raised by the river, had just finished hauling heavy cargo. His shoulders ached, but his pay was good tonight.

He and a group of fellow dockworkers gathered under the fading light.

They had managed to obtain one copy of The Legend of the Dao Xuan Tianzun Demon Slaying.

One book.

Dozens of heads crowded together, layered like cabbages, eyes fixed on the pages.

"Look at this. Tianzun smashed that mountain bandit into paste with a single strike."

"And he gives people food. Good food!"

"Tianzun bless us!"

They laughed and shouted just like the Gao Family Village Militia.

Then someone pointed.

"Here. This part is about recruiting militia."

"Wait. Isn't that masked man Instructor He?"

Jiang Daliang leaned closer.

It was him.

Instructor He assembling the first Gao Family Village militia under Dao Xuan Tianzun's command. Soldiers lined up. Drilling in formation.

Among dockworkers, Instructor He's reputation had already reached near mythic status.

Jiang Daliang felt warmth rise in his chest.

"Instructor He helped us deal with that corrupt foreman Wang Wen. He wiped out the bandits at Tieshan Ping. If not for him, I might have walked the wrong road myself."

Another dockworker chimed in.

"I heard Instructor He found a coal mine in Jingangbei, Beibei District. He's building a coal factory. They're recruiting workers. Anyone want to go? Hard labor is hard labor. At least the pay is steady."

"Beibei is too far," someone grumbled. "Can't they build it here?"

Jiang Daliang laughed.

"Coal comes from underground. You build the factory where the coal is. What are you thinking?"

Everyone burst into laughter.

At that moment, a dockworker ran over breathlessly.

"Why are you all still here? Hurry to the yamen. Instructor He is recruiting militia."

The laughter stopped.

Militia?

Many of them had once joined Chongqing's old militia, organized by Wang Wen against the vagrant rebels.

Jiang Daliang had joined too, though at the time he had his own secret motives.

But this was different.

Instructor He.

Their eyes lit up simultaneously.

"This one is worth joining."

"Let's go."

Jiang Daliang jumped to his feet.

"I must join."

Getting from Jiangbei to the Chongqing Prefecture yamen was not simple.

They had to cross the Jialing River by boat, then enter through Chaotianmen Gate.

They rowed like madmen.

When they reached the yamen, they saw him.

Instructor He sat behind a table at the entrance. Before him stretched a long line of young men.

Faces full of admiration.

These were not conscripts dragged from their homes.

They had come willingly.

Someone called out from the crowd.

"Instructor He. The vagrant rebels are gone. Why recruit militia now?"

Cheng Xu's voice rang out clearly.

"One wave of rebels has been driven away. Another may come. And throughout Sichuan, mountain strongholds still harbor bandits. Our war is not finished."

The crowd quieted.

He continued.

"Until all internal strife and external threats are eliminated, we cannot stop fighting. Young men who wish to defend your homes, protect your parents, wives, children, and neighbors. Step forward."

Jiang Daliang's hand shot up.

"Me."

Around him, countless hands rose as well.

"Me too."

"I'll go."

In that moment, beneath the lantern light of the yamen, a new militia began to take shape.

Chapter 1175 Take It Up With My Superior

While new militias were still being recruited in Sichuan, Li Daoxuan was busy studying something far more "profound." The limits of his own field of vision.

His sight had now expanded all the way to Hanzhong Prefecture. With Gao Family Village as the center, the radius was roughly four hundred kilometers.

Half of Henan was covered. Most of the Yunxiang region as well.

Li Daoxuan casually tapped the "North, South, East, West" buttons on the Diorama Box, like a bored immortal flipping through channels. His gaze swept leisurely across Henan.

He kept pushing his view southeast until, at the very edge, a small county town slid into sight.

Above its city gate hung a plaque with three bold characters.

Wuyang County.

The place had long since been breached by bandit armies. Its walls were torn open on all sides. Crumbling ramparts sagged like broken teeth. Whole sections were reduced to rubble. The local population had been slaughtered, looted, or forcibly dragged away. Barely a hundred households remained.

A county town that once held thousands now felt like a hollow shell with a heartbeat.

Before, Li Daoxuan could not see this far. He could not help. Now that he could see it clearly, ignoring it would be no different from complicity.

He reached for a small handful of grain, ready to drop it into the box.

Then his eyes sharpened.

Through the north gate of Wuyang County, a group entered.

Gao Family Village Militia.

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan blinked. "The militia is here?"

His hand paused in midair.

If the militia had already arrived to help, there was no need for him to intervene immediately. A sudden divine rain of grain might terrify the already jittery locals. After everything they had suffered, even kindness falling from the sky could look like disaster.

So he simply watched.

The detachment was small, fewer than two hundred men. Likely one of the scattered relief teams sent out to scout and search for surviving civilians.

Li Daoxuan narrowed his eyes at the man leading them.

That face felt familiar.

He thought for a while. Then it clicked.

Wang Chenggong.

Years ago, this man had been a bandit leader. He once occupied an old fortress at Wangjia Fork in northern Shaanxi. Back then, Gao Family Village Militia had sent Shi Jian, along with Luo Xi who was still serving as adjutant general, to take him down.

The Mongols of the Wushen Tribe had also shown up to stir trouble during that battle.

They lasted ten breaths.

Ten.

After that crushing defeat, Wang Chenggong surrendered.

Li Daoxuan had not seen him since. He had assumed the man was still undergoing Labor Reform somewhere, swinging a hoe and contemplating life.

Yet here he was, released, wearing militia colors, even leading his former subordinates to provide relief.

People could change. Sometimes history forced them to.

The Wang Chenggong of today was nothing like the swaggering bandit chief of old. His stride was steady, not arrogant. His face carried a restrained calm. The sharp, predatory edge was gone.

Now he looked like an ordinary middle aged man.

Which, in this chaotic era, might have been the greatest transformation of all.

As soon as they entered Wuyang County, the common folk on the streets scattered. Doors slammed. Curtains twitched. Within moments, the streets were half empty.

In times of war, civilians were like startled birds. Two hundred armed men entering town was not something you waited around to interpret.

Wang Chenggong seemed used to this reaction.

He pulled out a tin megaphone.

"Folks, do not be afraid!" His voice boomed across the broken streets. "We are not bandits. We are not government troops. We are the militia, the people's own army. We will not harm you. We are here to help."

He lifted a sack.

"Come out, household by household, to receive grain. Three catties per family first. Fill your stomachs. Then we will talk about the rest."

This tactic never failed.

Doors creaked open. Faces peeked out. One by one, people stepped into the street.

Wang Chenggong's face lit up. "Line up properly. No pushing, no grabbing. Every family will get their share."

From above, Li Daoxuan watched with quiet satisfaction.

Then, at the southern edge of his field of vision, another force appeared.

And this one was not small.

Three to four thousand men.

They flew a banner that read Runing Garrison. On paper, government troops.

In reality, they looked worse than bandits.

Their armor and weapons were a chaotic mess. Some carried firearms. Some swords. One idiot waved around what looked like a treasured blade in dramatic fashion, reminding Li Daoxuan of Flat Rabbit showing off a shiny toy.

Their clothing was even more absurd. A few wore proper Ming cloth armor. Others had hemp garments. A handful were in mismatched pieces of clothing. One man was even wearing a woman's floral dress.

Li Daoxuan frowned.

"The Runing Garrison looks like this?" he muttered. "They are sloppier than the most undisciplined garrison troops."

The chaotic mass entered Wuyang County through the south gate.

As they marched toward the center of town, they saw the militia distributing grain.

The two sides met face to face.

Everyone froze for a heartbeat.

The civilians who had just started lining up let out a collective gasp and scattered again, vanishing into houses like smoke.

Wang Chenggong clasped his fists politely.

"We are the militia from Luoyang, acting under the orders of Governor Fan Shangzheng of Henan to provide disaster relief."

He deliberately invoked Fan Shangzheng's name. Sometimes a higher banner made conversations smoother.

From the ranks of the Runing Garrison, an officer stepped forward.

"My surname is Zhang. Call me Commander Zhang."

He clicked his tongue. "Tsk. Your militia seems to have quite a bit of grain. Enough to hand out generously."

The tone was wrong. Too casual. Too probing.

Behind his back, Wang Chenggong made a subtle hand gesture. Be alert.

Aloud, he replied calmly, "All this grain belongs to Governor Fan."

"Oh?" Commander Zhang burst into laughter. "Trying to scare me with the Governor?"

He stepped closer.

"Do I look like someone easily frightened?"

He waved a hand dismissively. "Forget it. I do not want to waste words. Since you are here to help disaster victims, why not help us as well? My men are also victims. Every single one of them is starving."

There it was.

Robbery, wrapped in official language.

Wang Chenggong's expression darkened slightly. Behind him, militia soldiers subtly shifted, hands brushing the stocks of their muskets.

He lowered his voice. "They have thousands. We have two hundred. If we fight, we will suffer heavy losses."

The militia quietly took a few steps back, creating space.

Wang Chenggong looked back at Commander Zhang.

"As a garrison commander, you surely would not dare to rob provisions belonging to the Governor." His tone remained steady. "Who is backing you? Give me a name. I will report it to the Governor. If your patron is powerful enough, perhaps this matter can be overlooked. Then you will not face consequences. Is that not reasonable?"

Commander Zhang sneered.

"Still hiding behind the Governor?"

"Fine. I will tell you."

"My direct superior is the Grand General for Aid and Suppression, Zuo Liangyu."

He laughed harshly.

"If you have complaints, tell Fan Shangzheng to take it up with Zuo Liangyu. Let us see whether that stinking scholar official dares."

The moment those words left his mouth, both Wang Chenggong and Li Daoxuan understood.

So.

Zuo Liangyu's men.

Of course.

The so called Grand General for Aid and Suppression had never truly suppressed anything. When facing real bandit forces, he always let the big fish slip away. Only the small fry were captured.

And those small fry were not destroyed.

They were absorbed.

Folded neatly into his own private army.

He swelled his ranks. He grew powerful. The imperial court became an increasingly distant inconvenience.

No wonder the Runing Garrison looked like a patchwork of bandits pretending to be soldiers.

Because that was exactly what they were.

Chapter 1176 A Wise Man Avoids Immediate Loss

Wang Chenggong was not stupid.

The moment he heard the name Zuo Liangyu, he already knew that invoking Governor Fan Shangzheng was pointless. This Officer Zhang in front of him was, at best, a bandit chief who had successfully wrapped himself in official clothing. At worst, even the surname "Zhang" might have been improvised

on the spot. If someone told Wang Chenggong that the man's real nickname was something absurd like Megatron or Bumblebee, he would not have been surprised in the slightest.

As for the title "Runing Commander," that was almost certainly something Zuo Liangyu had granted privately. Whether the imperial court even acknowledged such a post was another matter entirely.

He lowered his voice and spoke to his men without moving his lips too much.

"A wise man avoids immediate loss. Give them the grain for now. We keep our lives. Then we send word to Instructor Bai. When the main force arrives, we collect everything back with interest."

The militia members understood at once. Two hundred against three thousand was not bravery. It was suicide dressed up as righteousness.

Decision made, Wang Chenggong raised his head and spoke in a clear, even tone.

"Very well. Since you are also an imperial officer, I will hand over this grain. Consider it assistance between fellow officials."

Officer Zhang's face bloomed with satisfaction. He had expected resistance. Instead, he received obedience. Things were going more smoothly than he had anticipated.

And then everything changed.

The cotton thread embroidery of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Wang Chenggong's chest suddenly opened its mouth.

"Wang Chenggong. Do not fear him. Challenge him."

For a split second, Wang Chenggong thought he had hallucinated.

Then the meaning sank in.

His eyes widened. His entire expression transformed as if someone had poured boiling wine into his veins.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived?" he muttered, then louder, "Dao Xuan Tianzun has entered my body for the first time?"

The realization hit him like lightning.

He threw his head back and burst into laughter, loud and unrestrained, the kind of laughter that did not belong on a battlefield.

"Hahahaha! I am personally blessed by Dao Xuan Tianzun! All those years of labor reform were not wasted after all!"

His voice echoed through the battered streets of Wuyang County. Even civilians hiding behind doors exchanged uneasy glances. Had the militia captain lost his mind at the crucial moment?

Officer Zhang frowned deeply.

"What are you laughing at?"

When Wang Chenggong lowered his head again, the joy on his face was gone. In its place stood something far older, something he had once worn like armor during his bandit days.

His gaze sharpened. His back straightened. The modest middle aged man vanished, and for a fleeting moment, the ruthless outlaw of Wangjia Fork returned.

"I have reconsidered," he said calmly.

"Not a single grain will go to you."

Officer Zhang blinked, stunned by the abrupt shift.

"You grew a leopard's gall in the span of a breath?"

Wang Chenggong's lips curled slightly.

"Our grain feeds common people who cannot defend themselves. It feeds proper soldiers who fight bandits honestly, like the White Pole Soldiers. But it will never feed vermin who rob under an official banner."

He paused just long enough for the insult to land.

"If you become prisoners, however, we may feed you as convicts. We are not inhumane."

Officer Zhang stared at him as if trying to determine whether this was some elaborate joke. Moments ago, the man had been reasonable. Now every word was edged like a blade.

"You are seeking death," he growled.

"With Dao Xuan Tianzun protecting me, how could I die?" Wang Chenggong replied almost lazily.

The embroidered figure on his chest spoke again, voice clear and composed.

"He will not die. That much I guarantee. As for you, the situation is less certain."

Several of Officer Zhang's men physically recoiled.

"That embroidery is talking?" someone whispered.

Officer Zhang's face turned red, whether from anger or fear was difficult to tell.

"Cheap jianghu tricks. Ventriloquism. Moving your chest to fake speech. Do you think I am a fool?"

Wang Chenggong gave a small shrug.

"If disbelief comforts you, keep it."

Officer Zhang's patience snapped.

"Attack!"

At that very moment, high above them, Li Daoxuan was considering his options.

Using the giant palm again felt repetitive. Even gods should avoid becoming predictable. His gaze drifted across his desk until it landed on his personal seal, the one he had bought at a tourist site for far more than it was worth.

It looked like jade. It almost certainly was not.

He picked it up and casually dropped it into the Diorama Box.

Below, Officer Zhang's men were already surging forward. Three thousand against two hundred. In their eyes, this was a trivial sweep, not a battle.

Wang Chenggong, meanwhile, stood with his hands tucked into his sleeves, completely unhurried. Confidence radiated from him, not the reckless kind, but the sort that came from knowing someone infinitely larger was watching.

Then the sky split open.

Clouds rolled aside as if brushed away by an invisible hand, and from the heavens descended an enormous seal.

It did not fall chaotically. It came down with deliberate weight.

The impact shook the entire county.

The ground thundered. Nearby buildings that had survived earlier raids finally surrendered to the tremor and collapsed into dust. The seal stood embedded between the two forces, its surface gleaming faintly through the rising haze.

To the militia, it was merely another sign of Dao Xuan Tianzun's intervention.

To Officer Zhang's army, it was the end of all rational explanations.

The object towered four or five zhang high, thick as an ancient tree trunk, square and imposing like a fragment of heaven carved into shape. Along one side were four powerful characters.

None of them could read the full meaning. Most of them could barely recognize the strokes.

But everyone understood one thing.

Stones do not carve themselves.

And they do not descend from clear skies without cause.

Before anyone could process what they were seeing, the massive seal rose again, slowly, impossibly, lifting back into the clouds until it vanished entirely.

On the ground remained a deep imprint.

Seal of Li Daoxuan.

Officer Zhang felt his knees weaken before he consciously decided to kneel. He hit the ground hard.

Behind him, as if pulled by a single invisible string, three thousand men followed, kneeling in a chaotic wave.

Silence fell.

Wang Chenggong looked at the kneeling mass and let out a long breath.

"I told you earlier," he said, not loudly, but clearly enough for them to hear.

"At first, it was only attempted grain robbery."

His gaze swept across their lowered heads.

"Now you have added attempted robbery and attempted murder."

He shook his head with something almost like pity.

"The labor reform camp will be a very educational place for you."

Chapter 1177 Deal With Him

The common folk of Wuyang County had witnessed the entire spectacle from behind cracked doors and broken walls.

When Zhang Shoubei and his three thousand men collapsed to their knees in surrender, the remaining hundred or so households in the county town slowly emerged. One by one, then in clusters, they stepped into the open street, looked at the massive imprint left in the ground, and finally did what felt safest.

They knelt.

Foreheads struck the earth in hurried succession as they bowed toward the sky again and again, terrified and grateful in equal measure.

They had just received grain from Wang Chenggong. They knew he was not a bad man. So a few braver ones dared to lift their heads slightly and ask in trembling voices,

"My lord... which deity descended just now?"

"Was it the Jade Emperor? Or the Grand Pure One?"

Wang Chenggong smiled faintly. For once, he was not exaggerating.

"That was Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said solemnly. "A benevolent and compassionate deity who delights in blessing the common people. The grain you received was bestowed by him, sent down from the heavens."

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd.

So it was divine grain.

No wonder it came so generously. No wonder it appeared exactly when famine was tightening its grip.

The common folk immediately bowed again, even harder this time, some muttering hurried prayers, some promising incense they could not afford.

Behind them, Zhang Shoubei and his surrendered men wore expressions that could only be described as educational.

Divine grain.

They had tried to rob divine grain.

That was not courage. That was courting thunder.

Wang Chenggong turned and looked at the kneeling bandits.

"Enough. Get up."

His tone was calm again, but no one mistook it for weakness.

"You will follow me obediently. We are going back for labor reform."

Zhang Shoubei did not hesitate.

"As you command," he said, head lowered so far his chin nearly touched his chest.

Thus, with only two hundred militia members, Wang Chenggong escorted more than three thousand surrendered bandits back toward Xiaolangdi. Not one fled. Not one resisted. Fear, when properly cultivated, was remarkably effective discipline.

Half an hour later, they were seated around a table.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun sat at the head. Bai Yuan fanned himself with lazy elegance. Governor Fan Shangzheng maintained his composed scholar's posture. Gao Jie leaned back with the air of someone who preferred solving problems with a blade but was willing to listen first. Wang Chenggong stood respectfully to one side.

Zhang Shoubei felt like a rabbit dropped into a tiger's den.

He perched on the edge of his chair, barely daring to sit fully, as though the wood itself might accuse him of unworthiness. His eyes did not dare linger on Li Daoxuan for more than a heartbeat. He already knew. This was the deity who had dropped the Divine Seal.

Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Pressure pressed against his lungs with every breath.

Fan Shangzheng was the first to speak.

"What was your bandit alias before all this?"

Zhang Shoubei answered quickly.

"This humble one was called Dajin Wang. Just a minor leader among the vagrant bands. I had three thousand people, but only about a thousand could actually fight. The rest were elderly, women, children. Refugees more than soldiers."

Fan Shangzheng nodded slowly.

"And you surrendered to Zuo Liangyu?"

"Yes. He came to suppress us in Runing Prefecture with more than ten thousand troops. I could not resist. I begged for surrender."

Fan Shangzheng folded his hands together.

"It is not unusual for vagrant bandits to surrender to a general. But protocol demands that surrendered forces be reported to the Governor, then to the court, and properly resettled."

Dajin Wang scratched his head awkwardly.

"This humble one does not understand such procedures. Zuo Liangyu said I had potential. He told me to join him. Promised wealth, rank, a bright future. Then he appointed me Runing Garrison Commander."

Around the table, several expressions hovered between amusement and disbelief.

Gao Jie let out a soft snort.

"Runing Garrison Commander. That is a generous title."

Fan Shangzheng sighed.

"Zuo Liangyu does not possess the authority to grant such a position. At most, he might secure a minor post through proper channels. But a garrison commander? The Ministry of War would need to approve it. Do you have an official appointment document?"

"I do!"

Dajin Wang hurriedly reached into his clothes and pulled out a crumpled paper.

They examined it.

Crooked characters sprawled across the page: "Hereby appoints Zhang Xiaoyi as Runing Garrison Commander, effective immediately."

The seal stamped at the bottom was a disaster. Blurry, uneven, as though carved hastily from a radish and pressed without ink control. It looked official only to someone who had never seen an official seal before.

Fan Shangzheng burst into laughter.

"Zuo Liangyu truly shows his refinement here. Even his forged documents are written in illiterate style."

Bai Yuan snapped his fan open with a crisp sound and partially covered his face, revealing the character for Gentleman painted on its surface.

"So your real name is Zhang Xiaoyi," he said mildly.

Dajin Wang nodded with embarrassment.

"You claimed Zuo Liangyu had more than ten thousand troops when he suppressed you?"

"Yes. I saw them with my own eyes. Dense as a forest. Endless heads."

Bai Yuan's expression sharpened slightly.

"On record, he commands only three thousand regular soldiers."

"I was not mistaken," Dajin Wang insisted.

Gao Jie leaned forward.

"Which means, aside from his official three thousand, he has at least seven thousand more. Likely absorbed vagrant bands like yours."

Silence settled over the table.

Fan Shangzheng's earlier humor vanished.

"For years, bandit suppression in Henan relied primarily on Generals Cao Wenzhao, He Renlong..."

He paused.

Gao Jie coughed meaningfully.

"And General Gao Jie, of course," Fan Shangzheng corrected.

Gao Jie nodded with visible satisfaction.

Fan Shangzheng continued.

"While they fought desperately, Zuo Liangyu frequently appeared absent from major engagements. Now it seems he was not absent at all. He was recruiting."

Absorbing.

Expanding.

"And issuing false appointments," Bai Yuan added quietly.

Fan Shangzheng's expression hardened.

"These are grave offenses. He cannot be left unchecked."

Gao Jie crossed his arms.

"What do you propose? Submit a memorial? Ask the Emperor to issue a decree?"

Fan Shangzheng shook his head slowly.

"If Zuo Liangyu still feared the court, he would not dare to act so openly."

That was the heart of it.

The realm was already shaking. Vagrant bandits ravaged the countryside. The Jurchens in the northeast pressed relentlessly. Any frontline general could smell the instability of the times. Ambitious men did not wait for collapsing dynasties to crush them. They prepared.

"An ambitious man," Fan Shangzheng murmured. "Difficult to handle."

"There is nothing difficult about it," Li Daoxuan said calmly.

All eyes turned to him.

"Offer him a chance to surrender. If he refuses, eliminate him."

The simplicity of the proposal stunned the room.

"Are we to deal with him ourselves?" Gao Jie asked.

"Yes," Li Daoxuan replied. "The imperial court is unreliable in this matter. A man like Zuo Liangyu has already stepped beyond proper order. His army will not bring stability. It will bring suffering."

He glanced at Dajin Wang.

"Today he raided Wuyang County for grain. Tomorrow, others will do the same. The extra thousands of soldiers he hides must eat. If not from the court, then from the people."

Understanding dawned.

Zuo Liangyu reported three thousand to the court.

He commanded more than ten thousand.

The difference had to be fed somehow.

Plunder.

And when villages burned, blame could be shifted onto Chuang Wang or the Eight Great Kings.

In a land already drowning in chaos, who could tell which knife belonged to whom?

Li Daoxuan's voice grew colder.

"He is no different from a vagrant bandit."

He paused.

"No. He is worse."

Chapter 1178 The Bruises Faded

Lu'an, Shucheng.

Inside the main command tent, Zuo Liangyu was eating like a king in exile who had already decided the throne was his. The outside world was starving. Refugees chewed bark and scraped dirt for roots. Children cried until their voices went hoarse.

Inside the tent, however, the table groaned under chicken, duck, fish, braised pork, fragrant wine. Not a single dish missing. Not a single grain wasted.

Across from him sat his son, Zuo Menggeng, who poked at a slice of meat but did not seem entirely at ease.

"Father," he began cautiously, "the Grand Coordinator of Yingtian, Zhang Guowei, has issued three proclamations ordering us to enter the mountains and wipe out the remaining rebels. We've... done nothing. Won't that look improper?"

Zuo Liangyu burst into loud laughter, oil shining on his lips.

"Zhang Guowei? Useless scholar. Why should I listen to him? What can he do to me?"

Zuo Menggeng hesitated, then continued, "The Anlu Circuit Censor, Shi Kefa, also sent a letter urging us to march west and pressure the Eight Great Kings."

Zuo Liangyu snorted. "The Eight Great Kings? That's a tiger with iron teeth. I'm not stupid enough to shove my head into its mouth. I'd rather sit comfortably here. Shi Kefa cannot leave Anqing or Lu Prefecture. Is he going to personally jump out and cut me down?"

His son lowered his voice. "I just feel... we're playing with fire. And the flames are getting higher. One day..."

Zuo Liangyu waved his chopsticks dismissively, then slowly put them down. His voice shifted, heavy, grounded in memory.

"You weren't there. You didn't see what I saw in Liaodong."

Zuo Menggeng looked up.

"When I was Commander of the Right Flank Chariot Battalion in Liaodong, I saw the Manchus with my own eyes. Their cavalry rolled like black thunder across the plains. Discipline. Ferocity. Ruthlessness." His gaze darkened. "Let me tell you something plainly. The imperial court cannot defeat them. It simply cannot. Sooner or later, they will ride into Beijing. Zhu Youjian will not die on a dragon throne. He will die under iron hooves."

Zuo Menggeng sucked in a breath.

"Since I left Liaodong, I swore never to go back. That place is a graveyard." Zuo Liangyu leaned back. "Better to 'suppress bandits' in the Central Plains. And tell me, can bandits ever truly be eliminated?"

Zuo Menggeng did not answer.

"They cannot," Zuo Liangyu said flatly. "As long as the court has no money to pay soldiers, no grain to feed refugees, bandits will always sprout like weeds. Suppress one, two more grow. And this court having money?" He laughed bitterly. "That's a fantasy."

"Why won't the court have money?" the son asked.

Zuo Liangyu shrugged. "Ask the civil officials. They shuffle numbers, argue over taxes, squeeze peasants dry, and still the treasury is empty. I don't need to understand why. I only need to see the result. This Zhu family empire is unstable."

He leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"Our Zuo family must prepare early. Who knows? One day this empire might not be named Zhu."

Zuo Menggeng froze. The ambition in those words was not a passing thought. It was something that had been quietly fermenting for years.

After a long silence, he said carefully, "Even so... abducting women... is that really necessary?"

There it was.

Zhang Guowei had demanded mountain searches. Mountain searches meant exhaustion and no loot. Zuo Liangyu had instead unleashed his men across Southern Zhili. They robbed grain, seized silver, dragged women back to camp.

Grain and silver could be justified under military necessity. Women could not.

They were distributed among the absorbed bandit soldiers as wives. A crude reward system. Loyalty purchased not with coin, but with stolen flesh.

At night, cries could be heard through the camp.

Zuo Liangyu's expression hardened. "You are still soft."

"I—"

"Listen well. I cannot shower my men with silver like the rich households. If I want loyalty, I must use what I have. Those who achieve great things do not fuss over trifles."

Zuo Menggeng fell silent again. The meat on his plate had grown cold.

At that moment, a soldier entered and knelt.

"Report, Commander. A messenger has arrived from the Governor of Henan."

Zuo Liangyu frowned. "The Governor of Henan? I'm in Huguang. What does he want with me? Bring him in."

A moment later, the messenger entered.

Zuo Liangyu blinked.

"Eh? Isn't this my Runing Garrison Commander? Dajin Wang? Why are you delivering messages now?"

Dajin Wang, formerly Zhang Xiaoyi, looked like a man trying to appear dignified while remembering he had once believed a radish-stamped appointment letter was legitimate.

"General Zuo," he said with strained grievance, "the post you gave me... it was fake, wasn't it? It was never reported to the court."

Zuo Liangyu laughed. "Fake? When I hold real power, that paper will become priceless. A treasured artifact."

Dajin Wang thought, If literacy were power, you would not own a single county. But he swallowed the thought.

Zuo Liangyu waved impatiently. "Why are you here?"

"I was captured by an immortal," Dajin Wang said solemnly. "I am now undergoing labor reform. I came to atone through service."

Zuo Liangyu stared.

Dajin Wang continued bravely, "The Governor of Henan sends this message: 'Surrender immediately. Go to Luoyang and accept punishment. You may yet preserve your life. Persist in stubbornness, and there is only one path. Death.'"

CRACK.

Zuo Liangyu's boot slammed into Dajin Wang's stomach before the sentence finished. The former bandit flew backward, rolled across the carpet, and stopped near a table leg.

"Get out!"

Dajin Wang clutched his belly. Oddly, there was a flicker of satisfaction in his eyes.

The more I'm beaten, the greater my merit when I return, he calculated.

"You were my man!" Zuo Liangyu roared. "Now you dare threaten me?"

"I would not dare," Dajin Wang said quickly, adjusting his tone. "General, please calm your anger."

"Go back and tell that Governor," Zuo Liangyu barked, "I am in Huguang. If he has courage, let him come here and kill me. Does he dare leave Henan? Does he dare?"

Dajin Wang hesitated, then whispered, "He has an immortal assisting him. His name is Dao Xuan Tianzun. He is extremely powerful. Perhaps General should reconsider."

CRACK.

Another kick. Dajin Wang rolled again, like a sack of grain kicked out of storage.

"Immortal?" Zuo Liangyu spat. "I'll kill even an immortal for you to see!"

"I'm afraid," Dajin Wang muttered while rolling toward the exit, "that may be difficult."

CRACK.

One final kick sent him fully out of the tent.

He stood up outside, brushed dust from his clothes, and grinned.

Good. Very good. Plenty of bruises. Surely this counts as hardship endured in the line of duty.

He mounted a horse and began the long ride back to Luoyang, occasionally touching his sore ribs with satisfaction.

By the time he arrived, however, after days on the road, wind and sun and sweat had done their work.

The bruises had faded.

Dajin Wang stared at his unmarked skin in disbelief.

"All that rolling," he muttered, deeply offended by time itself. "And not even a mark to prove it."

Chapter 1179 Visiting Xi'an

Just as Henan was quietly sharpening its knives for Zuo Liangyu, two wandering princes finally returned home.

After months of roaming through Sichuan, Zhu Cunji and Zhu Yujian arrived back at the gates of Xi'an.

The moment his boots touched familiar stone, Zhu Cunji did not sigh in nostalgia, nor did he admire the city walls.

He demanded ink.

Then he wrote.

The letter was addressed to the Prince of Rui of Hanzhong, Zhu Changhao.

There was no polite preamble. No respectful cousinly phrasing. No gentle courtly restraint.

"Zhu Changhao, you shameless fellow! That Hanzhong station on your West Han Railway is an embarrassment. Renovate it properly! It's nothing but a broken thatched shed selling tickets. Utterly disgraceful. Don't think I can't see it just because I'm not in Hanzhong. My eyes are wide open!"

He slapped the brush down with satisfaction.

Only then did he turn toward Zhu Yujian and grin.

"Official business done. Now I can properly show you Xi'an. This is the Dao Xuan Tianzun Liberated Zone. You've only seen the surface."

The last time Zhu Yujian passed through, he had been rushing. Hanzhong. Sichuan. Strategy. Movement. Urgency.

This time, there was leisure.

And after what he had witnessed in Sichuan, he was no longer the naïve prince who viewed everything connected to Dao Xuan Tianzun with suspicion and disbelief. He had seen railways move grain like flowing water. He had seen cannons roar. He had seen soldiers supplied without starving peasants.

His eyes were open now.

"Where do we begin?" Zhu Yujian asked.

Zhu Cunji's eyes sparkled. "Food, drink, and entertainment!"

Zhu Yujian closed his eyes briefly.

Of course.

Going with this frivolous heir would result in wine houses and opera troupes. He decided instead to wander alone.

He donned his wandering swordsman attire once more. Straw hat. Loose robe. The identity of Zhu Piaoling.

The moment he stepped onto the bustling streets of Xi'an, someone shouted:

"Hey! Isn't that Hero Zhu Piaoling? You're back!"

Zhu Yujian froze.

Another voice chimed in. "Hero Zhu! I'm a road worker! Remember the West Han Railway? That eunuch embezzled my wages. You beat him until he cried for his mother. I got double compensation because of you!"

A third voice called out, "Hero Zhu! Have you eaten? Come, have a bowl!"

Warmth surged from every direction.

Zhu Yujian was genuinely stunned.

He had never imagined Zhu Cunji was so loved by the common people.

He approached the road worker who had spoken and asked casually, "You know the two princes who hired you to build the railway?"

"Of course," the man said cheerfully. "One's the Railway King, Zhu Cunji. The other's the big money-grabber, Zhu Changhao."

"Railway King?" Zhu Yujian repeated.

The man laughed. "Everyone in Xi'an knows it. His Highness says he'll build railways across the whole world. Even to Yizhou Island!"

"To an island?" Zhu Yujian raised a brow.

"How he plans to lay tracks across the sea, we don't know. And frankly, we don't care," the worker said with a shrug. "If he says he'll build it, maybe he will."

Zhu Yujian fell into thought.

Railways had moved troops swiftly to defend Hanzhong. They had carried supplies into Sichuan with speed no caravan could match. That kind of infrastructure was not a trivial toy. It was a legacy.

Ambition backed by practicality, he mused. That is no small thing.

"Hero Zhu," the worker chuckled, "since when do you talk about serious matters? Aren't you the one who roams for scenery and romance?"

Zhu Yujian answered dryly, "To admire scenery, one must travel by train."

The worker laughed heartily.

Yet it was not the laughter that struck Zhu Yujian most.

It was the confidence.

This was an ordinary laborer. His hands were rough. His clothes were plain. And yet when he spoke of princes, he did so without trembling, without lowering his voice, without that ingrained tone of inferiority Zhu Yujian had grown accustomed to in Nanyang.

There was no fearful reverence.

No worshipful distance.

Only familiarity.

Respect, perhaps. But not submission.

As if to say: I am a worker. I stand upright.

Zhu Yujian scanned the street.

Every passerby carried themselves the same way. Heads high. Shoulders straight. Eyes bright.

In that moment, he realized the most fundamental difference between the Dao Xuan Tianzun Liberated Zone and the outside world.

Here, people walked like human beings.

He had barely turned the next corner when he saw a woman carrying a worn cloth bag. Inside it, something slapped wetly.

A fish.

A sea fish.

It was still half alive, thrashing faintly. He recognized the type from Xiaolangdi pier. A grouper, transported by river-sea vessels from the coast.

Expensive.

He quickened his pace.

"Madam," he said politely.

She turned, looking at him curiously. She did not call him Hero Zhu. She did not recognize the disguise.

"Yes?"

"I couldn't help noticing the fish," he said. "That's a sea grouper, is it not? Transported from the coast. Quite costly."

She smiled proudly. "You have good eyes. Three taels of silver."

Zhu Yujian blinked.

Three taels.

That was not a small amount.

"Forgive me," he said carefully, "but you do not appear to be from a wealthy household. How can you afford such a purchase?"

She burst out laughing.

"What kind of talk is that? My husband is a skilled technician at the Western Steel Mill. Three taels and five qian a month. Plus bonuses. I work at the textile factory. Three taels a month."

She patted the bag.

"We just had a grandson. What's wrong with spending a month's wages to celebrate properly?"

Zhu Yujian calculated silently.

Seven taels and five qian monthly income.

A three-ael fish was extravagant, yes, but not ruinous.

He studied her clothes. Plain. Clean. Ordinary.

Nothing about her suggested wealth.

And yet this family could afford sea fish flown across rivers and canals.

"Are there many families like yours?" he asked.

"Of course," she said lightly. "Hundreds of women at the textile factory. And that's just one factory."

He pressed further. "With so many workers, producing so much cloth, can it all truly be sold? Cotton garments are expensive. If they don't sell, how can wages be paid? Is it all divine gold from Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

She laughed again, shaking her head.

"Everyone earns well. So everyone can buy. Cotton clothes sell out. The factory makes profit. We even contribute to the village treasury to support other regions."

Zhu Yujian stopped walking.

The logic was simple.

If incomes rise across the board, what was once luxury becomes normal consumption.

Production feeds wages. Wages feed consumption. Consumption sustains production.

Silver circulates.

Goods circulate.

Confidence circulates.

It was not divine gold raining from the sky.

It was a system.

And for the first time, Zhu Yujian understood something deeper than railways or artillery.

This place did not merely build machines.

It built people who believed they were worth something.

And that, perhaps, was far more dangerous than cannons.

Chapter 1180 The Jinyiwei Return

Zhu Yujian had discovered something dangerous.

He liked learning.

As a child, he had been confined like a criminal inside the Prince of Tang's residence. The old prince had once attempted to starve him into submission. Hunger gnawed at his ribs. Books filled the emptiness.

He studied when he was hungry.

He studied when he was weak.

He studied when he was angry.

Now he was free.

And freedom only sharpened that hunger.

At dawn each day, before the Prince of Qin's manor stirred awake, Zhu Yujian would slip out in his wandering swordsman attire. Straw hat low. Sleeves loose. Eyes alert.

He walked markets. He visited workshops. He questioned merchants, blacksmiths, laborers, clerks, women buying vegetables, boys hauling coal.

He asked about taxes. About wages. About steel production. About grain distribution. About rail timetables.

In the evenings, he never missed Gaojia News.

Xi'an felt different from any city he had known. It was not merely prosperous.

It was alive.

People were not surviving. They were advancing.

There was a collective momentum in the air, as if the entire city were running toward sunrise.

Perhaps this, he thought, is what a golden age feels like before historians give it a name.

The more he learned, the more he realized how ignorant he truly was.

His classical education was impeccable. His moral philosophy refined. His understanding of military history solid.

Yet here, in this new world of railways and factories, of wage systems and profit cycles, he felt like a child again.

One morning, he sought out Zhu Cunji.

"I wish to study properly," Zhu Yujian said without hesitation. "Systematically. Politics. Economics. Administration. Everything. Where should I go?"

Zhu Cunji grinned as if waiting for that question.

"To Gao Family Village, of course. Thirty-Two Middle School. Even Shi Kefa once studied there. Whenever someone realizes their brain is insufficient, that's where they go."

Zhu Yujian's eyes brightened. "Then I will go."

He paused.

"But how shall I live there? I have no residence. And no money."

Zhu Cunji burst into laughter.

"Money? That's the easiest problem you'll ever have."

With a heavy thud, he placed a thick pouch of silver into Zhu Yujian's hands.

Then he rubbed his chin.

"Actually... money alone won't work. In Gao Family Village itself, silver doesn't always speak. And you are not exactly a youth anymore. Imagine a masked knight-errant sitting in elementary arithmetic class. They might throw you out."

Zhu Yujian imagined it.

It was indeed absurd.

"I'll write you a letter of introduction."

Zhu Cunji swiftly composed a letter stating that Zhu Yujian was a relative of his, not a suspicious element, and wished to enroll at Thirty-Two Middle School for advanced study.

Then, instead of signing "Heir to the Prince of Qin," he produced a seal and stamped it decisively.

Pa.

Zhu Yujian leaned closer.

The seal read:

Exclusive Stamp of the Xi'an Railway Bureau Director.

He stared.

"You," he said slowly, "are the Prince of Qin's heir. Yet you do not sign as such. Instead, you use... this?"

Zhu Cunji's smile widened.

"You don't understand. Gao Family Village is where Dao Xuan Tianzun first manifested his miracles. It's sacred ground. In sacred ground, what weight does 'Prince of Qin's heir' carry? Very little."

He tapped the seal.

"But the Xi'an Railway Bureau? That is certified by Gao Family Village. Established with the Heavenly Lord's assistance. He even personally helped build a bridge for us. This enterprise is under divine protection."

He leaned closer.

"In Gao Family Village, 'Railway Bureau Director' is more useful than 'Prince of Qin's heir.'"

Zhu Yujian fell silent.

One title granted by an earthly emperor.

The other endorsed by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The difference was not subtle.

"Remember," Zhu Cunji added, "if you encounter trouble on the way, present this letter. It will open more doors than your real identity ever could. And your real identity is not to be mentioned. Ever."

Zhu Yujian nodded.

Letter secured. Silver packed. Horse prepared.

He could have taken the train. It would have been fastest.

But speed was not his goal.

He wanted to see more.

So he rode out of Xi'an alone, heading toward Chengcheng County, dust rising beneath his horse's hooves.

At that very moment, another group was approaching Xi'an from the opposite direction.

The Jinyiwei had returned.

Not in flying fish robes. Not with embroidered uniforms or ceremonial blades.

They looked like beggars.

Tattered clothes. Dust-caked faces. Shoulders stooped. Eyes sharp.

Leading them was a thousand-household commander surnamed Mi.

His assignment was simple in wording.

Find the Prince of Tang.

Zhu Youjian had been furious when he learned of the escape. A prince slipping through the capital's grasp was not a small matter. Imperial dignity had been wounded.

Commander Mi had received the order.

In an empire of millions, he was to locate one man.

He had questioned the Jinyiwei who lost Zhu Yujian.

The kidnappers had worn knight-errant attire. Large conical hats. Shaanxi accents. Accompanied by black-clad masked subordinates.

So Commander Mi entered Shaanxi in disguise.

He did not know what a train was. He crossed Tongguan on foot.

Dust gathered in his hair. His boots wore thin.

"Remember," he told his men, "the abductor wore a flamboyant conical hat. That is our primary clue."

One subordinate grunted, "If we find him, we kill his subordinates and seize him."

Commander Mi nearly struck him.

"Are you brainless? We are searching for Zhu Yujian, not hunting hats. If we attack blindly and alert the wrong people, we lose everything."

He lowered his voice.

"If we see such a man, we follow. Quietly. To his hideout. If Zhu Yujian is there, we succeed. If not, then we consider... persuasion."

His men nodded.

Commander Mi sighed.

"In this vast realm, to find one man in a conical hat..."

Before he finished, a subordinate suddenly froze.

"Commander. Ahead."

Mi frowned. "What nonsense—"

Then he saw him.

A man in a conical hat.

Riding calmly toward them on the official road.

Alone.

No black-clad guards. No dramatic entourage.

Just one rider, unhurried, sunlight glinting off the edge of the hat.

The Jinyiwei froze.

It was too easy.

Commander Mi's heart pounded once.

Then he snapped to clarity.

"Do not panic. We are not wearing Flying Fish Robes. We look like refugees. He has no reason to suspect us."

He lowered his head.

"Disperse. Pretend you do not know each other."

The men immediately scattered, limping in different directions, playing their roles.

Meanwhile, the rider in the conical hat continued forward, unaware that fate had just placed him directly in front of the empire's sharpest hunters.

Or perhaps,

Not unaware at all.