

Great Ming 1201

Chapter 1201 They're Fighting!

Chuang Wang, Li Yan, Li Guo, and Liu Zongmin were leading a force of just over a thousand men through the rugged Dabie Mountains.

After several days of "practicing benevolence and righteousness," their numbers had grown to around fifteen hundred.

Chuang Wang had forbidden looting and killing. They treated commoners kindly and only targeted official garrisons and imperial granaries for supplies. Though still small in number, the army felt different now.

There was laughter among the troops.

No more endless sighs. No more hollow stares filled with uncertainty about the future.

Chuang Wang could not help but admire Li Yan. It was Li Yan who had suggested this path of benevolence, allowing him to rise again from despair.

"Report, Big Brother. Baimao Town is just beyond the next ridge," a scout said.

Baimao Town lay on the southern slope of the Dabie Mountains, southwest of the third branch of the Tianyang range.

As Chuang Wang emerged from the mountains, he found himself approaching the town.

"Is there an official granary?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not sure about that," the scout replied, his expression turning strange. "But a large army has occupied Baimao Town."

"Are they here to suppress us?" Chuang Wang asked.

"No... it doesn't look like it," the scout said. "They're building defensive works inside the town. It seems like they're preparing to block someone."

Chuang Wang's interest was immediately piqued.

"Come. Let's take a look from the mountainside."

He brought only Li Yan, Li Guo, and Liu Zongmin. The four of them crawled to a high slope and looked down at Baimao Town.

Indeed, a massive army occupied the town, no fewer than ten thousand men.

Only a small portion wore official uniforms. The rest were dressed in mixed clothing.

Chuang Wang quickly spotted a thousand members of the Gao Family Village Militia.

He would never forget their distinctive attire.

"It's that strange firearms unit. How did they end up here?"

Li Guo frowned. "They can't be chasing us. We're too few now. It wouldn't make sense to send a specialized firearms unit just for us."

Chuang Wang glanced up at the reconnaissance hot air balloon floating above Baimao Town and nodded.

"With so few of us scattered across the Dabie Mountains, even their large Kongming lantern wouldn't easily spot us. They're definitely not here for us. Let's observe."

They lay there quietly.

The firearms unit was directing others to build defensive structures.

Baimao Town's walls were low and small. It could not possibly house over ten thousand soldiers, so defenses were being constructed outside the town as well.

Chuang Wang saw them piling stones and packed earth into low walls about half a man's height.

These were not single lines. They formed staggered layers that spread outward from both sides of the town, extending far across the open ground.

Li Guo said, "They've broken up the flat terrain with these low walls. No one can form proper battle ranks like that."

Chuang Wang nodded.

"They don't need ranks. They want staggered cover so their flintlock riflemen can fire from behind it. Arrows and bullets will be blocked. Charging cavalry will also be slowed."

Li Guo thought about it carefully and realized it made sense.

The firearms unit was also digging trenches. Rows of ditches encircled Baimao Town, forming layered defensive rings.

Li Guo stared blankly.

"How are we supposed to fight against something like that?"

Chuang Wang closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Unless you bombard them with cannons, I see no way. And even cannons might not work well. Those trenches make it easy to avoid artillery. With this setup, they're nearly invincible."

"Huh?" Li Guo blurted.

Chuang Wang sighed.

"This is the advantage of advanced weapons. Because they have flintlock rifles, they can use tactics like this. We do not. When we fight, we must form ranks. If we dug trenches or built low walls, we would only disrupt our own formations."

Li Guo remained completely confused.

But the most bewildered person at that moment was Li Yan.

He did not understand much about battlefield tactics. What he was observing was discipline.

This large army had settled in Baimao Town and was digging trenches and building walls. Under normal circumstances, government troops would force the townspeople to do such labor.

This army did not.

They did not harm a single civilian.

While some soldiers dug and built, others entered the town to reassure the people and distribute porridge to those in need.

The townspeople remained calm. The whole town felt orderly and steady.

Li Yan suddenly exclaimed, "Wait. This army is using the same method as us. They are practicing benevolence and righteousness."

Chuang Wang's brows furrowed deeply.

He had always known they were powerful in battle.

He had not expected them to be ahead in strategy as well.

This strange firearms unit seemed to have practiced benevolence and righteousness from the beginning, while he had only just started after meeting Li Yan.

Compared to them, he was far behind.

He had lost in both strength and strategy.

"Look. Another army is approaching," Liu Zongmin said, pointing west.

Chuang Wang turned his head and immediately recognized them.

"Zuo Liangyu."

Zuo Liangyu's army was easy to identify.

At the center were three thousand government soldiers in bright, well maintained armor, presenting the image of a regular imperial force.

But surrounding them were large numbers of unruly, pacified bandits.

There was no discipline.

Even Zuo Liangyu's three thousand core troops lacked strict order. The surrounding bandits were noisy, chaotic, and kicking up clouds of dust.

The army halted outside Baimao Town.

Zuo Liangyu burst into loud laughter.

"Shi Kefa! A scholar leading troops is truly laughable. Do you even know how to wage war? Building low walls everywhere and digging trenches. Are you putting on a show?"

Chuang Wang muttered, "He still doesn't understand the power of the firearms unit. He doesn't grasp how flintlock riflemen are deployed."

Zuo Liangyu's booming voice carried across the field.

"Listen well! Shi Kefa, as Governor of Anqing and Luzhou, has unlawfully brought troops into Huguang. He harbors rebellious intent! I, Zuo Liangyu, remain loyal to the imperial court. I will eradicate this rebellious faction and uphold the law!"

The bandits burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha!"

Zuo Liangyu waved his hand forward.

"Attack!"

Two large cannons were rolled out from the government formation.

But before the artillerymen could finish loading them, Baimao Town opened fire first.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Portable small cannon barrels spat flames. Explosive grenades arced through the air toward Zuo Liangyu's artillery position.

Chapter 1202 There Is a Loophole

The rebels were already familiar with Gao Family Village's way of fighting.

Zuo Liangyu was not.

Before he could even understand what was happening, two deafening explosions tore through the air.

Boom!

Boom!

His artillery position collapsed instantly. The gunners were thrown off their feet. Some had instinctively dropped flat to the ground, hugging the earth. Those who survived were pale with terror.

Zuo Liangyu sucked in a breath.

"What was that?!"

Boom! Boom! Boom!

More explosions followed.

The small mortars of Gao Family Village were light and easy to maneuver. And there were not just two or three. Even on Shi Kefa's relatively weaker flank, more than a dozen had been deployed.

Shells rained down continuously. Every blast threw Zuo Liangyu's forces into chaos.

The outer ranks, mostly former rebels who had surrendered, already lacked discipline and courage. If they had possessed any real backbone, they would not have abandoned their original banners so easily.

Where a shell landed, a circle of men fell.

That kind of precision shattered morale instantly.

With panicked shouts, the outer troops broke first, scattering in all directions.

Zuo Liangyu roared,

"Charge! Rush them! Cut down their artillery!"

His three thousand regular soldiers began forming ranks and advancing steadily.

But he still did not understand the true strength of Gao Family Village.

Advancing in tight formation against their Flintlock Riflemen was no different from marching into death.

The riflemen fired.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

This was not the main regiment, so not every soldier carried a breech-loading rifle. But there were still plenty of Chassepot rifles among them, the same weapons that had once unleashed four volleys in ten breaths and crushed the Wushen tribe.

The riflemen carved small firing gaps into the half-man-high earthen walls. Resting their barrels in those openings, they aimed calmly.

Another volley rang out.

A wide section of Zuo Liangyu's front line dropped.

Shields were useless.

Some soldiers felt their wrists jolt violently. They stared in disbelief at the neat hole punched through their shield. A heartbeat later, a burning pain erupted in their chest.

They fell screaming.

Zuo Liangyu cursed,

"Damn it!"

It was his first encounter with Gao Family Village.

Anyone would have been stunned.

For a brief moment, his mind went blank. He forgot to issue orders.

A strong army might still push forward without commands.

A disorganized one would collapse.

Zuo Liangyu's forces were the latter.

With chaotic shouts, they began retreating. What started as withdrawal quickly became a rout.

Zuo Menggeng grabbed his father's reins.

"Father, we have to retreat now!"

Zuo Liangyu growled,

"What just happened? What kind of troops are those?!"

"They're too strong!" Zuo Menggeng snapped. "Unbelievably strong! If we don't run now, we'll be finished!"

Zuo Liangyu spat bitterly.

"Shi Kefa? A mere civil official who only knows how to talk? How can he command troops like this?"

"Stop talking and move!" Zuo Menggeng shouted.

Father and son turned their horses and galloped west.

Shi Kefa did not pursue recklessly.

He remained calm.

"Zuo Liangyu has lost. He cannot move east anymore. He can only retreat west. We will seal every eastern route and advance steadily. Slowly compress the space. Then annihilate Zuo Liangyu and Zhang Xianzhong together."

From the mountainside, Li Zicheng watched the rout.

After a moment, he turned away.

"There's no need to keep watching," he said quietly.

He pointed toward a group of retreating soldiers heading into the Dabie Mountains.

"Look at that unit."

Li Guo narrowed his eyes.

"I recognize them. Those are Chuang Tatian's men."

Li Zicheng's expression shifted.

"Chuang Tatian is my sworn brother. A true friend. I don't know why his troops were under Zuo Liangyu's command. But now that Zuo Liangyu is defeated, this is our chance."

He looked at Li Guo.

"Let's go."

The two men slid down the slope.

Chuang Tatian's scattered troops were still running in panic when a figure suddenly blocked their path.

"Brothers," the man called out, "look closely. Do you recognize me?"

The soldiers froze.

"Brother Chuang Wang!"

Li Zicheng stepped forward.

"Where is Brother Chuang Tatian?"

The men lowered their heads.

"He was defeated by Zuo Liangyu. We got separated during the chaos. We searched but couldn't find him. With no choice, we joined Zuo Liangyu's ranks."

Li Zicheng was silent for a moment.

"Then follow me," he said at last. "But listen carefully. Things are different now. There will be no more burning, killing, or looting. I have changed our path. We will rise in a new way."

The men looked at one another.

Then they answered together,

"We follow Brother Chuang Wang!"

Li Zicheng nodded.

"Good. Come."

He turned and led them into the deeper stretches of the Dabie Mountains. Five thousand former followers trailed behind him, vanishing into the forest.

High above Baimao Town, a reconnaissance hot air balloon floated silently.

A scout from Gao Family Village carefully marked the movements of Zuo Liangyu's scattered forces on a map.

Then he spotted it.

A large group fleeing into the Dabie Mountains.

He quickly scribbled a note, sealed it inside a bamboo tube, and lowered it down.

The message soon reached Shi Kefa.

Shi Kefa studied the map.

"Our army blocks the southern side of the Dabie Mountains. East of the mountains lies Luzhou. Before I marched out, I strengthened Luzhou's defenses. That fleeing force cannot capture it."

He traced the northern route with his finger.

"They can only head north. Once they cross the Dabie Mountains, they will enter the Northern Army's jurisdiction. The Northern Army is strong enough to handle them."

Meanwhile, deeper within the mountains, Li Zicheng spoke to his trusted men.

"In Shaanxi and Sichuan, these Flintlock Riflemen must already be active. In Shanxi and Henan as well. Now Shi Kefa commands them here in the south. It's clear."

He paused.

"They are casting a wide net. They intend to wipe out every rebel force in the Central Plains."

His men stiffened.

"Then aren't we inside that net too?"

Li Zicheng nodded slowly.

"Yes. But there is a loophole."

"Where?"

"Fengyang."

He continued calmly.

"Fengyang is the ancestral homeland of the Zhu imperial clan. After Zhang Xianzhong desecrated the imperial tombs, the court became extremely sensitive about that region."

He glanced at them.

"And since even Wang Er is part of this Flintlock force, it proves they are not aligned with the court. If they act openly in Fengyang, they risk alarming the imperial court itself."

Understanding dawned.

"So we can pass through Fengyang to escape the encirclement?"

"Exactly."

Then his expression hardened.

"But remember this. We must not harm a single commoner in Fengyang. Not one. If we disturb the people, the Flintlock forces will immediately move against us."

He looked ahead into the forest.

"If we leave no trace, we slip through the net."

The mountains swallowed their figures as they moved northward.

Chapter 1203 True Master, Save Me!

Wuchang.

Zhu Huadie, the tenth Prince of Chu of the Great Ming, sat rigidly on a gilded folding chair granted by the Hongwu Emperor himself. His back was straight, but his face was pale with fear.

He was the twin brother of the late ninth Prince of Chu, Zhu Huakui. In the past, he had been enfeoffed as the Prince of Xuanhua, a minor and low-profile prince who had barely left a trace in the historical record.

But everything changed not long ago.

Zhu Huakui had died in terror.

They said that in the middle of the night, a monster had crawled into the princely residence. The prince had hidden under his bed and been frightened to death.

No heirs. No successor.

The title of Prince of Chu could not remain vacant.

So the court officials had no choice. They hauled Zhu Huadie out from obscurity, placed him onto the gilded folding chair, and declared solemnly, "From this day forward, Your Highness is the Prince of Chu."

Zhu Huadie had nearly fainted on the spot.

He knew exactly how his brother had died.

During the rebel turmoil, refugees had fled toward Wuchang seeking shelter. His brother had refused to open the gates. Worse, he had personally shot and wounded a commoner with a crossbow.

Public resentment had boiled over.

People whispered that the vengeful spirits of the suffering masses had taken form, turning into a monster that crept into the prince's residence at night and claimed his life.

Whether that story was true or not, Zhu Huadie did not dare test it.

The moment he took power, he ordered Wuchang's gates thrown open.

Refugees were welcomed without restriction.

To make his sincerity clear, he even hung an enormous banner over the city gate that read:

"My home's gates are always open. I welcome you with open arms."

The refugees did not bother with formalities. War raged outside. Survival came first. They flooded into Wuchang in great numbers.

Soon, the city was packed to the brim.

People expected grain prices to skyrocket.

But something unexpected happened.

Huge transport fleets sailed along the river at regular intervals. Each time they passed Wuchang, they unloaded massive quantities of grain. Relief gruel was distributed daily. A grain shop was opened to sell rice at fair prices.

If you had money, you could buy food at a reasonable rate.

If you had no money, you could line up for porridge.

It was not luxurious, but no one starved.

Amid the chaos outside, Wuchang stood firm.

Ironically, the most miserable person in the entire city was Zhu Huadie himself.

Every night before sleeping, he checked under his bed again and again.

Whenever he sat on the gilded folding chair, his heart pounded wildly.

He burned incense daily. He bowed to Buddha. He prayed to every god and immortal he could think of, begging them to keep the monster away.

At sixty-six years old, the constant fear was wearing him down.

"Report!"

A palace guard rushed in, breathing hard.

"The bandit army of the Eight Great Kings is loitering outside the city again."

Zhu Huadie waved irritably.

"What are the Eight Great Kings compared to a monster? The monster is the real terror! Have you invited the Daoist Master I requested?"

The guard swallowed.

"Yes, Your Highness. Ma Tianzheng, True Master of the Quanzhen Longmen Sect, is arriving by boat. Scouts say he will reach the south water gate within half an hour."

Zhu Huadie leapt to his feet.

"Half an hour? Why didn't you report sooner? Prepare the sedan chair! This prince will personally welcome Master Ma."

He hurried to straighten his robes, making sure every detail was flawless. Then he assembled his most ceremonial honor guard and headed toward the south water gate.

At the same time, outside Wuchang's north gate, the main force of the Eight Great Kings lingered.

On the city wall, the Prefect of Wuchang stood grim-faced. Around him were aging garrison troops and a handful of militiamen with pitiful combat ability.

He felt the weight of responsibility pressing down on him.

"Has the Prince of Chu arrived yet?" he asked anxiously. "We need his guards to help defend the city."

A subordinate bowed.

"Your Excellency, the prince's honor guard has left the residence."

The Prefect sighed in relief.

Not even two minutes later, another subordinate rushed up.

"Your Excellency... the prince's honor guard is heading toward the south water gate."

"The south gate?" The Prefect stared in disbelief. "The enemy is at the north gate! Is he trying to flee? A prince cannot leave his fief without authorization. Even attempting it is a capital offense!"

"He appears to be welcoming someone."

The Prefect nearly choked.

Before he could explode in anger, a rebel general outside the north gate shouted up at the walls.

"Prefect of Wuchang! Hand over all your gold, silver, jewels, and grain immediately! If we breach the city, not a single living thing will survive!"

The Prefect roared back,

"You madmen! All of you are insane! If you want this city, come and take it! I will fight you to the death!"

Meanwhile, at the south water gate.

Zhu Huadie stood on the wall, peering anxiously at the river.

A small boat approached slowly.

On it stood a Daoist priest in flowing robes.

Ma Tianzheng.

He carried himself with ethereal calm, an air of detachment and transcendence. Years of traveling and preaching the glory of Dao Xuan Tianzun had made him widely known. Even before he spoke, his presence alone commanded attention.

The boat touched the dock.

Ordinary passengers would disembark clumsily.

Ma Tianzheng did not.

With a sharp slap against the scabbard on his back, his three-foot azure blade slid free with a clear metallic ring.

He caught it in a reverse grip and began a dazzling series of sword movements.

The blade flashed like flowing water.

His robes billowed.

Moving with the momentum of his sword, he seemed almost to float from the boat onto the shore. Once on land, he performed another swift sequence of Quanzhen sword techniques and intoned solemnly,

"Heaven and Earth without limit. The cosmos obeys my command. By decree of Dao Xuan Tianzun, manifest!"

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the sword skyward.

The blade spun twice in the air.

Then, with a crisp ring, it dropped neatly back into its scabbard behind him.

Perfect.

He had practiced that move for twenty years.

The spectacle left everyone stunned.

Zhu Huadie's eyes shone.

This was it. This was the man.

He hurried forward and bowed deeply.

"True Master, save me!"

Ma Tianzheng looked at him calmly.

"I hear Wuchang is plagued by a monster."

Zhu Huadie's eyes reddened instantly.

"Yes! A monster! I have not slept peacefully for days. Every night I check under my bed a hundred times..."

Ma Tianzheng raised a hand.

"Silence. Say nothing more. Allow this humble Daoist to divine the matter."

Zhu Huadie shut his mouth immediately.

Even the Emperor could not have commanded him so effectively.

Ma Tianzheng formed a hand seal. His fingers shifted in complex patterns, swift and precise. After a long moment, he exhaled softly.

"I understand."

Zhu Huadie leaned forward eagerly.

"You understand what, True Master?"

"Come with me."

Ma Tianzheng flicked his sleeves and walked into the city.

Though it was clearly his first time in Wuchang, he strode confidently through the streets as if he had lived there for years.

Zhu Huadie hurried after him.

A long line of princely guards followed.

Behind them, several guards exchanged uneasy glances.

One muttered under his breath,

"Isn't he just a swindler?"

No one dared say it louder.

Chapter 1204 No Use Hiding

A large crowd followed Ma Tianzheng through several streets.

They arrived at a secluded alley not far from the Prince of Chu's Estate.

The onlookers were completely confused.

Then they saw Ma Tianzheng lower his head and mutter toward a small dirt hole at the corner of the wall.

"There's no use hiding," he said calmly. "This humble Daoist has already seen you."

Everyone was stunned.

Suddenly, from the small dirt hole, a tiny metal hand shot out.

It was extremely small, yet it moved with eerie speed.

The Prince of Chu screamed, "Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!"

His retainers followed, "Ah! Ah! Ah!"

The metal hand naturally belonged to the reconnaissance Heavenly Lord unit.

After scaring the Prince of Chu to death earlier, Li Daoxuan had left the reconnaissance Heavenly Lord unit hidden in a remote corner of Wuchang City. Now he simply instructed Ma Tianzheng to retrieve it.

The Heavenly Lord always enjoyed playfully manifesting in the mortal world, much like Monk Jigong. Since the Heavenly Lord told Ma Tianzheng to cooperate in this little prank, he naturally complied wholeheartedly.

Ma Tianzheng said in a solemn voice, "There is no need to hide in there. This humble Daoist knows that you are a monstrous entity formed from the resentment of countless commoners who died in and around Wuchang City. Thinking of your suffering in life, this humble Daoist will not use divine artifacts to destroy you. Leave on your own."

The small metal hand at the entrance made a strange gesture, then pointed at the Prince of Chu.

A sinister voice came from inside the hole.

"It was the Prince of Chu who caused my death. When the rebels wanted to kill me, I tried to enter the city, but he refused to open the gates."

Zhu Huadie cried out in panic, "Ah! Ah! Ah! It wasn't this prince! It wasn't this prince! That was this prince's twin brother! This prince is a good person! A good person!"

The cold voice replied, "I can't tell. I don't think he's a good person. I'm going to kill him."

Zhu Huadie wailed, "Ah! Ah! Ah! True Master, save me! Save me!"

Ma Tianzheng looked toward the hole.

"If the Prince proves that he is a good person, you will not harm him?"

The voice answered, "Why would I kill a good person? I only kill the wicked."

Ma Tianzheng turned to Zhu Huadie.

Zhu Huadie immediately understood.

"This prince will do good deeds at once! Immediately!"

Ma Tianzheng looked back at the hole.

"Are you satisfied?"

"Hmph," the voice snorted. "For Ma Tianzheng's sake, I will leave for now. But if the Prince of Chu commits evil again, I will return and take his life. Move aside. I am coming out."

The Prince of Chu and his retainers scrambled away in terror.

With a whoosh, a tiny figure shot out of the hole.

It was a small skeletal metal figure, its face smeared with black mud. It moved incredibly fast. In a blink, it reached the alley entrance and disappeared.

Zhu Huadie and his guards were completely numb with fear.

Only then did Ma Tianzheng turn back.

"The rebels bring disaster and the people suffer greatly. Too many wronged souls linger around this city. The former Prince of Chu failed to act with benevolence, oppressed the innocent, and caused deep resentment. These resentful spirits gathered and became such a monstrous entity."

Zhu Huadie stammered, "Then... then..."

Ma Tianzheng continued, "It dragged your brother's soul into the Underworld. He is now trapped in the eighteen layers of hell."

Zhu Huadie trembled. "He is in the eighteen layers of hell? Heavens... Heavens... What should be done? How can I save my brother? True Master, you must save me."

"There are two ways," Ma Tianzheng said. "First, practice benevolence and righteousness. Be a good ruler. Second, repel the rebels and protect the peace of this region."

"Repel the rebels..." Zhu Huadie said bitterly. "This prince cannot do that."

Ma Tianzheng nodded. "Since the second is difficult for you, let us speak of the first. That is not hard."

Zhu Huadie quickly said, "Yes! Yes! I will immediately distribute porridge to the hungry, give silver to refugees. I will give money!"

At that moment, from behind a distant wall, the metal entity's voice echoed again.

"Hehehe. You think giving a little silver makes you a good person? Everyone knows the Prince of Chu's Estate holds one million taels of silver. If you only give thirty or fifty thousand taels, that is like throwing scraps to beggars. Does that count as virtue?"

Zhu Huadie froze.

Even that was known.

The one million taels in the estate had not been accumulated by him. It had been hoarded by his twin brother, Zhu Huakui, the ninth-generation Prince of Chu. During his tenure, Zhu Huakui had beaten a circuit inspector to death, oppressed innocent citizens, and extorted heavy taxes.

It was dirty money.

To save his life, Zhu Huadie did not dare cling to it.

Since he had not earned it himself, giving it away did not truly pain him.

He hurriedly shouted, "I will distribute all one million taels to prove my sincerity!"

Ma Tianzheng smiled.

"Excellent."

He turned toward the distance.

"You heard him, did you not?"

"I heard," the voice replied. "If he truly distributes it all, I will no longer trouble him and will reincarnate peacefully."

"Distribute it all!" Zhu Huadie shouted. "Immediately! Go now!"

Just as his words fell, thunderous battle cries erupted from outside the north gate of the city.

The rebels were preparing to attack Wuchang City.

Zhu Huadie jumped in fright.

"What should we do now?"

Ma Tianzheng remained calm.

"With one million taels, generously reward brave men. How can the city lack defenders? Since you intend to distribute the silver anyway, why not use it to reward those who defend the city?"

Zhu Huadie's eyes lit up.

"Yes! Yes!"

He shouted loudly, "Pass down my order! The Prince of Chu's Estate will fund this. Any able-bodied man who volunteers to defend Wuchang will receive ten taels of silver. If the rebels are repelled, another ten taels will be awarded. If someone dies in battle, his family will receive thirty taels. Those who transport supplies and assist in defense will also be rewarded with silver!"

The moment the order was announced, Wuchang City erupted.

The common people rushed to the north gate walls.

"How dare these rebels attack our Wuchang!"

Outside the city, the rebel leader looked up and was stunned.

"So many people?"

Countless civilians stood atop the walls waving flags.

"Come on! Attack if you dare!"

The most feared situation for an attacking army was a united city where soldiers and civilians stood as one.

The rebel leader cursed, "Just you wait! We will settle this later!"

After leaving behind harsh words, the rebels quickly retreated.

Zhu Huadie let out a long breath.

"They have retreated... but what if they return?"

Ma Tianzheng calculated with his fingers and smiled faintly.

"Do not worry. Within three days, reinforcements will arrive."

Zhu Huadie was shocked.

"True Master, you can predict this?"

Ma Tianzheng smiled calmly.

"This humble Daoist serves under Dao Xuan Tian Zun. The Heavenly Lord knows the past five hundred years and the next five hundred years.

There is nothing under heaven unknown to the Heavenly Lord. Here is a copy of The Divine Tales of Dao Xuan, Demon Slayer. Study it diligently every day. You will surely benefit."

Chapter 1205 Tianzun Signature Style

Ma Tianzheng's prophecy very quickly became reality.

Two days later, a massive fleet appeared on the river outside Wuchang.

The Prefect of Wuchang grew nervous. He had no idea where this fleet came from and did not dare open the gates lightly.

Before he could make up his mind, Prince Zhu Huadie came running to the South Water Gate, Ma Tianzheng following close behind.

"Open the water gate at once!" Zhu Huadie shouted. "Let them in. They are reinforcements. Reinforcements!"

The Prefect frowned. "Reinforcements from where? Which general of the court leads them? Why have I received no notice?"

Zhu Huadie waved him off impatiently. "What do you know? They were sent by the Tianzun to save the common people."

The Prefect blinked. "What?"

Zhu Huadie excitedly waved a copy of The Tales of Dao Xuan Tianzun, Demon Slayer. "Read this and you will understand. The Tianzun, in boundless compassion, has organized a militia to rescue those in suffering."

The words White Lotus Sect flashed through the Prefect's mind.

Before he could protest, the Prince's guards rushed forward, lifted him off his feet, and politely but firmly carried him away.

"Open the South Water Gate!"

The great gate creaked open, and the militia fleet sailed into the city.

Cheng Xu stood at the bow of the leading ship. To his left was Gao Chu Wu. To his right, Zheng Daniu.

Zhu Huadie hurried over, beaming with delight. "The Tianzun's army is truly mighty and extraordinary. This prince also wishes to join."

Cheng Xu laughed. "You are sixty six years old. Best not to overexert yourself."

Yet the older a man grew, the more fervent his superstition became.

Zhu Huadie gazed at the militia with reddened eyes. He truly wanted to join. In his heart he calculated that if he made more donations to Dao Xuan Tianzun's temples, perhaps he could at least secure an honorary instructor's title.

Cheng Xu asked, "What is the situation here?"

Zhu Huadie hesitated. "Ah... this... I am not entirely sure. The Prefect should explain."

So the Prince's guards went and fetched the Prefect again.

Dragged back and forth like a sack of rice, the Prefect felt numb. He dared not offend the Prince of Chu. The previous prince had even beaten a provincial inspector to death. As for this new one, best not to test his temper.

He faced Cheng Xu. "You are a militia?"

"Yes," Cheng Xu replied with a smile. "Militia from Shaanxi, from Shanxi, from Henan, and from Sichuan. All common folk, united under the Tianzun's call to deal with the bandits."

The Prefect had already heard Zhu Huadie speak of the Tianzun these past days. He privately classified it as something akin to a heterodox sect. But unlike certain sects, this one was helping fight rebels rather than stirring trouble, so he chose not to oppose it.

"The Eight Great Kings' men have been roaming outside Wuchang," the Prefect said. "Fortunately, villagers have fled into the city. Otherwise they would have been slaughtered. But they cannot remain inside forever. The fields outside must be cultivated."

Cheng Xu nodded. "Understood. Now that we are here, leave the Eight Great Kings to us."

Could the Prefect refuse?

Clearly not.

With the Prince backing them, he had little choice but to step aside.

Boats continued pouring into Wuchang. Militia soldiers armed with firelocks swiftly took over the arrow towers, gatehouses, and key defensive positions along the walls.

Throughout the entire process, Cheng Xu did not issue a single command. The squad leaders handled everything.

The Prefect watched their discipline and felt a chill. This militia was more professional than the official troops.

At the North Gate tower, one militia soldier examined the structure, selected the sturdiest stone pillar, and began tying a thick rope around it.

The Prefect stared. "What is that for?"

He soon found out.

At the other end of the rope was a massive balloon lantern. The militia heated the air within it, and slowly, it rose above Wuchang.

High above, the wind caught it, causing it to sway. Only the long rope tethered to the tower kept it from drifting away.

The Prefect gasped. "What sorcery is this?"

Zhu Huadie was ecstatic. "Ma Zhenren, this must be what the fifteenth volume of The Tales of Dao Xuan Tianzun describes. The secret art bestowed by the Tianzun. The giant Kongming lantern. Once it rises into the sky, bandits within dozens of li have nowhere to hide."

Ma Tianzheng smiled gently. "When Dao Xuan Tianzun has leisure, he personally observes the sufferings of the mortal world from the heavens. But the Tianzun is busy. One day in Heaven equals one year among men. If he takes even a brief rest, much time passes here. He cannot watch us constantly, so he granted this giant lantern that we may keep watch ourselves."

Zhu Huadie nodded earnestly. "Quite right. How could an immortal of such dignity spend every day staring at mortals? No immortal is that idle."

At that very moment, Li Daoxuan sneezed. "Who is speaking ill of me?"

Gao Yiye, who could hear his voice, looked up at the sky and smiled. "Who would dare speak ill of the Tianzun?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Plenty of people dare. I am not invincible. Even those who are invincible still have others gossiping about them behind their backs."

Gao Yiye nodded thoughtfully.

Li Daoxuan asked, "Yiye, how do you plan to spend today?"

She smiled. "You trained two journalism students to manage Gao Family News, so I am free again. I want to visit Henan."

"What is there to see in Henan?"

"I heard you left a celestial seal in Wuyang County. You stamped the earth with it. I want to see what it looks like."

Li Daoxuan laughed. "No need to travel that far. I will stamp one for you here."

He took out his cheap market stall seal and tossed it onto the open ground beside Gao Family Village's main fortress.

A thunderous boom shook the earth.

The villagers were not frightened. They rushed forward excitedly.

"The Tianzun's immortal seal!"

"Look, it says 'Shen Si Du Xing' – Think Carefully, Act Steadfastly. That must be a true mantra."

"I want to make a personal seal just like it."

"Are you mad? Copying the Tianzun's seal is blasphemy."

"You must be new here. Everyone knows the Tianzun does not mind. Even the hero outfits sold in our village are the same style as his."

Three days later, replica seals engraved with the same four characters were selling wildly. The villagers used fine jade for theirs, far superior to the Tianzun's own cheap imitation stone.

Chapter 1206 Going All Out

"Report! Reinforcements have entered Wuchang!"

A rebel scout rushed forward and knelt before the Eight Great Kings, Zhang Xianzhong, his voice still rough from running hard across the outer lines.

"Wuchang was already difficult to take. Now that reinforcements have arrived, it will be even harder for our army to capture it."

Zhang Xianzhong's brows drew together slowly, not in panic, but in irritation. He had never truly intended to bleed himself dry on a fortress city like Wuchang. Great cities looked impressive on a map, but for men who lived by movement, momentum mattered more than walls. If it could not be taken cleanly, then there was no shame in turning aside and gnawing on softer prey elsewhere.

He was still weighing which direction to shift his forces when a middle aged man stepped into the command tent. The guards did not stop him.

Zhang Xianzhong narrowed his eyes, then recognized him at once.

It was the Shanxi merchant, Zhai Tang.

The two had dealt with each other for years. After the Shanxi merchants lost their northern trade routes, they had not hesitated long before opening business with the rebel armies. They did not particularly care who carried the banner, whether it was Chuang Wang or the Eight Great Kings. Whoever had silver to spend was worth talking to.

Since Chuang Wang had moved into Sichuan and become difficult to contact, much of their supply trade had shifted toward Zhang Xianzhong instead. Grain, salt, iron, powder, cloth. Coin flowed both ways, and neither side pretended it was about loyalty.

But today, Zhai Tang's face was tight.

"Mr. Zhai," Zhang Xianzhong said, studying him, "what troubles you?"

"The situation is not favorable," Zhai Tang replied, his voice low.

Zhang Xianzhong raised a brow.

"Oh?"

"In Henan territory, we have discovered a large force of moving firelock troops."

"A large force?" Zhang Xianzhong gave a short laugh. "Larger than my one hundred fifty thousand men?"

"Not that large," Zhai Tang answered carefully, choosing his words as a merchant weighs silver. "But I fear there may be thirty thousand."

He was speaking conservatively. The northern army of Gao Family Village numbered thirty five thousand fighting men, and with their logistics units included, the total exceeded forty thousand. Yet from a distance one could only judge by the dust on the horizon, and dust had a way of exaggerating or diminishing according to the wind.

Zhang Xianzhong's expression tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Thirty thousand."

He understood what that number meant.

His so called one hundred fifty thousand included entire families moving with the host, old men, women, children, camp followers who inflated the count. True fighting strength did not exceed seventy thousand. Thirty thousand firelock troops, however, meant thirty thousand hardened soldiers with powder and discipline, without padding or illusion.

With seventy thousand irregulars against thirty thousand organized firelocks, the outcome required no divination.

"They are coming for me?" he asked.

"Very likely," Zhai Tang said. "They have dispersed their forces and cast a vast net across the region. Even my hidden bases in Henan were forced to withdraw south."

In truth, the net had been cast for the rebels, not for merchants. Gao Family Village had no intention of hunting caravans.

But the Shanxi merchants carried their own shadows. At the mere sight of those firelock columns, they assumed reckoning had come, hastily gathering their ledgers, goods, and storehouses, hauling

everything south toward Huguang. Warehouses were emptied in a rush. Entire lines of commerce uprooted overnight.

"Recently," Zhai Tang continued, "my men have also inquired among the common people and learned more of their origins."

Zhang Xianzhong leaned forward slightly.

"And?"

"They come from Shaanxi. They are followers of a sect called the Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect. The structure resembles the White Lotus Sect. They use the name of Dao Xuan Tianzun to gather believers among the populace, then organize those believers into armies."

Zhang Xianzhong spat a curse.

"If they are rebels like us, stirring up chaos and defying the court, why are they fixated on us?"

Zhai Tang let out a cold breath through his nose.

"They intend to swallow us first, then turn on the court. During the Red Turban uprising centuries ago, rebel forces devoured one another in the same fashion. Small fish consumed larger fish, until Zhu Yuanzhang grew large enough to devour the Yuan dynasty itself."

Zhang Xianzhong's jaw hardened.

"Damn them."

At that moment, a scholar stepped forward from behind him. He wore the robes of a literatus, his bearing calm and measured. This was Pan Dugu, also known as Pan Du'ao, the newly appointed military adviser.

A xiucai from Yingcheng in Huguang, he had once contended with local gentry over land and, after losing the lawsuit, turned his resentment toward the court itself. For a rebel army, a scholar was treasure beyond gold. Zhang Xianzhong had wasted no time in elevating him.

And Pan Dugu had proven his worth. He lectured on Sun Wu's Art of War, supervised the crafting of three eyed fire guns and spiked maces, arranged ambush crossbows, and instructed the men in battalion formations and coordinated camp structures. Under his guidance, the Eight Great Kings' army had shed some of its former chaos.

He stepped forward and clasped his hands.

"Your Majesty, we must make plans without delay."

Zhang Xianzhong looked at him steadily.

"What do you propose?"

"North is closed to us," Pan Dugu said calmly. "As for the west, Chuang Wang recently suffered a crushing defeat in Sichuan. Over a hundred thousand men vanished like smoke. It is very likely that these same firelock troops drove him back. We cannot move west."

He paused only briefly before continuing.

"To the south lies the Yangtze River. In recent days, I have observed frequent ship movements along its waters. I cannot yet confirm whether they belong to the court or another force, but they move with purpose, as if tightening a blockade."

Zhang Xianzhong's eyes narrowed.

"So north, west, and south are all barred. That leaves the east."

Pan Dugu inclined his head.

"To our east stands Zuo Liangyu. And Zuo Liangyu is the easiest to bully."

Zhang Xianzhong considered the map in his mind. Compared to an organized firelock army, a conventional Ming commander who guarded his own turf might indeed be the softer target.

"This may work," he said slowly.

Zhai Tang nodded as well.

"There is reason in this."

Pan Dugu turned toward the merchant.

"Mr. Zhai, we are now insects tied to the same rope, surrounded by the Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect. If we do not wish to be devoured in turn, we must join forces."

Zhai Tang hesitated only a moment before answering.

"Very well."

"We provide the men," Pan Dugu said, his tone firm. "The Shanxi merchants provide the supplies. We commit everything we have, strike through the eastern route, and break out of this encirclement."

"Agreed."

...

Above Wuchang, a giant Kongming lantern drifted against the sky, its basket swaying gently in the wind. From that height, a scout peered down toward the rebel camp stationed ten li north of the city.

In earlier campaigns, rebel encampments had resembled unruly sprawl, tents scattered without order, fires smoking at random, men sleeping where they pleased. This time, the formation below displayed structure. Lines were straighter. Units were grouped with intention. Whoever had advised them had imposed discipline upon disorder.

The scout made a mental note to record the change and send the message down in a bamboo tube.

Then movement at the northern gate caught his eye.

A vast transport column was entering the camp, wagon after wagon stretching along the yellow official road like a dark ribbon stitched across the earth. Even from high above, its length was unmistakable.

He quickly raised his telescope and brought the distant scene into focus.

A flag fluttered above the lead carts.

The character read Zhai.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath. "The Shanxi merchants."

He guided the lens slowly along the convoy. Soon he spotted heavy cannons drawn by horses, their iron barrels glinting dully in the light. Behind them rolled carts stacked with barrels of gunpowder. More cannons followed. More powder. Piles of black iron cannonballs heaped high like clustered fruit.

The Shanxi merchants had committed fully this time, pouring wealth and steel alike into the rebel cause, as though wagering not merely profit, but survival itself.

Chapter 1207 The Arrival

Cheng Xu held the small slip of paper written by the scout and looked up at Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, and the gathered company and platoon commanders in the tent.

"The Shanxi merchants are providing aid to the rebels," he said evenly. "Our scout observed a large number of cannons being delivered into the Eight Great Kings' camp. It seems the first battle we fight will be an artillery engagement."

The officers immediately broke into grins.

"We are First Regiment of the Village," one battalion commander laughed. "An artillery duel is no pressure at all. Let them experience the kind of fire coverage those bandits at Tieshanping once enjoyed."

Cheng Xu snorted.

"So now you remember you are First Regiment."

The tent filled with laughter. Confidence, when backed by iron and powder, had weight.

Before the mood could settle, another scout rushed in from outside, breathing hard.

"Something strange. The rebels have broken camp. They are not advancing on Wuchang. They are moving east."

The artillery battalion commander was the first to jump to his feet.

"What? How can they do that? Do they know how hard it is for our artillery to finally get a chance to fire? Don't run. Stay and let us bombard you."

Even Cheng Xu felt his brow tighten for a brief moment, but the irritation faded as quickly as it came, replaced by clarity.

"They know Wuchang is too difficult to take," he said slowly. "They have decided to break east. And to the east is the weakest segment of our encirclement. Only Shi Kefa and his one thousand militia are holding that line. That is dangerous."

Gao Chuwu showed his teeth in a grin.

"Then we hurry up and chase them."

Zheng Daniu nodded vigorously.

"If we catch up, we can sandwich them with Shi Kefa from both sides."

Cheng Xu glanced at him in mild surprise.

"Daniu, you even understand a pincer attack now?"

Zheng Daniu scratched his head and laughed.

"Like roujiamo. Meat pressed between bread. Talking about it makes me hungry."

The room fell briefly silent before someone muttered that of course he understood once it involved food.

Cheng Xu issued his orders at once.

"Leave a message for Flat Rabbit's overland column. We pursue the Eight Great Kings immediately."

...

After Zuo Liangyu suffered his defeat at Baimao Town, his scattered forces had dissolved in chaos. Several thousand had been lured away by Chuang Wang, but others drifted back in small groups to Yingshan County, seeking familiar banners and a commander who, however unreliable, was still theirs.

Following a short period of reorganization, Zuo Liangyu managed to gather more than eight thousand men once again. Shi Kefa was not someone he could afford to offend further. Failing to silence him meant future memorials to the court accusing him of misconduct. In response, Zuo Liangyu had begun drafting his own accusations. If both of them were technically violating orders, then neither stood on perfectly clean ground.

He was in the middle of urging his son, Zuo Menggeng, to write faster when scouts arrived with fresh news.

"Shi Kefa has left Baimao Town and is advancing west."

Zuo Liangyu's expression darkened immediately.

"Stop writing. We move."

He assembled his troops and withdrew westward from Yingshan County, hoping to avoid being pinned between forces. The common people of the county breathed a collective sigh of relief as his banners disappeared over the hills, for his presence had been more burden than protection.

Yet he had marched less than ten li when another scout galloped back in alarm.

"General, the Eight Great Kings' army is heading straight for us."

Zuo Liangyu froze.

"Heading for us? Weren't they near Wuchang? That is still far from here."

"They are clearly targeting us," the scout insisted. "Their formation is aggressive. They look ready to fight."

Anger flared in Zuo Liangyu's chest.

"So even bandits think they can bully me now? I may not match their numbers, but I will not fear a rabble of over a hundred thousand."

Normally he preferred to avoid the main strength of rebel forces, but with Shi Kefa pressing from behind, retreat was no longer a comfortable option. Compared to Gao Family Village's militia, rebels at least felt like familiar opponents.

"Advance."

His army surged forward to meet the Eight Great Kings.

The clash came swiftly, and almost immediately something felt wrong.

The rebels' lines shifted with surprising order. Then, in one coordinated motion, ten cannons were rolled into position and fired. The thunder of artillery split the air as iron shot screamed toward Zuo Liangyu's ranks. Before the smoke cleared, volleys of matchlocks, three eyed fire guns, and ambush crossbows followed, washing over his troops in relentless succession.

Zuo Liangyu felt a chill crawl up his spine.

"This is not right."

These were not the disorganized brigands he was accustomed to harrying. Weapons he did not fully understand were appearing not only in militia hands but now among rebels as well. The world seemed to be changing faster than he could grasp.

It did not take long.

His army broke.

Standards toppled, formations dissolved, men fled in all directions. Zuo Liangyu himself escaped with only a few dozen cavalry, riding north in humiliation as the battlefield dissolved behind him.

...

News of the battle between Zuo Liangyu and the Eight Great Kings spread rapidly through the various forces of Gao Family Village. Their intelligence network was operating at full speed, messages relayed by runners and bamboo tubes dropped from drifting Kongming lanterns overhead.

"Report. The Eight Great Kings have engaged Zuo Liangyu."

"Report. The Eight Great Kings hold the advantage."

"Report. They possess ten cannons. Zuo Liangyu is stunned."

"Zuo Liangyu's forces have collapsed. He is fleeing north with a handful of riders."

Cheng Xu and Shi Kefa received nearly identical reports, yet their positions on opposite sides of the battlefield demanded very different responses.

Shi Kefa raised his hand without hesitation.

"Entire army halt. Construct defensive positions immediately and prepare to withstand the impact of the Eight Great Kings' forces. It is clear they intend to break east. Their clash with Zuo Liangyu was incidental. Soon they will strike our line."

The militia felt tension tighten in their chests. Defeating Zuo Liangyu at Baimao Town had been manageable. Facing the full strength of the Eight Great Kings, with cavalry and sheer numbers, was another matter entirely. Fifteen thousand or one hundred fifty thousand, rumor inflated figures easily, but even the lower estimate represented a formidable mass. Carelessness here could overturn everything.

On the western side, Cheng Xu's expression grew grave as he finished reading the reports.

"It is obvious the rebel army intends to punch through the eastern edge of our encirclement. Shi Kefa's position is our only thin point."

He looked up sharply.

"Accelerate the march. We must reinforce him as quickly as possible. Maintain caution along the route. Given the size of the Eight Great Kings' forces, they may leave rear guards to ambush pursuing troops."

Orders were relayed at once. Columns tightened, pace quickened, scouts spread farther ahead.

Cheng Xu lifted his gaze toward the north.

"Main force, hurry."

The main force had already divided into multiple advancing columns. Bai Yuan led one. Wang Er and Bai Mao another. Old Nanfeng commanded his own route. Xing Honglang marched separately. Fan Shangjing and Gao Jie advanced together, while Ma Shouying brought up the heavy cavalry.

Thirty five thousand troops swept southward along several critical corridors, combing through Henan like a great sieve. In the past, scattered deployments had allowed rebels and criminals to roam freely across the Central Plains. This time, Gao Family Village moved as one coordinated machine. Wherever the army passed, disorder either fled or surrendered itself to labor camps without resistance.

As the various columns marched at full speed, something happened almost simultaneously across them.

The small statues of Dao Xuan Tianzun hanging upon the chests of each commanding officer opened their mouths in unison.

"Reinforce Shi Kefa immediately."

Chapter 1208 Setting the Trap Together

After flattening Zuo Liangyu, Ba Da Wang did not even bother to clean the blood from his boots before ordering the army to continue marching eastward, because in his mind speed meant survival, and survival meant not being swallowed alive by the tightening net of Gao Family Village.

Before long, scouts galloped back in a cloud of dust.

"Report! A force is blocking the road ahead at Yangliu Bay Town. Their numbers are similar to Zuo Liangyu's army. The banners indicate they belong to Governor Shi Kefa of Anlu."

At the name Shi Kefa, Ba Da Wang laughed, and it was not nervous laughter but the sound of an old gambler recognizing a familiar opponent across the table.

"Shi Kefa again."

Over the years he had crossed blades with Shi Kefa more times than he could count. When he looted Fengyang and pushed south, when he backed the Huangmei water bandits, when he fought around the Taihu region, when he roamed Hubei like a wolf testing fences, Shi Kefa had always been somewhere nearby, sometimes retreating, sometimes counterattacking, always stubborn.

Ba Da Wang knew Shi Kefa's habits.

"Shi Kefa has those strange musket troops," he said calmly. "But not many."

"Big Brother, they also have those palm thunder bombs that explode when thrown."

"Lie flat when you see one."

"They might use those blooming cannons again."

"Lie flat for those too."

He did not say this lightly. Experience had taught him that panic killed more men than gunfire. If soldiers scattered wildly, they died. If they flattened themselves to the earth like stubborn weeds, they survived.

Then his tone shifted.

"Do not charge recklessly. Spread out. Advance slowly. Keep low. No tight formations. Move forward bit by bit and look for cover."

Beside him, strategist Pan Duguo stepped forward, his scholar's robe now permanently dusted with battlefield dirt, and added in a measured voice that carried across the officers' ranks.

"Shi Kefa likes trenches. His men hide inside them and fire from safety. Their trenches reduce the effectiveness of our artillery and arrows. We will do the same."

He paused, eyes glinting.

"We dig while we advance. Slowly. Patiently. This is not a battle to finish in one day. Even ten days is acceptable. Use trenches to crawl close enough that their range advantage disappears."

There it was. Not brute force. Not wild charges. Mud and patience.

"Shi Kefa has few troops," Pan Duguo concluded. "If we do not rush foolishly, we will grind him down."

Orders spread. Axes began to swing.

Yangliu Bay Town braced itself.

Shi Kefa had already constructed layered defenses outside the town walls. Just like at Baimao Town, earthen ramparts half the height of a man dotted the open ground, trenches crisscrossed the fields like scars, and fallback positions were prepared behind the first line.

Yet this time the pressure weighed heavier on him.

He knew Ba Da Wang well, and Ba Da Wang knew him.

Years ago near Taihu, when Ming forces clashed with the rebels, Shi Kefa had rushed to reinforce allied troops only to find Ba Da Wang's ambush waiting in concealed trenches, muskets and bows firing from behind earthworks that looked suspiciously like Gao Family Village's own methods. That delay had cost dozens of Ming generals their lives.

The memory still burned.

Standing atop the wall, Shi Kefa narrowed his eyes toward the western horizon as the rebel vanguard appeared like ants at the edge of vision, probing, observing, then halting rather than charging blindly.

They spread to the hills on both sides, testing for a path around Yangliu Bay.

But Yangliu Bay was no open plain. It sat in a critical pass through the Dabie Mountains. The slopes on either side were steep, and Shi Kefa had stationed troops on elevated ground. Any attempt to flank would invite a deadly pincer.

Then came the order from the rebel lines.

"Cut trees!"

Under Shi Kefa's watchful gaze, the rebels calmly felled timber and constructed shield carts reinforced with thick planks. Behind the lines, Pan Duguo directed craftsmen who somehow managed to assemble crude giant crossbows and catapults from freshly cut wood. Not elegant, but functional.

Soon, ten cannons rolled forward under the supervision of Zhai Tang's men.

Cavalry massed at the flanks, poised for sweeping maneuvers.

None of this frightened Shi Kefa.

Gao Family Village did not fear outdated artillery. Cavalry charging into trench zones only fed bodies into kill corridors. Smoothbore cannons and wooden siege engines were crude tools compared to disciplined musket fire.

What he feared was simpler.

He feared they would dig.

And of course, they did.

A mass of rebels carrying hoes and spades advanced behind shield carts, pushing forward cautiously until they reached the very edge of musket range, just shy of it, as if measuring with invisible string.

Then the first hoe struck the earth.

Dirt flew.

"Lord Shi! They are copying us. They are digging trenches!"

"Shall we open fire with artillery now?"

Shi Kefa shook his head slowly.

"No."

His officers stared at him.

"Our artillery is limited. Ammunition is limited. If we waste shells on laborers now, what will we fire when the real assault begins?"

"So we just watch them dig?"

"Yes."

He kept his eyes fixed on the distant figures hacking into the soil.

"Our mission is not annihilation. It is delay. Dao Xuan Tianzun once lectured that trenches transform warfare. They stretch a battle into days, even weeks."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"We can afford to delay. In fact, delay is our strategy. The rebels cannot afford it."

Understanding dawned.

If Ba Da Wang stalled here too long, the tightening encirclement would close. Reinforcements from the north would arrive. Supplies would dwindle. Morale would erode.

"Begin digging additional trenches behind our current lines," Shi Kefa ordered. "Connect them. Layer them. If they push us back from one line, we fall to the next. Prepare as if this battle will last half a year."

His officers laughed nervously.

"Half a year?"

"Yes."

Soon, across the battlefield, two armies faced each other not with charges and cannon blasts, but with shovels.

One hoe struck earth.

One shovel answered.

Mud flew in twin arcs beneath the same indifferent sky.

Now and then, a soldier paused, wiped sweat from his brow, glanced across the widening maze of dirt, and blew an exaggerated kiss toward the enemy trench.

"Muah."

War had become construction.

And somewhere far to the north, the main forces of Gao Family Village were already marching.

Chapter 1209 Delay

The moment the battle truly began, Ba Da Wang's artillery position was lifted straight into the sky.

The ten cannons that had recently bombarded Zuo Liangyu until his scalp tingled with fear did not even last five minutes. After firing a single round whose shells landed who knew where, they were answered by a storm.

From Gao Family Village's side, countless small artillery tubes roared almost simultaneously. The sound overlapped into a rolling thunder that did not pause for breath. One volley followed another with mechanical precision, far faster than any traditional cannon crew could manage.

Within moments, Ba Da Wang's artillery ground was swallowed in explosions. Earth and shattered wood flew upward. Cannon carriages flipped. Wheels snapped. Iron barrels rolled uselessly in the dirt like broken limbs.

Zhai Tang and the Shanxi merchants behind him felt their scalps go numb.

Before the battle, Zhai Tang had harbored a quiet dissatisfaction with Ba Da Wang's slow trench advancing tactics. In his mind, firelock troops were troublesome only because of their range advantage. Now that their own cannons outranged muskets, should they not simply bombard the enemy from afar and crush them cleanly?

He had not voiced it aloud.

Five minutes into the battle, he no longer needed to.

Their ten cannons had fired one round.

The other side had fired several.

The difference was not courage. It was speed.

Fortunately, Ba Da Wang's artillerymen had experience. The instant they heard the first counter-battery boom, they threw themselves flat to the ground. Many survived because they knew to hug the earth before thinking about honor. Even so, the position was finished. The cannons were silent. The crews were shaken. No one was fighting with them again today.

As for the giant crossbows and catapults hastily assembled from fresh timber, they were even more embarrassing. They did not manage a single launch before being blasted apart into splinters.

Ba Da Wang's jaw tightened.

"Shield carts forward."

His hardened bandits pushed the heavy shield carts ahead step by step, while behind them trenches continued extending toward Gao Family Village's lines like dark veins crawling across the field.

"Open fire!"

Gao Family Village did not let up. Shells screamed across the sky.

Yet Ba Da Wang's men had indeed learned something. The instant a cannon fired, no matter where the shell was headed, they dropped flat. Some did not even bother looking and simply flung themselves backward into their own trenches. Explosions tore open the surface, fragments hissed through the air, but men crouched below ground level suffered far less than those standing in the open.

Ba Da Wang could not help laughing.

"I knew it would work. Keep pushing!"

They pushed.

Until they pushed too close.

At a certain distance, Gao Family Village's soldiers lifted their arms and small dark shapes arced across the gap of several dozen meters, dropping neatly into the freshly dug rebel trenches.

Boom.

The confined space turned lethal instantly.

Bandits who had felt safe underground were blasted rigid, smoke filling the trench lines. Then came something worse. Clay oil jars with cloth stuffed in their mouths were lit and hurled forward. The jars shattered upon landing, flaming oil spilling along the trench floor. Fire raced through the narrow channels, turning carefully dug shelter into blazing ovens.

The bandits digging forward froze.

The closer they dug, the easier they were to bomb and burn. Continue, and they died. Stop, and they stalled.

And so a strange equilibrium formed.

Rebel soldiers poked their heads up from trenches to lob arrows in high arcs toward Gao Family Village's earthworks, more harassment than real assault. In response, disciplined firelock troops maintained steady suppression, preventing any serious charge from leaping out of the trenches.

Dozens of meters separated the two sides. Noise was constant. Casualties were not.

One hardened bandit retreated back to Ba Da Wang's main formation, face blackened with soot.

"Big Brother, we cannot cross. The moment we jump out, we get shot. If we dig forward, their small bombs drop right into the trench."

Pan Dugu frowned and spoke quietly.

"We need oil jars as well. Throw them into their trenches and burn them out."

After saying this, he turned to look at Zhai Tang.

The rebel army was poor. Oil did not fall from the sky.

Zhai Tang's face darkened.

"Our oil is barely enough for cooking. You want to throw it away to burn the ground?"

The Shanxi merchants were wealthy compared to peasants, but compared to the boundless supplies behind Dao Xuan Tianzun's forces, they were fireflies before the moon. In a contest of logistics, they were hopelessly outmatched.

Ba Da Wang exhaled slowly.

"It seems the daytime will remain like this."

And so it did.

The entire day passed in trench to trench harassment, arrows flying, shots cracking, explosions punctuating the mud. Heat faded. The sky darkened.

Pan Dugu leaned closer.

"After nightfall, we send men crawling. Keep them flat against the ground. Slip into their trenches. If we seize even a short section, our numbers will let us roll their line from within."

Ba Da Wang nodded. Zhai Tang also felt the idea held promise. Night erased range advantages. Darkness was the ally of the desperate.

But before the sky turned fully black, Gao Family Village's lines suddenly blossomed with light.

Oil lamps rose one by one along the trenches and behind low earthen walls. Bamboo poles were planted at intervals, each bearing a lantern that burned as if oil were cheaper than water. Within moments, the entire defensive line glowed in warm yellow light, illuminating every patch of ground between the armies.

Sneak attack?

On what darkness?

The plan dissolved without even being attempted.

The next morning, the two sides resumed their strange rhythm. Arrows and shots. Noise without breakthrough.

At one point, a group of impatient bandits lost their tempers, drew blades, and charged recklessly. Firelock shots cracked in disciplined volleys. The brave fools collapsed in a scattered heap before reaching halfway.

After that, no one volunteered to demonstrate courage again.

Three days passed.

Pan Dugu's brow furrowed deeper with each sunrise.

"Something is wrong. If we continue delaying like this, those strange firelock troops from other directions will arrive."

As if summoned by his worry, a scout came galloping in, shouting before he even dismounted.

"Big Brother, Military Adviser, bad news. The defenders of Wuchang are chasing us from behind."

Ba Da Wang blinked.

"Wuchang has defenders?"

"It appears the Prince of Chu spent one million taels of silver to hire civilians to defend the city. This army must be the force he assembled."

Ba Da Wang let out a cold laugh.

"He takes a pile of silver, hires a crowd of commoners, and thinks he can fight me? I was once like that ten years ago. Back then we were peasants grabbing hoes and charging without formation, discipline, or tactics. We thought bravery alone was enough."

He shook his head at the memory, half amused, half contemptuous.

Turning to his adopted son, Sun Kewang, he gestured casually.

"Your cavalry cannot break these trenches anyway. Turn back and deal with this Chu Prince's patchwork army. Sweep them aside and return."

Sun Kewang grinned, confidence radiating from him.

"A trivial matter. Against a cavalry charge, a miscellaneous civilian army will not withstand even one clash. I will finish them quickly."

Ba Da Wang nodded.

"Good. Then when you are done, you can clean the battlefield."

The phrase sounded light.

But everyone present understood.

If Sun Kewang failed, there might be no battlefield left to clean.

Chapter 1210 You Clear the Battlefield

Sun Kewang led three thousand cavalrymen wheeling around in a wide arc, hooves drumming against the valley floor as they rode to intercept what he contemptuously referred to as "the Chu Prince's hired rabble."

Even from a distance, he could see the opposing force advancing at a steady but unhurried pace.

No horses.

Not even the commanding officers were mounted.

Everyone marched on foot, their formation orderly but unremarkable at first glance. From this far away he could not clearly make out their weapons, yet one detail stood out immediately.

No long spears.

Long spears were always the easiest weapon to spot from afar. During a march they had to be held upright, turning the entire formation into something resembling a giant hedgehog bristling with thorns. For cavalry, a properly formed spear wall was the one thing that demanded caution.

And here, there were none.

Sun Kewang raised his riding crop and pointed forward, laughter bubbling up from his throat.

"They do not even have spears. What is there to worry about? Cavalry, charge!"

"Charge!"

The riders howled as they surged forward, grins spread casually across their faces. In their minds they were trampling a crowd of hastily hired townsfolk who would scatter at the first sight of hooves.

They did not know they were charging straight at the First Regiment of Gao Family Village.

There is a particular sensation when one squeezes what appears to be a soft persimmon, only to discover it is a durian covered in spikes.

Cheng Xu watched the cavalry thunder toward him without the slightest change in expression. Even Granny had not bothered to show her head for this engagement. That alone told him how insignificant the threat truly was.

Beside him, however, the commander of the Chu Prince's guard was nearly shaking. He grabbed Cheng Xu's arm.

"What do we do? So many cavalry. If we run now, can we still make it?"

Cheng Xu glanced sideways, unimpressed.

"Run? Why would we run? They are the ones who should run."

The guard commander stared at him as if he had just heard madness spoken calmly.

Cheng Xu turned his head slightly.

"Open fire."

The command was simple.

The result was not.

Years ago, the Gao Family Village militia had already been capable of firing four volleys within ten breaths, breaking Mongol cavalry with disciplined gunfire. Since then, their firelock technology and drill had improved by several increments. Powder was more refined. Ignition was more reliable. Coordination was sharper.

The first volley cracked across the valley.

There was no second order required.

Sun Kewang had not even fully processed the sound before he saw men falling from their saddles. One rider pitched forward without warning. Another spun sideways and hit the ground. Horses stumbled over collapsing bodies. Within moments, what had been a charging line began disintegrating into chaos.

They had not met peasants.

They had met a wall of controlled thunder.

The charge died before it truly began.

Terror rippled through the cavalry ranks. Forward momentum dissolved into instinctive survival. Riders yanked reins, trying to turn back, but geography betrayed them. This was a narrow valley within the Dabie Mountains, steep slopes rising on both sides. Infantry might scramble uphill. Cavalry could not.

Horses crowded into one another in the confined space, spinning, colliding, blocking escape routes. Panic spread faster than bullets.

"Do not panic!" Sun Kewang shouted, voice cracking with urgency. "Hold formation!"

No one listened.

Firelock shots continued in measured rhythm. The clustered cavalry presented perfect targets. Some riders flattened themselves against their horses' necks, trying to reduce their silhouettes, clinging with both arms and not daring to lift their heads. In such a state they could not see, could not hear commands clearly, could not distinguish direction.

At last, those who remained unhit managed to turn their mounts and flee, spurring their horses with desperate heels. They rode as if chased by ghosts.

They were.

Within a short span, the valley floor fell silent except for groans. Bodies lay scattered among wounded horses and men writhing in dust.

Cheng Xu exhaled softly, then turned to the Chu Prince's guard commander.

"You clean the battlefield."

The man stared, still half frozen between fear and awe. Moments ago he had nearly lost control of his bladder at the sight of a cavalry charge. Now he had watched three thousand riders break like dry reeds.

So this was the combat strength taught under Dao Xuan Tianzun.

He could not help thinking that an army blessed by an immortal truly fought differently.

Cheng Xu nudged him lightly.

"I told you to clean the battlefield. We have already engaged the rebels. From here on we advance at full speed. We cannot give them time to react. My men have no time to linger."

The guard commander snapped upright.

"Yes. Understood."

The final words came out closer to a salute than a reply. The relationship between them had shifted quietly. It was no longer he leading a militia against bandits. It was the militia leading him.

Cheng Xu added calmly, "Cleaning the battlefield does not mean killing everyone. Treat prisoners properly. Bandage the wounded. Save whoever can be saved. These are able-bodied laborers. They will be useful later."

"Yes!"

Only then did Cheng Xu raise his voice to his regiment.

"Move out. We continue toward Yangliu Bay."

The First Regiment resumed its march without delay.

At Yangliu Bay, Ba Da Wang's main force remained locked in trench confrontation with Shi Kefa's troops, arrows and shots exchanged across dozens of meters in a noisy but stagnant contest.

Ba Da Wang was already irritable when the sound of frantic hooves reached his ears. He turned and saw Sun Kewang returning, not in triumph but in disorder, leading a battered remnant.

His heart tightened.

"What happened?"

Sun Kewang's face had lost all earlier arrogance.

"Firelocks. It was that firelock unit."

The words struck like a stone.

Ba Da Wang lifted his gaze toward the trench line ahead that he could not break, then imagined the same firelock troops closing in from behind. His head felt as though it had split into two.

Trenches in front.

Relentless firelocks behind.

If caught between them, there would be no path of survival.

After a long silence, he resorted to the bandits' oldest skill.

"Into the mountains. We enter the Dabie Mountains."

Pan Dugu spoke quickly, mind racing.

"The eastern slopes are steep, and Shi Kefa has prepared rolling stones and logs at key passes. The south leads to the Yangtze. We can only move northwest into the forested ridges. If we cross the mountains, we emerge in the Central Plains. But that firelock force has likely moved troops from Henan. There may be enemies waiting on the northern slope as well."

Ba Da Wang's eyes hardened.

"The Dabie Mountains are vast. They cannot seal every exit. There will be a gap somewhere."

Pan Dugu nodded.

"That is reasonable."

Zhai Tang and the Shanxi merchants had little choice. Following Ba Da Wang into the mountains was better than waiting to be crushed.

The rebel host began moving toward the northwest slopes, pouring into the forests of the Dabie Mountains. With over a hundred thousand people, even retreat required time. The front half had only just entered the mountain paths when Cheng Xu arrived at the rear.

Nearly half the rebel force had not yet made it into the hills.

"Open fire."

The First Regiment's guns roared once more. Faced with disciplined volleys and no room to maneuver, those left outside the mountains dropped their weapons in quick succession, raising their hands and kneeling.

Fifty thousand were captured on the spot.

At the same time, the Dao Xuan Tianzun emblems hanging on the chests of Gao Family Village's various commanders began speaking in turn.

"Encircle the northwestern Dabie Mountain region near Yingshan County. Close the net."

Across multiple directions, commanding officers straightened, spirits ignited, and columns began converging toward the mountain range.

The hunt had entered its final stage.