

Great Ming 1191

Chapter 1191 Did You Hear That?

Mi Qianhu could not hold it in anymore.

"Sichuan? How is that possible? How could you possibly gain a foothold in Sichuan?"

Zhu Cunji looked at him almost kindly.

"As long as you can give the common people a decent life, tell me, is there anywhere under Heaven you cannot go?"

He paused, then added casually,

"We even have considerable influence in Nanjing."

"Nanjing too?!"

Mi Qianhu's voice came out strangled.

"Impossible. Absolutely impossible."

Zhu Cunji seemed entertained by how the man's worldview shattered piece by piece.

"Since you look so shocked, I might as well finish the list. We have indirect influence over Pi Island, the Xuan-Da Command, the Mongolian grasslands, parts of the Fujian and Guangdong seas, and the Dengzhou Garrison."

Each place name struck like a hammer.

Mi Qianhu made a choking sound every time.

By the end of it, he realized something horrifying.

Aside from Northern Zhili and the Jiangnan core, nearly everything else was slipping beyond the court's effective grasp.

"No!" he barked. "This is impossible. Henan and Hubei are still overrun by bandits. You cannot even suppress the bandits. How could you orchestrate such a vast rebellion?"

Zhu Cunji smiled.

"As for the bandits, we are about to close the net."

He leaned forward slightly.

"Gaojia News reported it last night. Our forces are completing preparations to eliminate the last major bandit leader, the Eight Great Kings. There should be follow-up coverage today. Would you like to watch? I will personally take you to see the Divine Mirror."

Mi Qianhu's jaw tightened.

"You dare show me such secrets? As long as I live, I will deliver every word back to the capital."

"Secrets?" Zhu Cunji snorted. "If it's broadcast on Gaojia News, how can it be secret? Everyone in Dao Xuan Tianzun's Liberated Zone can see it. You are in this zone now, so naturally you may watch."

He smiled lazily.

"Stay a few days. If after that you still want to report back, then I will truly respect you as a man."

He raised a hand.

"Where is my car?"

The polished Kulinan rolled forward like a gleaming beast.

Zhu Cunji hopped in with the ease of habit.

"Bring these capital bumpkins. We're going to watch Gaojia News."

Capital bumpkins.

The words nearly made Mi Qianhu faint with fury.

They were men of the capital. They had always called outsiders bumpkins. To be labeled that by someone from Shaanxi felt like an insult carved into bone.

The convoy moved through Xi'an's streets toward Cai City Plaza.

Dusk was falling.

Across the city, people gathered as if for ritual.

Then, from somewhere unseen, a countdown began.

"Ten... nine... eight... seven..."

More voices joined.

"Six... five... four... three..."

"Two... one..."

"Lights on!"

In an instant, the entire city blazed into life.

Streetlamps flared. Windows glowed. Colorful electric lights shimmered across every alley and rooftop.

Xi'an became a sea of light.

Mi Qianhu and his men cried out involuntarily.

"What sorcery is this?!"

Zhu Cunji laughed.

"See? Country bumpkins are endlessly entertaining."

Mi Qianhu demanded, "What are these lights?"

No one bothered answering.

They arrived at Cai City Plaza just as the evening crowd thickened.

Zhu Cunji ascended to his private viewing platform on the second floor. His consort was already there, graceful and composed.

She glanced at the bound captives.

"What curious people have you brought this time? You always enjoy watching the news with strange company."

"It makes things lively," Zhu Cunji replied. "These capital bumpkins have never seen the world. I enjoy their expressions."

She shook her head with indulgent amusement.

Mi Qianhu, convinced he was already doomed, lost all restraint.

"You are the one who has not seen the world. Your whole family has not seen the world. Pigs trapped in Xi'an. What have you seen beyond your own city?"

A few years ago, those words would have crushed Zhu Cunji.

Now he merely smiled.

"I have seen the vast, mist-covered sea."

Mi Qianhu fell silent.

At that moment, the enormous Divine Mirror lit up.

As always, the first figure to appear was Chen Yuanyuan.

Today she wore light summer attire and held a delicate silken fan. She waved it gently and smiled.

"Flat Rabbit Brand Silken Fan. I simply cannot put it down."

The image shifted.

Flat Rabbit himself appeared.

"Flat Rabbit Brand, specializing in authentic Sichuan cuisine. All profits go to the poor. If even one coin enters this Rabbit's own pocket, I will personally walk into the Huanglong Mountain labor reform camp and lock myself in."

Zheng Gouzi suddenly popped into frame.

"Rabbit Lord, you cannot go back to Huanglong Mountain. I just heard someone say no rabbit leaves Sichuan alive."

Flat Rabbit blinked. "Why?"

The screen shifted again.

A massive crowd of Sichuanese shouted in unison.

"Spicy rabbit heads!"

The plaza erupted.

"Hahaha!"

"Flat Rabbit is still Flat Rabbit!"

"Only his commercials are worth watching!"

Someone protested, "Wait, wasn't that supposed to be an advertisement for a fan? Why do I now want to eat spicy rabbit heads?"

Another argued, "It does not matter. If Flat Rabbit sells it, I buy it. Fan or rabbit head, I buy both."

Laughter rolled through the square.

Mi Qianhu stared upward, stunned.

"What kind of monstrous mirror is this? It is used... to sell goods?"

For ten full minutes, products from every corner of the realm appeared. Silk from the Anqing Yingjiang Sericulture Cooperative. Machinery. Tools. Food.

Mi Qianhu's mind spun.

Then the screen darkened.

When it lit up again, Gao Yiye appeared, elegant and composed, flanked by two young presenters she was clearly training.

She smiled.

"This is Gaojia News. We begin with international affairs."

Mi Qianhu blinked.

International?

Gao Yiye continued.

"Recently, the Shimabara Rebellion has erupted in Japan, also known as the Christian Rebellion. A man named Amakusa Shiro is leading believers in uprising. On the surface, this appears to be religious persecution. In truth, it is largely an uprising of impoverished peasants driven by hardship, using religion as justification."

The square was silent.

Mi Qianhu slowly turned to Zhu Cunji.

"You... report on foreign nations. Publicly."

Zhu Cunji leaned back comfortably.

"Of course. The world does not end at the Great Wall."

Mi Qianhu swallowed.

In the capital, most officials could barely describe conditions two provinces away.

Here, in open plaza, common people were listening to analysis of Japan.

And suddenly, for the first time that evening, he felt something unfamiliar creeping into his chest.

Not fear.

Not anger.

But doubt.

Chapter 1192 The Grand Encirclement

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun once said," Gao Yiye declared, voice steady but carrying easily across the hall, "that as long as the common people live well, no matter how powerful Christianity becomes, it cannot stir them into rebellion."

He paused, letting that sink in before continuing.

"The White Lotus Society in our Great Ming is no different. If the court truly allowed the people to prosper, the Embroidered Uniform Guard wouldn't need to run around arresting so-called heretics every day. With full bellies and steady lives, who would risk their heads causing trouble?"

For a heartbeat, there was silence.

Then the hall erupted. Thunderous applause rolled like a summer storm.

Zhu Cunji tilted his head toward Mi Qianhu with a faint smile. "Did you hear that? Tell me, have you ever arrested a White Lotus follower?"

Mi Qianhu blinked. "I... I have."

"Then learn from this," Zhu Cunji said lightly. "If you learn it well, maybe one day you won't have to arrest any at all."

Mi Qianhu stared at him as if he had just been handed a philosophy exam without warning. "I heard it," he muttered. "But how exactly am I supposed to learn that?"

Before Zhu Cunji could tease him further, the international segment ended and the domestic news began.

A new host, seated to Gao Yiye's left, straightened his sleeves and began, slightly stiff.

"Now for domestic news. Continuing yesterday's report: we covered the Shanxi militia preparing to march south in support of Huguang. Today, we report on the movements of the Sichuan militia."

He cleared his throat.

"The five thousand militia members who entered Sichuan to suppress the rebellion have regrouped in Chongqing and are preparing to depart. Their next target is the Eight Great Kings, who are currently ravaging Huguang."

He stumbled over the title "Eight Great Kings," almost tangling his tongue, then swallowed hard. A faint laugh rippled through the audience.

"The new host still can't compare to the Saintess," someone whispered.

The poor man forced a professional smile. "Now, we turn to our frontline reporter, Zhou Daya, for an exclusive interview."

The scene shifted.

There she stood, Zhou Daya, radiant and composed on Chongqing's Chaotianmen Pier. Behind her: thousands of militia soldiers, and beside her, the masked Instructor He, Cheng Xu.

Even through the screen, she had presence. Clear voice, confident posture, eyes bright as riverlight.

"Instructor He," she began, "we understand you are preparing to leave Sichuan to deal with the roving bandits. How are preparations progressing?"

Though his lower face was hidden, the curve of Cheng Xu's eyes betrayed a smile.

"Very smoothly. We've gathered hundreds of vessels and will advance by land and water simultaneously."

He stepped aside.

The camera panned.

The pier was a forest of masts.

Small boats, medium ships, tightly packed, crowding the Yangtze and the Jialing until the rivers themselves seemed made of wood and sail. In this era, before any great dams reshaped the waters, the upper Yangtze ran shallow. Large vessels could not pass. Only smaller boats could carry troops upstream.

Which meant this sight was not excess.

It was necessity multiplied.

Mi Qianhu sucked in a sharp breath. "What kind of fleet is that? It looks stronger than the imperial navy."

As if hearing him through the screen, Zhou Daya asked, "Instructor He, how was such a fleet assembled?"

Cheng Xu answered calmly.

"Since entering Sichuan, our militia has focused on improving local livelihoods. The people know this. When word spread that we were leaving to strike the bandits, merchants lent their ships. Fishermen volunteered theirs. No one was compelled. Every vessel you see came willingly."

Mi Qianhu stared at the screen.

No forced requisition. No threats.

They came on their own.

He felt something twist uncomfortably in his chest.

Cheng Xu continued, "Huguang has many mountain regions. The Sichuan militia specializes in mountain warfare. We will fight them in the hills, where they believe themselves strongest."

He pulled a young man forward.

"This is Jiang Daliang, newly recruited into the New People's Militia. Let him speak."

The camera zoomed in.

Poor Jiang Daliang looked like a rabbit caught in torchlight. Television meant nothing to him, but Zhou Daya standing so close certainly did. He snapped into a stiff salute, voice shaking.

"I... I represent the dockworkers of Jiangbei District... Chongqing... Sichuan..." He coughed. "Do I really have to speak?"

Zhou Daya smiled encouragingly. "Just say what you feel."

He swallowed.

Then something steadied inside him.

"We're going to wipe them out. The roving bandits. The local tyrants. The bullies. All of them." His voice grew louder. "Every last one. For that... I'm not afraid to die."

Behind him, the dockworkers burst into laughter.

"Daliang, you're tripping over your own tongue!"

His ears turned red, but his back stayed straight.

Cheng Xu stepped forward again. "In short, we are confident we can sweep away the Huguang bandits in one decisive strike. Please wait and see."

The image faded.

Mi Qianhu's mouth remained open long after the screen changed.

"So... the Sichuan forces are already marching?"

Zhu Cunji nodded. "Yesterday you saw Shanxi's report. Shanxi will advance into Henan, link up with the Henan Front Army, then march south. Together, they will encircle the Eight Great Kings."

Mi Qianhu inhaled sharply again.

Encirclement from multiple provinces.

This was not suppression.

This was annihilation.

The broadcast returned to the studio.

"Next," the host announced, "we shift to Anqing."

The Yangtze rolled wide and grey beneath an open sky.

Standing at the riverbank was Shi Kefa, robed in flowing blue, calm as a pine in winter wind. Behind him stood the Anlu militia of Gao Family Village. Fewer in number than other forces, yes. But their formation was tight. Their discipline clear.

A reporter smiled at him. "Master Shi, you command the smallest force among the encircling armies. Do you feel pressure? Are you afraid?"

Shi Kefa's voice rang out, steady and unyielding.

"My head may be severed. My will cannot be bent."

As the words fell, ships entered Yingjiang Port behind him. Supplies poured ashore in controlled chaos. Barrels of gunpowder. Crates of bullets. New firearms stacked basket after basket.

A logistics officer saluted sharply. "Gao Family Village Waterborne Logistics Team reporting. Supplies for two thousand men delivered. Please confirm receipt."

Shi Kefa's stern expression softened.

"Our village's support has arrived again. With such backing, not a single bandit will break through our eastern flank."

Mi Qianhu exhaled slowly. "Such a vast encirclement..."

Zhu Cunji explained patiently, "The bandits number in the tens, even hundreds of thousands. To net them all, the net must be wide. This time, there will be a decisive battle in Hubei. The bandit crisis will end there."

Mi Qianhu's hands trembled.

"And after that... you'll march on the capital? Seize the Emperor's throne?"

Zhu Cunji spread his hands innocently.

"This heir apparent knows nothing. I am not even Prince of Qin yet. How could I dream of the dragon throne before earning my first title?"

He laughed.

"Everything depends on Dao Xuan Tianzun's arrangements. Whatever the Dao Xuan Tianzun says, that is what we will do."

He smiled lightly.

Mi Qianhu did not laugh.

For the first time, he realized something terrifying.

This was no rebellion fueled by hunger.

This was a machine powered by belief.

And belief, unlike hunger, does not disappear when fed.

Chapter 1193 Let's Merge Our Two Nations

As the great encirclement tightened across Hubei, Gao Family Village itself was experiencing a crisis of a different kind.

Tan Liwen was buried alive under paperwork.

Only a few months earlier, Shan Shier, the village's highest-ranking administrator, had led a massive expansion into Sichuan. The plan was simple in theory: replicate Shanxi's development model.

Reality disagreed.

Sichuan was a maze of mountains and old loyalties. Small factions sprouted everywhere like wild bamboo after rain. Worse, there was no stabilizing figure like Governor Wu Shen had been in Shanxi. No ready-made pillar to anchor reforms.

After careful evaluation, Shan Shier sent back an urgent request.

Not for soldiers.

For administrators.

And not the inexperienced kind.

Every single person dispatched to Sichuan was one of the village's best. Efficient. Capable. Battle-tested in governance. The kind who could balance grain ledgers while negotiating land disputes and drafting transport schedules.

Which meant Gao Family Village was suddenly hollowed out.

Now Tan Liwen, left behind as second-in-command, stared at the consequences.

Supply coordination for multiple army groups. Ammunition routing. Personnel deployment. Budget approvals. Internal civil management. Emergency adjustments.

The stacks of documents were growing faster than he could breathe.

He slumped into his chair.

"I can't do this anymore," he muttered. "If this continues, I'll die of paperwork before the bandits die of bullets."

That very evening, after Gaojia News concluded, a recruitment notice aired.

Gao Family Village Administrative Office is recruiting civil servants. Open to all genders. Requirement: graduate of Thirty-Two Middle School.

One requirement.

It eliminated almost everyone instantly.

By noon the next day, inside the administrative hall of the main keep, the recruitment process began.

Tan Liwen looked at the queue.

Then looked again.

There were barely any people.

His scalp tingled.

Did I set the bar too high?

Graduates of Thirty-Two Middle School were precious resources. Most had already been absorbed into factories, logistics, research units, or dispatched outward with development teams. Educated manpower was rarer than silver.

If no one applied, he was finished.

Just as anxiety began chewing at him, a cheerful voice rang out.

"Uncle Tan! I'm here to apply!"

Tan Liwen looked up.

A familiar grin greeted him.

"Handsome Enough to Bubble, Liu Maopao!"

Today Liu Maopao was not dressed like a wealthy young merchant. He wore his graduation scholar's robe from Thirty-Two Middle School. Clean. Crisp. Intentional.

He clasped his hands politely. "Uncle Tan, won't you welcome me?"

Tan Liwen thought, I barely know you. Calling me Uncle already?

But he waved him over anyway.

"You graduated this summer," Tan Liwen began. "Since then you've been helping your parents run the largest restaurant in the village. Your wool sweater factory is expanding into Jiangnan. Why would someone from such a prosperous family apply to become a bureaucrat? Isn't that a waste of business talent?"

Liu Maopao smiled calmly.

"Business talent is insignificant, Uncle Tan. Since childhood, I've wanted to enter public service. After graduation, I've been waiting for this recruitment notice. Now that it's here, how could I miss it?"

Tan Liwen narrowed his eyes.

"You're not running away from commerce because Mrs. San's down jackets are crushing your sweater market, are you?"

Liu Maopao laughed.

"Winter is cold, Uncle Tan. People wear down jackets over sweaters. Warm and Sleepy sweaters and Mrs. San's down jackets complement each other. We are partners in warmth, not enemies."

Tan Liwen suppressed a smile.

"Fine. List your advantages."

Liu Maopao straightened.

"My father, Liu You, is from Heyang County. One of the earliest followers of Dao Xuan Tianzun's teachings in the village. Ordinary background. No Manchu ties. No Mongolian aristocratic relations. No family members in the imperial court. We are pure working people. Our loyalty is unquestionable."

Tan Liwen nodded internally. Clean political background.

"During my first year at Thirty-Two Middle School, I joined the student council. I handled coordination between teachers and students. Communication skills, conflict resolution, organizational management."

He continued confidently.

"In my final year, I served as student council president."

Tan Liwen's eyebrows lifted slightly.

That was not trivial.

"While serving," Liu Maopao added, "I was assigned to interact with two Mongolian nobles studying here, Zhebu and E'zhe. I built a close relationship with them. We became sworn brothers. That relationship contributed to certain strategic deployments in the north. Dao Xuan Tianzun personally praised the outcome."

That made Tan Liwen sit straighter.

Praise from Dao Xuan Tianzun was no small endorsement.

"Furthermore," Liu Maopao said, "I managed the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory. I've overseen production, logistics, expansion into Jiangnan markets. I understand commerce, labor concerns, supply chains. I've traveled widely. I understand people."

He met Tan Liwen's eyes.

"Internal governance. External diplomacy. I can handle both."

Tan Liwen was genuinely impressed.

Still, he leaned back and folded his arms.

"Your resume is strong. But it lacks one decisive element."

He tapped the desk.

"Give me one reason I must hire you. A reason I cannot reject."

Liu Maopao smiled.

"You are desperately short-staffed."

Tan Liwen spat out his tea.

"You brat!"

Liu Maopao laughed. "Careful, Uncle Tan. Don't choke."

Tan Liwen grabbed his folding fan and tossed it at him.

"Get out of here. Report for duty tomorrow morning."

Liu Maopao caught the fan smoothly.

"Hahaha, thank you, Uncle Tan."

He twirled the fan and walked out.

Outside, two figures were waiting anxiously.

Zhebu and E'zhe rushed forward.

"Brother Maopao! Did you succeed?"

Liu Maopao grinned wide.

"It's done. I start tomorrow. I've officially stepped onto the political stage."

The two Mongolian youths cheered.

Liu Maopao clasped their hands tightly.

"One day," he declared boldly, "I will become Gao Family Village's chief administrator. You two will become Khans of Mongolia. When that day comes, we'll merge our nations into one country. Then we'll truly be brothers."

Zhebu's eyes shone. "Merge!"

E'zhe added excitedly, "And I'll be Navy Commander!"

Zhebu immediately frowned. "To be Navy Commander you need to study at the maritime academy. On Zhoushan Island. That requires special approval from Dao Xuan Tianzun."

E'zhe froze.

"...Then I'll apply!"

The three young men burst into laughter.

Inside the administrative hall, Tan Liwen rubbed his temples.

He had just recruited a future troublemaker.

But perhaps, he thought quietly, that was exactly what the village needed.

Because wars were won on battlefields.

But nations were built by ambitious fools who believed they could reshape the world.

Chapter 1194 The Fengtian Changyi Battalion

Meanwhile...

In southeastern Henan, just beyond Li Daoxuan's current field of view, the land near Lu'an was still green.

The drought that had crippled so many regions had not struck here as brutally. Grass still clung stubbornly to the soil. Trees still held their leaves. From a distance, it even looked peaceful.

But peace was an illusion.

If the heavens had spared the people here from famine, men had not. Bandits came. Government troops came. Sometimes you could not even tell which was worse. The common folk survived between the two like grain caught between millstones.

Outside a small village, hidden among the brush, Chuang Wang crouched with Li Yan, Li Guo, Liu Zongmin, and a little more than a hundred loyal followers. This was all that remained of what had once been a vast force.

In the past, if Chuang Wang had seen such a small village, he would not have hesitated. He would have stormed in, stripped it clean, and moved on without a second thought.

But that was before the crushing defeat in the Shu Mountains. Before humiliation. Before reflection. And before Li Yan's relentless persuasion finally pierced through his pride.

Li Zicheng had decided to change.

He would no longer burn, kill, and plunder. He would try, at the very least, to become a man worthy of following.

He licked his cracked lips and muttered, "Master Li, you told me no burning, no killing, no looting. You told me to practice benevolence and righteousness. Fine. But my men are starving. Over a hundred mouths. What do we do now?"

Li Yan's face was calm, but his voice carried weight.

"This," he said slowly, "is exactly when resolve is tested. If we cannot endure hunger for a single day and fall back into evil, then we were never meant to accomplish anything great."

Chuang Wang let out a breath. "So we dig for wild vegetables."

"Dig," Li Yan replied. "I will dig with you."

There was no mockery in his tone.

The men exchanged glances. The once-feared rebels of the land, reduced to foraging like peasants. Yet no one complained. They picked up tools and prepared to scatter into the fields.

Then voices drifted over the wind.

Men. Many men.

From the distance came a unit of roughly three hundred soldiers, marching under an official banner. Government troops.

At least, that was what the banner claimed.

Their leader had the eyes of a thief. His soldiers looked more like roadside bandits than imperial guards. Their armor was mismatched, their discipline nonexistent.

Li Guo narrowed his eyes. "One of Zuo Liangyu's irregular units."

Chuang Wang grunted. "I recognize them. Zuo Liangyu took them in quietly years ago. That commander used to be a minor chieftain back at the Xingyang conference. I've met him."

Liu Zongmin spat into the dirt. "They're here to loot the village."

Li Yan's eyes sharpened.

"Good," he said softly. "Heaven has delivered us an opportunity."

Chuang Wang glanced at him.

"Brother Chuang Wang," Li Yan continued, "let your righteous cause begin here. Destroy these corrupt troops. Protect the villagers. If you win people through protection instead of fear, the soldiers you gain will be ten times stronger than those forced to kneel at knifepoint."

Chuang Wang straightened.

He turned to the Old Eighth Squad behind him. These were his core men, the ones who had survived everything.

"Brothers," he said, voice rising, "time to work. This time, we are not thieves. We are heroes."

A roar answered him.

He pulled out a folded banner and handed it to Hao Yaoqi.

"Raise it well. This is our new standard."

The cloth snapped open in the wind.

Five bold characters blazed across it.

Fengtian Changyi Battalion.

Almost at the same time, Zuo Liangyu's ragtag force stormed into the village.

Doors were kicked in. Women screamed. Old men were dragged outside. Soldiers shouted demands for grain, silver, anything of value.

The village collapsed into panic.

Then from the woods erupted a thunderous roar.

Hao Yaoqi burst from the treeline first, banner strapped across his back like a war standard of judgment. Behind him came Li Guo and Liu Zongmin, blades flashing. Then Chuang Wang himself, leading more than a hundred hardened men.

"Corrupt imperial dogs!" they bellowed. "Prepare to die!"

Zuo Liangyu's men faltered immediately.

"Where did they come from?"

"Damn it, these lunatics are fierce!"

They tried to form ranks, but they were former bandits playing at being soldiers. Their morale cracked at the first collision.

The Old Eighth Squad hit like a hammer.

Steel rang against steel. Men screamed. Within moments, the so-called government troops were breaking apart, fleeing in all directions.

Chuang Wang cut straight toward the commander.

The man's face drained of color when he recognized him.

"The Dashing General? No... you're Chuang Wang now. What are you doing here? And what is this Fengtian Changyi Battalion nonsense?"

Chuang Wang smiled coldly.

"There's a lot you don't know."

Their blades met in a flurry of sparks. After only a few exchanges, Chuang Wang stepped inside the man's guard and struck once.

The commander's head fell.

The rest was slaughter.

Outnumbered, yet unstoppable, the hundred-plus rebels shattered a force three times their size. Survivors fled like scattered crows.

Chuang Wang did not order pursuit.

Instead, they searched the fallen soldiers. Grain. Dried rations. A little silver. Enough for a proper meal.

By the small river beside the village, the Fengtian Changyi Battalion cooked.

One by one, doors creaked open.

Villagers peeked out. No one was being dragged away. No houses were burning. The men by the river were laughing, cooking, not looting.

A few brave villagers approached.

"Heroes... where are you from? Thank you for saving us."

Li Yan stood.

"We are Chuang Wang's army."

Silence.

Then panic.

"The Bandit Chuang?!"

They turned to run.

Li Yan did not chase them. He simply raised his voice.

"Do not fear! Perhaps he made mistakes before. He will not again."

He gave a signal.

As rehearsed, the men began to sing.

"Chuang Wang's righteous army, neither kills nor plunders."

"Open wide your gates for Chuang Wang, he takes not a grain."

"Rise early to greet Chuang Wang, and joy will follow."

The melody was simple. Catchy. Impossible to forget.

Illiterate villagers might not remember proclamations, but they remembered songs.

By sunset, children were humming it.

The next morning, as Chuang Wang prepared to depart, villagers gathered in front of Li Yan, carrying what little wealth they possessed.

"Chuang Wang, take us with you."

"We will follow you."

"The soldiers you defeated will return with more troops. If we stay, we die."

"We have no choice."

For a long moment, Chuang Wang said nothing.

Then he looked at Li Yan.

Li Yan nodded once.

Chuang Wang faced the villagers.

"You trust me?"

They nodded.

"Then I swear this. From this day forward, I will protect you. We will cut down corrupt officials. We will rise together. And we will smash this rotten court."

The villagers cheered.

When they left, the Fengtian Changyi Battalion had grown past two hundred.

It was not a large increase.

But Chuang Wang could see the difference in their eyes.

These men were not dragged here by fear. They came by choice.

They trusted him.

They would not run at the first sign of danger.

For the first time in a long while, Chuang Wang felt something unfamiliar stirring in his chest.

This...

This was an army.

He only wondered whether he had learned this lesson too late.

Chapter 1195 A Recommendation Letter Is Required

Zhoushan. Dinghai Port.

A massive seagoing vessel eased into harbor, ropes thrown, planks lowered.

The moment the gangway hit the pier, a small figure shot down it like an arrow.

A ten-year-old boy leapt onto solid ground.

This was E'zhe, the nominal Khan of Mongolia, direct descendant of Genghis Khan, hostage in name but treated more like a peculiar guest.

The instant his boots touched the wooden planks, his face turned green.

He bent double and vomited spectacularly.

Dockworkers jumped back in horror.

"Hey! What's wrong with you, kid?"

"Ugh, that's disgusting!"

E'zhe wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, gasping between breaths.

"This is terrible... so this is what sailing is really like? All that rocking, swaying... I feel like the whole world is still moving."

Behind him, two operatives from Gao Family Village jumped down as well. Officially, they were his guards. In reality, they were his supervisors.

One of them folded his arms. "If it's this unbearable, maybe you should give up and go back."

E'zhe shot him a glare and straightened his small frame.

"No. I'm going to be a naval officer. Dao Xuan Tianzun approved it himself."

The two operatives exchanged a look and immediately fell silent.

When Dao Xuan Tianzun had spoken, that was the end of discussion.

Though E'zhe was technically a political hostage, Dao Xuan Tianzun had never mistreated him. In fact, he had indulged him far more than anyone expected.

Most soldiers did not understand why.

Only Gao Yiye knew the private reasoning.

It was shameful, Dao Xuan Tianzun had once said, to exploit a child for political leverage. Shameful. But if that shame secured peace and stability for the realm, then one man bearing that guilt was better than countless commoners bleeding for it.

So the boy was to be treated kindly.

E'zhe lingered on the dock until the nausea subsided. For a ten-year-old who had just crossed the sea for the first time, his recovery was astonishingly quick.

He took a deep breath.

Then another.

He squared his shoulders.

And marched toward the Zhoushan Maritime Academy.

The Zhoushan Maritime Academy now enjoyed immense prestige.

Together with the Yellow Pole Military Academy, it formed the twin pillars of Gao Family Village's military education. One for the sea. One for the land.

An officer of the land army who had not studied at the Yellow Pole Military Academy would blush to admit it. Even the loud and boastful Flat Rabbit had gone through formal drills there despite already being well past thirty.

Likewise, a naval officer without credentials from Zhoushan Maritime Academy was considered a "wild card" — talented perhaps, but lacking systematic training.

When E'zhe spotted the academy gates in the distance, his heart thumped with excitement.

"I finally made it..." he whispered. "This is the place."

But just as he approached, he noticed a commotion at the entrance.

A man in his thirties, dressed in merchant's attire, stood arguing with the guards.

"I'm here to enroll!" the man shouted. "Why are you blocking me?"

E'zhe blinked. "He's at least thirty... he's coming to school too?"

One of the operatives chuckled softly. "Perfectly normal. Flat Rabbit was over thirty when he trained at Yellow Pole. Many senior officers are 'wild cards.' They come here to fill gaps in their knowledge."

At the gate, the guard stood firm.

"Sir, this is not an ordinary academy. It is a military academy. Enrollment requires that you are a registered soldier or reservist of Gao Family Village, and you must present a recommendation letter."

The merchant scowled. "What nonsense is this? At other schools you just pay tuition and that's it! Why so complicated?"

The guard's tone cooled slightly.

"The fact that you are standing here means you are one of ours. No outsider could even reach this island. That is why I am speaking politely. If anyone else caused a disturbance here, they would already be thrown off the island."

The man's arrogance deflated instantly.

He fumbled inside his robe and produced a token.

"Look carefully. Instructor Jiang Cheng issued this. Dengzhou Navy token. I'm a naval captain."

The guard examined it.

"Dengzhou Navy. Special Mobility Squad Captain. Yao Xingjuan."

The name was real.

The token was authentic.

"You are indeed one of us," the guard said. "However, you still require a recommendation letter to enroll."

The man was none other than Yao Xingjuan, famed maritime merchant and occasional pirate.

After witnessing Dao Xuan Tianzun's "divine blessing" during the Battle of Pi Island, he had promptly thrown his lot in with Gao Family Village. Given his unique experience in both trade and naval combat, Jiang Cheng had granted him command of an independent fleet.

His mission was simple in theory and brutal in practice: trade with Japan, Joseon, Southeast Asia, and Western powers... and fight them whenever necessary.

On these seas, if you did not prey on others, others would prey on you.

Commerce and piracy were twin arts. One had to master both.

After joining, Yao Xingjuan learned of the Zhoushan Maritime Academy and rushed over eagerly. He wanted structured knowledge. Ocean currents. Monsoon patterns. Modern naval formations. He knew fragments, but his understanding was scattered and incomplete.

Unfortunately, in his enthusiasm, he had forgotten something basic.

Military academies were not open marketplaces.

He had come without a recommendation letter.

Yao Xingjuan frowned. "Recommendation letter? I've never heard of such a thing."

With practiced smoothness, he slipped out a heavy silver ingot and nudged it forward.

"Brother. Be flexible. Let me through."

The guard's face darkened instantly.

"Are you insane? Do you want me sent to a labor reform camp? You dare try to bribe me here?"

He tapped the embroidered emblem on his chest.

"The eyes of Dao Xuan Tianzun are watching."

Yao Xingjuan's hand snapped back as though burned.

The atmosphere turned painfully awkward.

At that exact moment, E'zhe stepped forward.

He reached into his tunic and produced a folded letter.

"Big brother," he said politely, "please check mine."

The guard unfolded it.

His eyes widened.

It bore the personal seal of Saintess Gao Yiye.

The letter declared that this child was the Heavenly Khan of Mongolia, here to study maritime affairs, and in the future would command the Mongolian Navy.

The authority of the document was overwhelming.

The guard immediately straightened and gestured respectfully. "Please, this way."

Another guard was summoned to escort E'zhe inside.

Watching this unfold, Yao Xingjuan's brows twitched.

"So... he has a recommendation letter, he walks in. I don't, so I stand outside. No exceptions?"

The guard gave an apologetic smile.

"Admiral Yao, with your status, a recommendation from Instructor Jiang Cheng would be effortless. Once you obtain it, you'll be admitted immediately."

Yao Xingjuan snorted. "Dengzhou is far away. If I go there and back, that's weeks wasted."

The guard hesitated. "Well..."

Then suddenly—

The embroidery of Dao Xuan Tianzun on the guard's chest shimmered faintly.

A clear, resonant laugh echoed from it.

Both men stiffened.

They immediately bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan's amplified voice carried calm authority.

"Guard, you handled this correctly. Without a recommendation letter, even the highest official must not be admitted. Rules exist for a reason. Without rules, there is no order."

The guard's back straightened even more.

"As for Yao Xingjuan," the voice continued, "you are correct as well. Traveling back to Dengzhou solely for a letter would be inefficient."

A slight pause.

"Therefore, I will personally act as your recommender."

Chapter 1196 A Bit Bloody

With Dao Xuan Tianzun personally stepping forward to make the introduction, the entire admission process naturally became as smooth as it could possibly be. There were no letters of recommendation to prepare, no formal endorsements to gather, and no complicated procedures to navigate. Under his name alone, everything was settled. At last, Yao Xingjuan was officially admitted.

When he and E'zhe went to report to the principal's office, Yao Xingjuan could hardly believe what he was seeing. The principal of the Naval Academy was none other than Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

Seated comfortably in a large armchair behind a heavy wooden desk, the so called Naval Combat Specialist Tianzun looked less like a distant divine figure and more like a seasoned headmaster overseeing his academy. As E'zhe and Yao Xingjuan stepped forward to report, he greeted them with an easy smile.

"Study diligently," he said in a calm and steady tone. "Cultivate your abilities well and strive to serve the nation as soon as you are capable."

The words were not grand, yet coming from him, they carried unusual weight. The two boys felt their spirits surge. By the time they left the office, their steps were so quick that they nearly broke into a run, eager to prove themselves worthy of the encouragement they had just received.

They had barely taken their seats in the classroom and opened their textbooks to a lesson on ocean currents when a sudden disturbance erupted outside. The sound of hurried footsteps and raised voices drifted through the windows, drawing the attention of the entire class. Several students rushed to the windows to see what was happening.

A small group had entered the sports field at speed. At the front was a young female reporter holding a microphone, and behind her followed a special task force carrying a massive camera mounted on a sturdy tripod.

She raised her voice and called out, "Is Master here at the school today? Does anyone know if Master is around?"

The reporter was a student from the Gao Family Village News Department and one of Dao Xuan Tianzun's disciples. Others addressed him formally as Dao Xuan Tianzun, but she had the privilege of calling him Master.

Yao Xingjuan and E'zhe leaned out of the window together.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun was just in the principal's office," Yao Xingjuan shouted back. "We are not sure if he is still there."

The reporter's expression brightened immediately. "Good. I have urgent news that must be reported to Master."

Without wasting another second, she hurried toward the principal's office.

It did not take long before Dao Xuan Tianzun emerged alongside her and walked toward the center of the sports field where the camera had been set up. Students poured out of their classrooms, gathering in growing numbers to see what was happening. Yao Xingjuan and E'zhe naturally joined the crowd.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's face was serious as he turned to the reporter. "Is the footage bloody?" he asked quietly. "Is it suitable for children?"

The reporter lowered her voice in response. "Master, the footage is extremely bloody. It would be inappropriate to broadcast it directly on Gaojia News. Very young children should not see this."

His gaze swept across the gathered students and paused briefly on the ten year old E'zhe.

Before Dao Xuan Tianzun could speak, E'zhe raised his chin and said firmly, "I am not an ordinary child. I grew up amidst war and have seen countless scenes of death. No matter how bloody it is, there is no need to shield me."

Dao Xuan Tianzun regarded him for a moment, then nodded slightly. He understood that children raised on the Mongolian grasslands in turbulent times were not as sheltered as modern city children. Shielding E'zhe from harsh realities would serve little purpose.

"In that case," he said aloud, "everyone proceed to the screening room. This material will not be broadcast publicly. Ordinary citizens will not see these images. However, this is a military academy, and you are all future soldiers. You have the right and the responsibility to understand what is happening."

He reached into the camera equipment and pulled out a TF card that was absurdly large, nearly the size of a door panel. Several members of the special task force lifted it carefully and carried it toward the screening room.

Inside, a tablet computer had already been set up. Since Zhoushan Island had not yet entered Dao Xuan Tianzun's direct field of view, he could not simply place devices there at will. The tablet had been transported by ship, and the villagers had painstakingly installed it using improvised tools. Even the solar power system had taken considerable effort to complete, but for the sake of knowledge and education, they had endured the hardship without complaint.

Once everything was ready, Dao Xuan Tianzun inserted the TF card, opened the file, and pressed play.

The footage that appeared on the screen was raw and unedited, devoid of narration or commentary.

A group of Dutch soldiers sat calmly to one side, muskets in hand, watching.

On the opposite side of the frame, a group of dark haired men were slaughtering another group of dark haired men.

It was not chaotic combat. It was a one sided massacre.

Blood soaked the sand. Severed heads tumbled across the ground. Some of the attackers lifted freshly cut heads by the hair and swung them with disturbing ease, blood spilling freely from the torn necks.

A wave of shocked gasps swept through the Naval Academy students.

"Where is this happening?" someone demanded.

"This is not even a battle," another student said under his breath. "It is slaughter for the sake of slaughter."

"Those people look like subjects of our Great Ming," a voice called out. "Why are the Dutch just sitting there watching as if it is entertainment?"

"What exactly is going on?"

At that moment, the camera began to tremble slightly and then slowly zoomed out. What had seemed like close range footage was revealed to have been filmed from a considerable distance, the lens magnifying the horror from afar. As the image widened, the surrounding landscape came into view.

The massacre was taking place on a narrow beach, hemmed in by steep mountains on both sides.

One of the older students, a former pirate who had been reformed through labor rehabilitation, suddenly cried out, "That is Yizhou Island."

A murmur spread through the room.

"It really is Yizhou."

"So the natives of Yizhou are killing other natives while the Dutch simply watch?"

"Do not call them red haired barbarians," someone corrected. "The court may use that term, but the Dao Xuan Tianzun told us they are called the Dutch."

"Fine, the Dutch," another student replied. "They have allied with one tribe and are letting them massacre another."

"This practice is called chucao," a student explained.

"What does that mean?"

"It is a custom among some indigenous tribes of Yizhou Island. It refers to headhunting."

The room grew heavy with murmurs and uneasy whispers.

Dao Xuan Tianzun stepped forward and stood before the screen. "We will treat this as an additional lesson," he said calmly. "I will be your lecturer for this session."

With a smooth motion of his hand, he brought up a detailed map of Yizhou Island.

He pointed to one section. "In the year 1624, during the fourth year of the Tianqi era, the Dutch arrived here and established a city. From that point onward, they began enslaving the surrounding indigenous populations while attempting to monopolize trade in East Asia."

He continued steadily, allowing the students time to absorb each detail. "To secure that monopoly, they employed many methods. Among them was the support of pirates."

He glanced around the room with a faint smile. "Is Zheng Sen present today?"

A student stood and responded, "Reporting to the Heavenly Lord, Zheng Sen and Shi Lang have led the fleet to Pi Island to deliver supplies to the garrison and will not return for several days."

"In that case," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied with a light tone, "this is an excellent opportunity to discuss his father's past without interruption."

Laughter broke out, easing the oppressive atmosphere slightly. The students were accustomed to his teaching style, which often blended serious history with subtle humor.

"Zheng Sen's father, Zheng Zhilong, was once a pirate supported by the Dutch in their attempt to control maritime trade," he said.

The room fell silent in shock.

E'zhe could not hold back. "But I have seen The Battle of Liaoluo Bay," he protested. "You made that film yourself. Zheng Zhilong was portrayed as a righteous hero who defeated the Dutch. How could he have been supported by them before that?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled, pleased by the question.

"That is precisely why history must be studied carefully," he replied. "Zheng Zhilong did indeed receive support from the Dutch in his early years. However, he was ambitious and unwilling to remain their pawn. When the Great Ming court offered amnesty and official recognition, he seized the opportunity to free himself from Dutch control on Yizhou Island. Once independent, he turned his fleet against them. That shift in allegiance ultimately led to the Battle of Liaoluo Bay."

Gradually, the students began to grasp the complexity of the situation.

"For many years, from the fourth year of Tianqi until the eighth year of Chongzhen two years ago, the Ming court and the Dutch were entangled in ongoing trade disputes. Only after those tensions stabilized

did the Dutch devote greater attention to consolidating their control over Yizhou Island. What you have just witnessed is part of that process."

He gestured toward the frozen image on the screen.

"And that," he concluded, "is the reality behind this footage."

The projection room remained silent, the earlier chatter replaced by a sober awareness that the world beyond their academy walls was far harsher than any textbook could convey.

Chapter 1197 Coming to Stir Up Trouble

The students had only just watched the massacre on the screen, so when Dao Xuan Tianzun continued his explanation, they understood immediately what he was implying.

"The Netherlands lies on the far side of the world," he said calmly. "The number of troops they can project here is limited. They do not possess the strength to sweep across Taiwan Island by force alone. Therefore, they chose a different strategy. They befriend some tribes while attacking others."

He enlarged a portion of the map with a light motion of his fingers.

"They signed what is known as the Mato Agreement with certain compliant indigenous tribes. Under this arrangement, the Dutch positioned themselves as feudal overlords, while the tribes became their vassals."

A murmur spread quietly among the students.

"Once that structure was established," he continued, "they mobilized those compliant tribes to attack the defiant ones. The so called headhunting you saw in the footage was not random savagery. It was encouraged and directed. The Dutch did not need to kill with their own hands. They merely needed to sit back and allow division to do the work."

His expression darkened.

"The indigenous people of Taiwan Island are also our people. We are one family. How can we allow distant brigands to dominate and humiliate them?"

"Absolutely not!" E'zhe leaped to his feet before anyone else could react. "We should slaughter them!"

All heads turned at once. The sight of a ten year old boy dressed in full Mongolian attire shouting for war created an odd contrast. Some students struggled not to laugh, while others looked conflicted.

A few of the more reflective students felt a flicker of uncomfortable comparison. If one looked at it purely from a strategic perspective, was not the policy toward the Mongolian tribes somewhat similar in structure? Establish influence, unify leadership, absorb gradually. The difference, they told themselves quickly, lay in intention and method.

They shook those thoughts away.

The Mongols and the Han were one family. The Tianzun policy was not subjugation but reunification. The same principle applied to the Tujia, Miao, Hui, Zhuang, and many other ethnic groups. Unity under protection was not the same as domination through terror.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's lips curved slightly, as if he could sense the direction of their thoughts.

"Throughout history," he said evenly, "nations have always sought to expand their influence. There is nothing unusual about strategy. The difference between righteousness and wickedness lies in the methods employed."

He turned and gestured toward the frozen image on the screen, where rows of severed heads lay displayed and Dutch soldiers looked on with detached amusement.

"When one pursues strategy without restraint, without moral boundary, one becomes indistinguishable from brigands."

The room fell silent.

E'zhe, however, was not inclined toward philosophical contemplation. He raised his hand again and spoke with fierce enthusiasm.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, let us send troops and fight them. We must protect our own people. I volunteer to lead the vanguard. Give me a horse and a bow and I will cut them down. No, wait, give me a ship and a cannon and I will blast those Dutch dogs into the sea."

Laughter burst out across the hall.

"You are still a child."

"It is your first day at school and you are already acting like an admiral."

"Go learn navigation before you declare war."

E'zhe's face flushed red, and he sank back into his seat, clearly unwilling to concede yet unable to argue further. Ten years old was indeed young. Even on the Mongolian plains, where children matured quickly, serious responsibility rarely fell upon someone so small.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's gaze moved slowly across the room and finally settled on Yao Xingjuan.

Yao Xingjuan immediately stepped forward, his expression bright and resolute. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, please issue your command."

"Our main forces from Gao Family Village are currently engaged in suppressing the bandits in the Central Plains," Dao Xuan Tianzun explained. "The primary fleet is stationed near Pi Island and Dengzhou. The situation there has not fully stabilized, so they cannot be redeployed at will. We are therefore unable to commit our main forces directly against the Dutch at this moment."

He paused, letting the weight of that reality settle.

"However, we cannot stand idle while they continue their actions unchecked."

Yao Xingjuan's eyes shone.

"I will grant you a Letter of Marque and Reprisal," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "You are authorized to operate independently in the waters near Taiwan Island. Your objective is to harass Dutch vessels, disrupt their logistics, and force them to divert attention back to the sea. The more pressure you apply, the less freedom they will have to interfere inland."

Yao Xingjuan clasped his fists and bowed deeply. "I accept the command."

"Understand the responsibility," Dao Xuan Tianzun added. "You are not to seek reckless glory. Your task is to entangle them, to exhaust them, to stretch their resources. The longer you hold their focus, the more time our main forces gain to stabilize the northeast and eliminate internal threats."

"I will not fail," Yao Xingjuan declared.

Dao Xuan Tianzun then turned toward a quiet figure standing off to the side.

"Bai Gongzi, do you have a suitable vessel prepared?"

Bai Gongzi smiled with restrained pride. "Little Black One."

Confused murmurs immediately followed.

"Little Black?"

"Were not all your ships named Little White Something?"

Bai Gongzi straightened his posture slightly. "During the last naval engagement against the English, Little White Three suffered severe damage. English cannon fire tore multiple holes through her hull. That battle made one fact clear. Wooden hulls alone will not suffice in the long term."

He continued with growing enthusiasm.

"I began exploring metal hull construction, but material limitations stalled progress. Then the Heavenly Lord introduced a new material to us. Aluminum alloy. It weighs only thirty percent as much as iron yet provides remarkable strength. I have used it to clad the ship's sides and deck."

Several students inhaled sharply in admiration.

"To distinguish it from the earlier wooden ships," Bai Gongzi went on, "I named this first aluminum alloy vessel Little Black One."

The teasing began immediately.

"Your naming sense is truly direct."

"That sounds exactly like something a science student would choose."

"Are there any liberal arts students willing to assist with future naming?"

Even Yao Xingjuan could not help smiling, though his eagerness was obvious. He urged Bai Gongzi to lead the way to the shipyard, and soon a large crowd of students followed, buzzing with anticipation.

Inside the dry dock rested a brand new paddle wheel steamship.

The main hull structure remained wooden to maintain buoyancy and manage weight distribution. Steam powered paddle wheels provided propulsion, just as before. However, the exterior surfaces told a different story. The sides and deck were clad entirely in aluminum alloy armor plating. When someone rapped a knuckle against it, the metallic resonance carried a reassuring solidity.

Bai Gongzi turned to Yao Xingjuan. "We have conducted live fire tests. Standard Frangki cannons cannot penetrate this plating under normal combat conditions. You may engage in artillery exchanges with confidence."

Yao Xingjuan's face lit up. "Then we have the advantage."

"We serve in different ways," Bai Gongzi replied modestly. "You stand on the front line. I remain behind to build what you require."

Yao Xingjuan saluted him with genuine respect before striding up the gangplank.

The deck had been designed thoughtfully. Beneath lay wood, then the aluminum alloy armor layer, and above it another wooden layer to prevent the metal from overheating under direct sunlight. Practicality had not been sacrificed for innovation.

Standing at the bow of the gleaming new vessel, Yao Xingjuan could not resist indulging himself. He pulled an eye patch dramatically over one eye, drew a pistol with his left hand, and raised a curved blade with his right.

With laughter echoing across the dock, he shouted toward the open sea.

"Let the Dutch prepare themselves. The Great Pirate Yao Xingjuan is coming to stir up trouble."

The students cheered, half amused and half inspired, while beyond the harbor the wind carried the promise of impending conflict.

Chapter 1198 Let's Go!

A vast number of soldiers were crossing the Xiaolangdi Yellow River Bridge.

Bai Yuan stood at the southern end of the bridge, watching as the armies led by Xing Honglang, Lao Nanfeng, and Bai Mao slowly approached him. The wind lifted the hem of his white robes, yet his posture remained relaxed.

He smiled faintly. "It's been a long time, you three."

Xing Honglang returned the smile. "Indeed, Master Bai, it has been years. Though we are separated by nothing more than a river, with one stationed in Hedong Circuit and another in Luoyang, we have not actually met in person for quite some time."

Lao Nanfeng let out a hearty laugh. "We have all been busy, have we not? If it were not for these wretched bandits stirring up trouble everywhere, we might never have gathered like this."

Bai Mao glanced toward the bridge and said in a steady tone, "This time, Dao Xuan Tianzun has ordered all of us to leave our officially appointed posts. In truth, this is no different from abandoning our positions to launch an attack. It seems he has no intention of showing the imperial court any deference."

Bai Yuan flicked open his folding fan with a crisp snap, revealing the two bold characters for "Gentleman." His eyes gleamed with conviction.

"A gentleman upholds righteousness above all else. Suppressing these wandering bandits will spare countless commoners from suffering. At a time like this, why concern ourselves with the crumbling court? Once we have completely crushed these rebels, we can settle accounts with the imperial court properly."

As he spoke, a subtle light flashed in the eyes of the other three men. For reasons they did not voice aloud, they seemed even more interested in confronting the imperial court than in dealing with the rebels.

At that moment, a thunderous rumble of hooves echoed from the northern end of the bridge.

Xing Honglang's eyes lit up. "Is Zao Ying here?"

Bai Yuan shook his head. "No. Zao Ying will not be able to join us yet. Her child with Zheng Daniu was only recently born. This is the time when her maternal instincts are strongest. It would not be appropriate for her to go to the battlefield, and Dao Xuan Tianzun would not allow it. He would never let her return home with the scent of blood still on her while nursing her child."

"Then who is it?" Xing Honglang paused briefly before realization dawned. "Lao Huihui has arrived."

Sure enough, a large contingent of heavy armored cavalry appeared at the northern bridgehead.

Both riders and horses were fully clad in heavy armor.

This was Dao Xuan Tianzun's extraordinarily enhanced armor, forged from aluminum alloy.

Originally, Dao Xuan Tianzun had not intended to grant such overwhelming advantages to the land forces. However, after considering that the navy had already received similar blessings, he decided it would be unfair to leave the army behind. They were all his people, and he believed in being impartial with his favor.

Thus, aluminum alloy armor made its appearance on the battlefield.

The material weighed only thirty percent as much as iron, yet it remained remarkably durable. Once equipped, the heavy cavalry not only retained their defensive strength but also gained astonishing speed and agility.

Lao Huihui rode forward and halted before Bai Yuan and the others. He cupped his fist in greeting but said nothing more. He was never one for unnecessary words. He simply stood there, radiating quiet authority.

Bai Yuan surveyed the gathered forces and declared, "With this, our Northern Route Army is complete. Excellent. We depart."

The Xiaolangdi militia, the Puzhou militia, the Hedong Circuit militia, and Lao Huihui's heavy armored cavalry combined into a formidable force of over twenty thousand soldiers.

When they reached the walls of Luoyang, two more armies were already prepared to move.

One was a force of government troops organized by Fan Shangzheng, the Governor of Henan. Although they were nominally imperial soldiers, in practice they were not much different from the Gao Family Village Militia, aside from slightly inferior equipment.

The other army consisted of reformed rebels under Gao Jie.

These men, along with Gao Jie himself, had attended daily classes and undergone continuous ideological reform. After several years of education and transformation, their political awareness was finally deemed satisfactory. The supervising commissar gave his approval, allowing them to participate in this campaign.

With the addition of these two forces, the Northern Army's strength approached thirty five thousand.

It was clear that this would become the principal force in the decisive battle for the Central Plains.

Meanwhile, in Sichuan, Cheng Xu was advancing on two fronts, both by land and by water.

One route was led personally by Cheng Xu, accompanied by Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu. They traveled along the Yangtze River through the Three Gorges with hundreds of small boats carrying the Gao Family Village Militia toward Wuchang.

The other route was led by Flat Rabbit, who marched alongside Zheng Gouzi, Jiang Daliang, and newly recruited Sichuan troops. They followed the ancient official road that ran parallel to the Yangtze River, steadily making their way out of central Sichuan.

A scout rode up and saluted. "Report. We have reached the easternmost boundary marker of Kuizhou. Once we cross this marker, we will have officially left Sichuan."

Flat Rabbit immediately stiffened.

"I have heard," he declared solemnly, "that no rabbit can ever leave Sichuan alive. Today, this Rabbit Master will prove that saying wrong."

The soldiers nearby cast strange looks at him, as if questioning his sanity.

Flat Rabbit paid them no mind. As long as he did not feel embarrassed, it was impossible for anyone else to embarrass him.

He waved off his personal guards and walked alone toward the boundary marker, sword in hand.

Just as he was about to step forward, a large gray rabbit burst out from the tall grass in panic and ran straight into the boundary marker with a heavy thud, dying on the spot.

The entire group fell silent.

Flat Rabbit froze mid step. "No way. Is it truly that cursed?"

An uneasy feeling spread among the soldiers. The omen was far from reassuring.

Flat Rabbit swallowed and glanced left and right, confirming that no enemies were lurking nearby.

"Impossible," he muttered. "You think you can scare this Rabbit Master? Not a chance."

Gathering his courage, he leaped decisively.

Both of his feet landed firmly on the other side of the boundary marker. He was now officially outside Sichuan.

He threw back his head and laughed loudly. "This Rabbit Master has left Sichuan alive. From now on, who dares to say that no rabbit can ever leave Sichuan alive?"

The words had barely left his mouth when a figure suddenly sprang out from the tall grass and shouted, "Die, rabbit!"

Flat Rabbit nearly jumped out of his skin. He did not even have time to draw his blade. Grabbing his ancestral sword together with its sheath, he swung it down forcefully and shouted, "Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord Sword!"

A loud crack rang out.

The figure who had leaped from the grass was struck squarely on the forehead by the sheath and tumbled backward with a cry of pain.

Flat Rabbit stared in shock. "Gouzi?"

It was Zheng Gouzi.

He lay on the ground, clutching the swelling lump on his forehead and glaring angrily. "Rabbit, you are ruthless. I was just playing a prank, and you struck me with your sword so hard. You even used your ultimate move."

Flat Rabbit snapped back, "That was an excessive prank. You nearly scared this rabbit's soul out of his body."

Zheng Gouzi snorted. "If it does not scare the soul out of someone, what is the point of a prank? You have to frighten someone out of their wits for it to be worthwhile."

Flat Rabbit paused and considered that logic seriously. "When you put it that way, it actually makes sense."

Zheng Gouzi laughed and punched him lightly on the shoulder. "In any case, we are out of Sichuan. Let us go deal with the Eight Great Kings."

Flat Rabbit grinned broadly. "Let's go."

Chapter 1199 The Yangtze Cannot Be Crossed

Anqing Prefecture, Yingjiang Pier.

A vast fleet of small boats gathered on the river, led by several river-sea vessels forming the core of the formation.

The fleet's composition was complicated.

There were Gao Family Village's river-sea vessels. There were reformed river bandits from Huangmei who were undergoing labor reform. There were official river patrol ships under the Anlu Governor. There was the Anlu militia personally organized by Shi Kefa. There were even ordinary fishermen and merchant ships who had voluntarily joined after being moved by his governance and public call to action.

Together, they formed a powerful blockade across the Yangtze.

Shi Kefa stood before the fleet, pride evident in his eyes.

"Gentlemen!" he called out. "Your task is to blockade the Yangtze River and prevent any rebel force from crossing to ravage the southern bank."

"Our northern, western, and eastern land armies will converge in the Central Plains to annihilate the rebels. The only direction without a land army is the south."

He raised his voice.

"Because to the south lies the Yangtze! I have pledged to Dao Xuan Tianzun that we will defend this river to the death. Not a single plank of a rebel boat will cross it. I hope you will make this pledge to me as well."

From countless boats came a thunderous response.

"Rest assured, Master Shi!"

"We will guard the Yangtze!"

"Not a single rebel boat will cross!"

"They will never touch the southern bank!"

"Excellent!" Shi Kefa declared. "Fleet, depart!"

The river-sea vessels took the lead, steaming upstream toward Wuchang. Behind them, countless small boats followed, rowing against the current.

Some ships headed toward Wuchang. Others toward Ezhou. Some toward Huangshi. Others would remain stationed at Jiujiang, Pengze, and Wangjiang.

They would spread across the Yangtze, sealing every possible crossing point.

If rebels attempted to cross, the small boats would signal one another and intercept them mid-river.

On land, they might not match the rebels.

But on water, the situation was different.

The rebels would suffer the same fate as the Qing soldiers who attacked Pi Island.

After watching the fleet depart, Shi Kefa inhaled deeply and turned toward the land forces behind him.

Now came the real challenge.

Bai Yuan's northern army numbered thirty-five thousand. It was the strongest.

Cheng Xu's western army included five thousand main Gao Family Village troops, plus several thousand Sichuan recruits. The First Battalion alone was terrifying. At this time, no army in the world could match it head-on.

But Shi Kefa's eastern army was much weaker.

Although he had governed Anlu for two years, it was far from Gao Family Village. Only a thousand village militia were under his command.

The rest were Jiangnan garrison troops and newly recruited local militias.

Whether regular soldiers or militia, Jiangnan troops simply lacked the fighting spirit of the northwestern forces.

Jiangnan was prosperous.

Prosperity nurtured culture, but often weakened martial strength.

Shi Kefa felt immense pressure.

If his eastern army faltered, the rebels might break through.

He raised his voice again.

"Gentlemen, we are the weakest of the three land armies. I do not demand that you slay countless enemies. I ask only one thing. Hold the eastern front. Do not allow this to become the rebels' breakthrough point."

A junior officer stepped forward and saluted.

"Master Shi," he asked, "as we sweep westward, the first force we will encounter is not the rebels, but Zuo Liangyu, who has marched south from Lu'an and Shucheng. How shall we deal with him?"

Shi Kefa clenched his fist.

"Crush him," he said without hesitation. "He is no different from the rebels. In fact, he is worse."

"As you command!" the soldiers answered in unison.

Meanwhile.

Yingshan County.

Among the rebels, Chuang Tatian was advancing eastward.

Not long ago, he had quarreled with Eight Great Kings over Chuang Wang.

Chuang Tatian was from northern Shaanxi, a native of Yan'an. He had risen around the same time as Chuang Wang and Eight Great Kings. He had sworn brotherhood with both at different times.

Recently, he learned that Chuang Wang, defeated in Sichuan, had sought refuge with Eight Great Kings. But Eight Great Kings' subordinates had attempted to kill Chuang Wang, forcing him to flee. His whereabouts were now unknown.

Chuang Tatian could not accept this.

Even in the jianghu, there were rules.

How could you think of killing a sworn brother when he was down?

So he confronted Eight Great Kings.

Eight Great Kings did not bother to argue.

He simply grabbed his blade and tried to kill Chuang Tatian as well.

Wronged and furious, Chuang Tatian had no choice but to split off with his own troops and head east.

He had just reached Yingshan County when battle cries erupted from the forest.

Zuo Liangyu burst out with his army.

Chuang Tatian was instantly forced into a defensive position and completely overwhelmed.

He fled in chaos with his most loyal thousand or so men.

Zuo Liangyu absorbed the rest of Chuang Tatian's scattered troops, swelling his own army by five thousand. He was extremely pleased.

Chuang Tatian fled for a long time.

Eventually, he reached the banks of the Yangtze.

Only then did he realize he had fled south.

Chuang Wang was missing. Eight Great Kings had turned against him. His main forces had been absorbed by Zuo Liangyu.

He felt completely cornered.

Perhaps crossing the Yangtze was his only path forward.

He ordered his remaining men to cut trees and build rafts.

Soon, a large number of crude rafts were tied together. Using broken planks as paddles, they began crossing toward the southern bank.

"Brother Chuang Tatian," a subordinate reported, "there are small boats watching us over there."

Chuang Tatian snorted.

"Drive them away."

The rebels roared toward the distant boats.

"What are you staring at?!"

They assumed fishermen would scatter at such a threat.

Instead, the small boats shouted back.

"So what if we are?!"

Chuang Tatian frowned.

"Since when did fishermen grow such courage?"

Voices rang out from the boats.

"You rebels dare attempt to cross the river? In a moment, you will learn that the Yangtze is not a river just anyone can cross!"

Chapter 1200 Preparing for War

Chuang Tatian was so furious he almost burst out laughing.

"A few fishermen? Have they gone mad?" he sneered. "I may only have rafts, but look at this scale. A thousand men spread across the river as far as the eye can see. Do a few tiny fishing boats really dare to show off in front of me?"

He barked an order.

"If they come closer, greet them with arrows."

One of his bandits hesitated. "Right away. But... Boss, we can barely keep our footing on these rafts. Our arrows might not hit anything."

Chuang Tatian snorted. "Then have more men shoot at once. Someone's bound to get lucky."

The rebels prepared themselves but continued paddling forward.

The river here was about a mile wide. Crossing on rafts took time. They rowed hard, grunting with effort, yet they had not even covered half the distance.

Suddenly, the small boats that had been watching them began cheering.

"They're here! They're here!"

Chuang Tatian frowned. "Who's here?"

A subordinate pointed with a trembling hand. "Over there... a fleet!"

Chuang Tatian turned and was instantly shocked.

From downstream, a large fleet was approaching. At the very front were three strangely shaped vessels. They had no sails and no oars, yet they moved at incredible speed.

Behind them came a chaotic mix of ships.

Imperial river patrol boats. Merchant cargo vessels. Fishing boats of every imaginable size and design.

Before the fleet even arrived, voices roared across the water.

"Villains, don't even think about crossing the river!"

"You will never ravage the southern bank of the Yangtze!"

"Go feed the fish at the bottom of the river!"

Chuang Tatian's heart sank.

Just moments ago, he had thought a thousand men on rafts looked impressive. Now they seemed like nothing more than a cluster of shrimps in open water.

"Retreat! Back to shore!" he shouted desperately.

He did not even need to give the order. The rebels were already turning around.

Only a fool would try to fight proper ships with makeshift rafts. They were northern Shaanxi soldiers. Fighting a naval battle on the Yangtze against southerners was pure madness.

"Run!"

Each man flailed his wooden plank wildly, paddling with all his strength.

But rafts were slow.

The fleet surged forward.

"Fire arrows!"

The rebels shot desperately.

But the rafts rocked violently. They could not steady themselves. Their arrows flew weakly and wildly, landing without force.

Crash!

Gao Family Village's electric boats were the first to ram into two rafts.

The rebels were thrown into the water, splashing frantically.

"Cast the nets! Haul them in!"

"Don't waste these labor reform candidates!"

"Good workers for repairing river embankments!"

Gao Family Village had already stepped into the industrial age. Their demand for labor far exceeded that of a simple farming society.

Seeing so many strong young men struggling in the water, how could they let such manpower go to waste?

Large nets were cast from the ships, scooping rebels from the river like fish. One sweep brought in a full catch.

Chuang Tatian stared in disbelief.

He had assumed these were imperial troops intercepting them.

Now he realized something was different. Imperial troops would not be so eager to capture prisoners alive.

"Who are they?" he muttered.

"Boss! Look! Their ships carry a multicolored flag!"

Chuang Tatian's face changed.

"The firearms unit?"

A chill ran down his spine.

They had shown mercy.

If those large ships had opened fire with their strange weapons, blasting at the rafts without restraint, his men would have had nowhere to hide.

The electric boats set the example. The imperial patrol ships and the requisitioned civilian vessels followed suit.

Larger boats rammed and overturned rafts, then cast nets.

Smaller boats could not ram safely, or the rebels might board them.

So they used different tactics.

The fishermen stripped off their shirts, revealing dark, muscular bodies.

One of them laughed loudly.

"Back in my day, I had a nickname too. 'Wave Tumbler' Little Zhang Shun! Let me show you what twenty years of river fishing can do!"

With a splash, he dove into the water.

In a single breath, he was already beneath a raft.

The raft began to shake violently.

The northern soldiers had never seen such a method. Terrified, they screamed as the raft rocked wildly.

Soon it flipped.

The soldiers fell into the water. After swallowing too much river water, they lost consciousness and were dragged onto boats, bound up one by one.

Chuang Tatian knew it was over.

He slowly raised his hands while standing on his raft.

"I surrender! I surrender!"

Meanwhile, Shi Kefa's detachment advanced with extreme caution.

Unlike the other two routes, he had neither multiple Gao Family Village generals nor elite units like the First Battalion.

He had to be careful.

Scouts were sent far ahead.

Hot air balloons floated constantly overhead.

They did not aim to slaughter large numbers of enemies. Their task was simply to prevent any rebel force from escaping through their sector.

Whenever they reached a village or small town, Shi Kefa would first order the construction of defensive works before advancing further.

"Report!" a scout announced. "Zuo Liangyu has appeared in Yingshan County. He defeated Chuang Tatian and absorbed five thousand of his men. His total strength now exceeds fifteen thousand."

Shi Kefa snorted.

"Though numerous, they are rabble. His true fighting force numbers only three thousand from his core troops. The rest are not worth fearing."

A subordinate spoke carefully.

"Commissioner Shi, while we also have over ten thousand men, our truly capable fighters are only the thousand Gao Family Village militia. The rest... are not worth fearing either."

Shi Kefa fell silent.

That was awkward.

"Report! Zuo Liangyu is advancing toward us. His scouts have already located our position."

For all his flaws, Zuo Liangyu was still a major Ming general. His grasp of strategy was solid. Once his scouts confirmed Shi Kefa's position, he acted immediately.

Soon, a messenger arrived.

"Commissioner Shi," the envoy said coldly, "as Governor of Anlu, you have abandoned your post and entered Huguang stirring up trouble. How is this different from rebellion? If our general reports this to the imperial court, you will face serious consequences."

Shi Kefa scoffed.

"You hoard troops for personal gain and harm the people. Of your men, how many are soldiers and how many are bandits? I have come to Hubei to suppress bandits. That includes both you and the rebels."

After a heated exchange, both sides understood there would be no peaceful resolution.

War was inevitable.

With fewer capable troops, Shi Kefa dared not launch a frontal assault.

He studied the map and pointed west of Yingshan County.

"Baimao Town. We will establish our defensive line there and meet Zuo Liangyu's challenge."