

Great Ming 1211

Chapter 1211 The Rebels Are Too Powerful

Xi'an, Caishikou execution ground, on Zhu Cunji's private viewing platform.

Zhu Cunji was sitting comfortably in his treasured "television chair," the one specially prepared for watching the Immortal Treasure Mirror. At his side sat the Princess Consort, composed and elegant as always, and not far away stood Sun Chuanting with hands folded in his sleeves. In front of them, tied up like dumplings awaiting the steamer, were Mi Qianhu and more than twenty of his Imperial Embroidered Uniform Guard subordinates.

For the past several days, Zhu Cunji had made it a nightly ritual to have these unfortunate Jinyiwei dragged over to watch the news together.

Since the Jinyiwei were notoriously "unyielding" and "loyal only to the Emperor," they were brought in bound hand and foot every single time, ropes wound tight around their torsos, wrists, and ankles, leaving no possibility of escape. It was a curious spectacle, watching agents of imperial authority tied up beneath a provincial prince's viewing platform like confiscated contraband.

Every evening, Mi Qianhu would begin by cursing.

"Traitors!"

"Rebels!"

"Shameless villains!"

The insults were colorful and inventive, delivered with genuine fury. His voice often rang across Caishikou before the news broadcast even began.

Zhu Cunji never responded. Sun Chuanting did not bother either. They simply allowed him to bark himself hoarse.

Tonight was no different.

The Gao Family News was about to begin. The screen was still playing advertisements. Mi Qianhu was in particularly good form, his voice sharp and brimming with righteous indignation, when suddenly the screen darkened. A moment later it lit up again, revealing a young male and female anchor seated side by side in dignified attire.

Mi Qianhu immediately shut his mouth.

All of his attention snapped to the screen.

In truth, watching the news had become the greatest pleasure of his imprisonment. Through Gao Family Village's broadcast, he could glimpse strange and astonishing happenings from all corners of the realm. New machines, new tactics, new ideas. Things he would never see within the sealed walls of the capital.

Sometimes, in a weak and unguarded corner of his heart, he even thought: if I return to the capital, I will no longer be able to watch Gao Family News. That would be... regrettable.

Once that thought surfaced, it became disturbingly difficult to suppress.

The male anchor smiled gently at the camera.

"Our first report concerns the progress of bandit suppression operations. Let us turn to our correspondent on the front line."

The image shifted.

Zhou Dayi appeared on screen, as bright and pretty as ever. She gave a sweet smile that felt so natural one might forget she was standing near a battlefield.

"Hello everyone. I am currently near Yingshan County. This small county town lies within the Dabie Mountains. The unit beside me is the First Regiment of Gao Family Village, led by our respected

Instructor He Jiuhe. There has long been a rumor in the liberated territories that Instructor He is in fact General He Kegang, one of the Three Heroes of Liaodong, who concealed his identity to train a powerful militia in Gao Family Village. This matter has not yet been confirmed. Let us hear from him directly..."

She was just about to move toward Cheng Xu for an interview when a scout's urgent shout cut through the air.

"The bandits' cavalry are coming! Cavalry incoming!"

Zhou Dayi turned back to the camera without losing her composure.

"Ah. A cavalry unit under Ba Da Wang is attacking. We cannot conduct the interview at the moment. Let us observe the battle first."

The camera swung away from her and toward the northeast.

On screen, Sun Kewang's cavalry appeared, charging forward with impressive momentum.

Mi Qianhu inhaled sharply.

This was no trivial force. Cavalry in full charge could shatter infantry lines like dry twigs. Even he, seasoned in imperial campaigns, felt his pulse quicken.

He thought to himself, This will not be easy to handle. Still, if the roving bandits are strong, that may not be a bad thing. Let rebels and bandits bite each other bloody. When both sides are exhausted, His Majesty can reap the fisherman's profit and sweep them all away without effort.

He was still savoring this pleasant imagination when he noticed Cheng Xu on the screen.

Calm.

Utterly calm.

Beside him, the Chu Prince's Guard Commander looked like he might collapse from anxiety, the contrast so stark it almost seemed theatrical.

"Open fire."

The command was given.

The militia fired.

Ten breaths later, the cavalry was finished.

Mi Qianhu's jaw dropped.

"Ten breaths. Four volleys. It is real?"

Zhu Cunji turned to him with a grin.

"The iron carriages are real too."

Mi Qianhu had no reply.

He watched as the Gao Family Village militia swept through the charging cavalry like autumn wind through fallen leaves, scattering them into dust. The once imposing riders dissolved into chaos and retreat in a matter of moments.

He could not form words.

On screen, Zhou Dayi began running. The entire filming crew ran with her. The militia surged forward at high speed. There were even brief fast forwarded shots, making the pursuit seem relentless and unstoppable.

Soon they reached Yangliu Bay.

Zhou Dayi spoke breathlessly into the camera.

"Everyone, ahead is Yangliu Bay. Shi Kefa has held back one hundred fifty thousand bandits here for three days, delaying them long enough for Instructor He's main force to catch up from behind. Instructor He has advanced. He is pursuing them."

The camera shifted again.

At the edge of the Dabie Mountains, waves of bandits were scrambling up the slopes, climbing desperately.

Mi Qianhu's eyes widened.

So many fleeing men. Even an immortal could not possibly capture them all.

Cheng Xu's voice came calmly from the screen.

"Artillery Battalion. Give them a warning."

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Small cannon roared.

Shells screamed through the air and exploded just ahead of the fleeing bandits. Wherever they tried to run, explosions bloomed in front of them. No one dared charge directly into blasts of fire and smoke. They recoiled again and again, herded by thunder.

Within moments, tens of thousands had bunched together in a miserable cluster, no longer daring to move.

They surrendered almost collectively.

Mi Qianhu's mouth hung open.

"This... this is too..."

Zhu Cunji leaned over and patted his shoulder.

"I told you. The Tianzun's militia uses immortal methods."

Mi Qianhu fell silent.

Zhu Cunji's tone turned playful.

"Well? Are you afraid?"

Before Mi Qianhu could answer, the screen returned to the studio. The two anchors reappeared.

"That concludes the report on bandit suppression," the male anchor said with a smile.

The female anchor took over.

"Our next story comes from another frontline correspondent, reporting from the sea. Due to transmission delays, this event occurred several days ago."

The image shifted once more.

Vast ocean.

A massive black steam paddlewheel ship cut through the waves, its hull towering above the water like a floating fortress.

The reporter stood on deck, smiling into the camera.

"Hello, viewers before the Immortal Treasure Mirror. Today I bring you the latest news from the sea. The vessel beneath my feet is Master Bai's newest development, named Little Black One."

On Zhu Cunji's platform, laughter erupted.

"His naming skills remain terrible."

Even the Princess Consort allowed herself a faint smile.

Mi Qianhu did not laugh.

Though the camera did not capture the entire hull, he could judge from the visible deck length behind the reporter that the ship was no shorter than twenty five zhang.

Enormous.

Terrifyingly enormous.

He felt a chill creep up his spine.

The rebels even possess ships of this scale. How is the imperial navy supposed to contend with such a monster? This is despair.

Behind the reporter stood a strange man wearing an eye patch. He grinned broadly at the camera.

"Hello everyone. I am the pirate, Yao Xingjuan."

The reporter continued, "The great pirate Yao Xingjuan has received a privateering license personally issued by the Tianzun. He is authorized to attack specific vessels within designated waters."

Yao Xingjuan chuckled.

"My current mission is to harass the Dutch near Yizhou Island. Oh, you may not know who the Dutch are. They are the red haired foreigners."

Mi Qianhu stared at the screen.

Bandits broken in the mountains.

Foreigners harassed at sea.

Steam giants cutting through the ocean.

He suddenly realized something that made his throat dry.

The rebels were not merely fighting within the empire.

They were stepping beyond it.

He swallowed.

For the first time, the rope binding his wrists felt less humiliating than the thought forming in his mind.

If this continues, what exactly is the court fighting against?

And more disturbingly.

Is the court capable of winning?

Chapter 1212 Their Acting Falls Short

The Immortal Treasure Mirror did not immediately cut away after the Dutch flag descended. Instead, the camera lingered on the scene, as if deliberately allowing viewers across the land to digest what they were seeing.

Little Black One loomed beside the wounded Western vessel like a black cliff rising from the sea. Up close, the difference between the two ships was even more unsettling. The Dutch ship looked tall and proud, yes, but it was a creature of wind and canvas. Its ribs were wood. Its strength came from favorable weather and experienced sailors.

Little Black One, in contrast, seemed born of iron intention.

Smoke rose steadily from its funnel. The paddle wheels churned with mechanical indifference. Even at low speed, it moved with a certainty that did not depend on heaven's mood.

On the viewing platform in Xi'an, no one laughed anymore.

Even Zhu Cunji leaned slightly forward.

On screen, armed sailors from Gao Family Village secured the Dutch vessel efficiently. They moved in coordinated teams, weapons ready but not wildly brandished. Orders were crisp. No chaotic looting. No drunken cheering.

The reporter walked carefully across the connecting plank, now standing partly between the two ships.

"Viewers," she said calmly, "the Dutch vessel has formally surrendered. According to the privateering license issued by Dao Xuan Tianzun, contraband cargo and military supplies will be confiscated. Civilian goods will be inventoried and handled according to maritime regulations."

Maritime regulations.

Mi Qianhu's eyelids twitched.

Regulations?

Since when did pirates speak of regulations?

Yao Xingjuan stepped into view again, hands on his hips, looking less like a brigand and more like an officer inspecting a captured position.

"We are not here to slaughter," he said. "We are here to establish order. If they behave, we behave."

The reporter nodded with professional seriousness.

"As Captain Yao Xingjuan has stated, the goal is deterrence, not indiscriminate violence."

Mi Qianhu could not help himself.

"Deterrence?" he muttered. "They sound like a ministry."

Zhu Cunji heard him.

"Perhaps they are becoming one."

Mi Qianhu shot him a glare but said nothing further.

On screen, several Dutch sailors were lined up on deck, guarded but not mistreated. One of them, a bearded man with sunburned skin, appeared to be arguing loudly in a language most viewers would not understand.

The reporter leaned slightly toward Yao Xingjuan.

"He appears dissatisfied."

Yao Xingjuan chuckled.

"Of course he is dissatisfied. His ship is damaged. His cargo is seized. His pride is wounded. If he smiled, that would be poor acting."

The reporter laughed softly.

"So the acting is convincing now?"

"Yes. Much better."

The camera zoomed in briefly on the lowered Dutch flag, fluttering limply in the sea breeze. Then it panned back to the black hull of Little Black One, lingering on the rotating paddle wheel, water foaming and churning as though the ocean itself had been harnessed.

Back in Xi'an, Mi Qianhu's mind was racing.

He remembered discussions in the capital about foreign ships. Reports from Fujian and Guangdong. Complaints from coastal officials about red haired merchants demanding privileges. The court's response had always been slow, tangled in debate and ritual.

Yet here, in this floating iron beast, he saw response without hesitation.

Not memorials.

Action.

The broadcast finally shifted back to the studio.

The male anchor folded his hands politely.

"That concludes our maritime report."

The female anchor smiled.

"Next, a brief update on infrastructure development in the liberated territories."

Mi Qianhu nearly choked.

Infrastructure?

After cannons and captured foreign ships, they were going to talk about roads?

The screen changed again.

Now it showed laborers working along a broad dirt road, laying stones, measuring distances with tools that looked far more precise than rope and guesswork. Wooden frames supported early bridge structures across a shallow river. In the background, what looked like iron rails were being positioned carefully on prepared ground.

The reporter's voice narrated over the footage.

"The expansion of transport routes continues. Improved roads and rail lines will allow faster troop movement, more efficient trade, and better disaster relief response."

Mi Qianhu's fingers curled against the rope binding them.

Faster troop movement.

More efficient trade.

Better disaster relief.

Each phrase struck him like a quiet hammer.

Zhu Cunji finally spoke again, his tone no longer teasing.

"You see, Mi Qianhu, what troubles you is not that they fight bandits."

Mi Qianhu remained silent.

"It is that they build."

Sun Chuanting added quietly, "An army can be suppressed. A system is harder."

Mi Qianhu's jaw tightened.

He did not want to agree.

Yet he could not deny what he had witnessed.

Bandits defeated in ten breaths.

Tens of thousands captured through calculated artillery intimidation.

Foreign ships seized under formal license.

Steam powered vessels roaming coastal waters.

Roads laid with long term planning.

Rail lines hinted at.

This was not random rebellion.

It was structured ambition.

The female anchor concluded the infrastructure segment with a gentle nod.

"Under the guidance of Dao Xuan Tianzun, development continues steadily. Shen Si Du Xing. Think carefully, act steadfastly."

The phrase lingered in the air.

Mi Qianhu stared at the screen.

Shen Si Du Xing.

He had seen the four characters before. He had even mocked them once.

Now they felt less like a slogan and more like a method.

The broadcast began transitioning to lighter segments. Agricultural yields. School enrollments. A brief demonstration of a new water pump design.

Zhu Cunji leaned back again, exhaling.

"Tell me honestly," he said. "If you were still in the capital and saw only memorials, would you believe any of this?"

Mi Qianhu answered slowly.

"No."

"Would His Majesty believe it?"

Mi Qianhu hesitated longer.

"... No."

The Princess Consort finally spoke, her voice soft but clear.

"Then perhaps the greater problem is not what Gao Family Village is doing."

Mi Qianhu looked at her.

"It is what others refuse to see."

Silence fell again.

The ropes around Mi Qianhu's wrists had not loosened. The knots were tight. The humiliation remained.

Yet something else had shifted.

For the first time, the thought did not arise that he must escape at all costs.

Instead, a quieter and far more dangerous thought surfaced.

If this truly is the future, then what is loyalty?

Loyalty to a throne.

Or loyalty to a realm.

The Immortal Treasure Mirror dimmed slightly as the program ended.

Around Xi'an, countless viewers dispersed, chatting excitedly about steam ships and artillery, about pirates with licenses and roads that promised connection rather than division.

On the platform at Caishikou, Zhu Cunji stood.

"Untie them later," he said casually. "Feed them."

Mi Qianhu blinked.

Feed them?

Zhu Cunji smiled faintly.

"If you are to continue watching tomorrow, you must maintain your strength. I would hate for our most dedicated critic to collapse from weakness."

Mi Qianhu almost retorted with another curse.

The words rose to his lips.

Then stopped.

For tonight, at least, he said nothing.

Somewhere far away, in the waters near Yizhou Island, Little Black One continued to move through the darkening sea, its paddle wheels turning steadily, indifferent to old loyalties and new doubts alike.

History, like steam, had begun to build pressure.

And once pressure builds long enough, it does not ask permission before moving the world.

Chapter 1213 A Way to Help Them

Mi Qianhu felt a chill crawl up his spine when he heard Yao Xingjuan's earlier declaration.

Attack the red haired foreigners at sea?

For what reason?

Rebels usually seized cities, robbed granaries, shouted slogans about righteousness, and then fought imperial troops. That was the pattern. That was how chaos behaved.

But these people were sailing out into open waters to provoke Western powers.

Why?

Before he could untangle the thought, the battlefield reporter on the Immortal Treasure Mirror spoke again, her tone steady and unhurried, as if explaining grain prices rather than war.

"In recent days, the red haired foreigners have been conquering the indigenous tribes on Yizhou Island. They are instigating internal conflicts among the tribes and encouraging them to carry out headhunting raids. The methods are extremely cruel. Therefore Dao Xuan Tianzun has ordered Yao Xingjuan to harass the Dutch forces at sea, forcing them to focus on self defense and leaving them no time to bully the islanders."

Mi Qianhu froze.

So that was the reason.

Not profit.

Not random piracy.

Intervention.

Zhu Cunji turned his head slowly.

"You see? This should have been something Zhu Youjian handled properly. But since Zhu Youjian did not handle it well, Dao Xuan Tianzun stepped in."

Mi Qianhu said nothing.

There were moments when silence was safer than rebuttal.

On the screen, the broadcast continued.

Yao Xingjuan faced the camera and bared his teeth in a grin that tried very hard to look ferocious.

"In short, I am a great sea bandit. Let us see which unlucky red haired fellow sails into our sight today."

The grin was fierce.

Too fierce.

Among the commoners watching in Xi'an, not a single person flinched.

Someone even laughed.

"His acting is not convincing."

"Trying to look scary."

"After seeing Chen Qianhu's face, this is nothing."

"Why not send Chen Qianhu to deal with the red haired devils? He would not even need to attack. Just show his face and the whole ship would surrender."

Laughter rolled through the crowd.

Mi Qianhu blinked in disbelief.

They were mocking a pirate on live broadcast.

And no one was afraid.

"Look," Yao Xingjuan said, pointing ahead. "A Dutch ship."

He grinned again.

"Boys. Time to work."

"Time to work."

On Little Black One, activity erupted in disciplined layers.

There were two kinds of sailors aboard.

The first were Yao Xingjuan's old subordinates. They understood wind and canvas, knew how to maneuver wooden sailing ships, and were born for boarding actions and blade work. Steam power, however, was beyond them. They served primarily as the assault force.

The second group had been sent from Gao Family Village. These men operated differently. They had specialized teams. Helmsmen. Gunnery crews. Damage control units. Signal operators. Each group moved to its station with quiet efficiency, like gears meshing into place.

In the distance, a Dutch vessel lay anchored near the shore.

Beside it, a small fishing village burned with violence.

The scene unfolding there was grotesque.

Dutch musketeers were firing into a tribal settlement. The targeted tribe had refused to align with the Dutch and was strong enough to resist the coalition tribes already brought under Dutch influence. Since their proxies failed, the Dutch intervened directly.

Against muskets, spears meant little.

Several indigenous warriors already lay fallen. Blood stained the earth. Survivors trembled, despair settling over them like ash.

Then someone shouted.

"A ship at sea!"

The Dutch soldiers immediately ceased fire and hurried back toward their vessel. In the Age of Sail, any approaching ship was a potential enemy. Caution was instinct.

The surviving islanders looked toward the horizon.

A massive black ship was approaching.

They did not know letters. They did not know geopolitics. But they understood one thing. The arrival of that vessel had interrupted their slaughter.

Yet fear remained.

Only Western sea raiders possessed ships of such size.

The Dutch, too, felt unease when they saw the seventy meter giant drawing near. Their officer quickly ordered the Saint George trade flag raised.

In Western waters, that flag declared peaceful commerce.

Yao Xingjuan laughed when he saw it.

"They raise and lower flags quite skillfully. Western raiders bully the weak and fear the strong. When they see a bigger ship, they raise the Saint George trade flag. If we were smaller, they would raise the Dutch war flag instead."

He spat to the side.

"Prepare to fight."

Little Black One did not hesitate.

It charged directly forward.

"They are coming."

"They intend to attack."

Panic flickered across Dutch faces. The strange vessel had no sails. No oars. Yet it moved swiftly. Only the great circular wheels at its sides churned white water beneath them.

"Prepare the cannons."

The Dutch scrambled.

But Little Black One fired first.

Rifled artillery spoke with ruthless precision. The range advantage was humiliating. Several shells struck before the Dutch guns could even respond effectively.

These were not the rising English of an aggressive dawn. The Dutch Republic was already aging, slipping toward twilight. Their soldiers' will lacked the steel of earlier decades. When they realized the enemy guns outranged them so decisively, the thought of escape came naturally.

They turned.

No heroic stand.

No glorious broadside exchange.

They fled along the coastline.

Yao Xingjuan scowled.

"Only one round and they run? Is there no backbone?"

He slammed his palm against the railing.

"Chase."

Little Black One surged forward, firing continuously.

Shell after shell tore into the Dutch vessel. Planks shattered. Decks splintered. Sailors screamed.

Suddenly, dozens of black African sailors rushed onto the Dutch deck, wielding blades and shields, shouting in languages no one on Little Black One understood.

Yao Xingjuan narrowed his eyes.

"I cannot understand them, but I can guess. Come closer. Stop shooting from afar. Fight us properly."

He laughed.

"Very well."

An explosive shell answered.

The blast silenced the shouts. Bodies collapsed onto the deck.

The more terrifying Little Black One appeared, the less the Dutch dared to resist. They zigzagged desperately through the clutter of small islands along the coast, trying to use geography as a shield.

The chase stretched on.

Then, ahead, five large Dutch sailing ships appeared, forming a support squadron.

Yao Xingjuan burst into laughter.

"We withdraw. No need to fight many with few. We are faster anyway."

Little Black One turned cleanly and sped away.

The Dutch ships watched its retreating form and, after witnessing that unnatural speed, abandoned any thought of pursuit.

The sea fell quiet again.

Back in Xi'an, the broadcast replayed segments of the battle from different angles, cutting between cannon fire, fleeing sails, and the burning village spared from total destruction.

The commoners roared with laughter.

"Toying with the red haired devils."

"Making fools of them."

Mi Qianhu, however, did not laugh.

He stared at the screen with complicated admiration.

"To manipulate Westerners so easily," he murmured despite himself. "Impressive."

He had spent years believing that foreign ships represented unstoppable menace. Coastal officials feared them. Court debates circled endlessly around tribute and trade.

Yet here, one black steam vessel dictated terms.

Not by negotiation.

By capability.

On Yizhou Island, a tribe that had nearly vanished that day now breathed because someone far away had decided to intervene.

Mi Qianhu lowered his gaze.

The rope around his wrists still bit into his skin.

But something else bound him tighter.

If rebels protected the frontier while the court hesitated, then what name did history give such people?

Bandits.

Or guardians.

The Immortal Treasure Mirror dimmed slightly as the segment ended.

The crowd dispersed in lively discussion, debating cannons, steam power, and the cowardice of the Dutch.

Mi Qianhu remained where he stood, silent, his thoughts far louder than any artillery.

Chapter 1214 The Cunning Rabbit's Three Burrows

Little Black One slowly returned to the small village that had just been humiliated and brutalized by the Dutch.

The villagers were gathering the bodies of their clansmen who had been shot down. Blood still streaked the ground in dark, sticky lines. They worked in silence, grief weighing on their shoulders like wet sand. Their minds were numb. No one spoke of what would happen tomorrow, because none of them could imagine one.

Then someone looked up toward the sea.

The great black ship had come back.

Although that vessel had driven away the Dutch only moments ago, fear does not disappear simply because danger retreats. To these islanders, ships of that size belonged to foreign devils. Power and terror wore the same shape.

The moment they saw Little Black One approaching again, they scattered and hid. The village was left deserted, bodies half collected, blood soaking the earth beneath the sun.

At the bow stood Yao Xingjuan, staring at the devastated settlement. For once, the notorious sea bandit did not grin. He scratched his cheek and shifted his weight awkwardly.

Beside him, the battlefield reporter continued filming quietly.

Yao Xingjuan coughed lightly.

"Well... I have not been in Dao Xuan Tianzun's sect for very long. In a situation like this, what do we usually do?"

"Usually we give them grain and money," the reporter replied. "Then we bring them back with us."

"Oh. That sounds good."

He was about to give the order when the reporter shook her head.

"But here, that might not work."

"Why?"

"These tribes on Yizhou Island are our compatriots in blood," she said carefully, choosing her words, "but their current social structure, knowledge structure, and cultural structure are extremely... undeveloped. They may not accept our goodwill. Even if they did, they might not adapt to our society."

Yao Xingjuan understood immediately.

To put it plainly, they were too primitive.

If they were brought back to Gao Family Village, it would be difficult for them to integrate overnight. They might not even understand what law was. Teaching them about discipline and regulations might mean nothing to them. Conflicts could easily arise.

And if they violated Gao Family Village's laws out of ignorance, Fang Wushang would not hesitate.

Survive the Dutch only to be executed for breaking unfamiliar rules.

That would be truly awkward.

And disturbingly possible.

Just then, from the cabin behind them, a small head popped out.

It was the ten year old Mongol Great Khan, E'zhe.

He jumped lightly to Yao Xingjuan's side with a grin.

"I know how to handle these natives."

Yao Xingjuan nearly leaped out of his boots.

"You little brat. What are you doing on this ship?"

"I hid inside a grain barrel and came along."

Yao Xingjuan fell silent.

This was very troublesome.

"Uncle Yao Xingjuan," E'zhe continued confidently, "for dealing with primitive tribes like this, Mongols are experts."

"Oh? And what is your expert method?"

"Kill all the men. Take the women and children back as slaves. Beat the ones who disobey. Teach the ones who obey. It will be settled quickly."

Yao Xingjuan almost sprayed tea from his mouth.

The reporter stiffened.

"You are ten years old. How can you say something so brutal?"

E'zhe pouted.

"What is brutal about it? That is how it is done on the grasslands."

He glanced toward the village below and lowered his voice.

"These tribes might be even more primitive than ours. They are probably used to that method already. If we do not act that way, they might find us strange."

Silence settled over the deck.

Yao Xingjuan and the reporter exchanged a look.

After a long pause, the reporter's expression hardened.

"E'zhe, you have lived in Gao Family Village for years. You grew up studying in our schools. You have watched countless Gao Family news broadcasts. How can you still think like that? You should have grown."

E'zhe scratched his head awkwardly.

"Use what you learned in Gao Family Village," she continued. "Think again. How should we treat them?"

The boy clasped his head and thought hard.

The old Mongol methods clearly would not pass under Dao Xuan Tianzun's gaze.

After a while, he spoke again.

"Then we use another method. We quietly leave some food and weapons, and then we leave decisively. Do not bring them back to our village. First, that avoids the shock of forcing them into Gao Family Village's life. Second, once they receive our help, they will begin to accept us. When they accept us as friends, they will naturally learn our culture and rules. Then, over time, we become one family."

He paused, then added softly.

"Is that not how Dao Xuan Tianzun treated us Mongols? He kept sending goods to the grasslands and brought Han knowledge to teach us."

The reporter nodded.

"That is more like it. That is a good method."

Yao Xingjuan waved several subordinates over and gave instructions.

Soon sailors carried barrels of food onto the beach. They also unloaded old cold weapons that had been phased out after the pirates upgraded to firearms. Blades, spears, and shields were arranged neatly on the sand.

Then the great ship slowly withdrew from the coastline.

The villagers did not appear immediately. They remained hidden until Little Black One had sailed far enough away to no longer feel oppressive.

Only then did they emerge cautiously from their hiding places and walk to the beach to see what the strange people had left behind.

When they discovered food and weapons, understanding dawned in their eyes.

They ran to the shoreline and performed their own ritual gestures toward the black ship at sea. Their movements were unfamiliar to Han customs, but gratitude speaks clearly through posture and expression.

The sailors aboard could understand.

They were saying thank you.

"All right. That will do," Yao Xingjuan said. "The weapons we left are not enough to stop the Dutch if they return in force. But they are enough to deal with the allied tribes' headhunting raids. And after we ambushed the Dutch like this, they probably will not dare to harass this tribe again for a while."

The reporter quickly recorded his words, preserving the footage for transmission when they next returned to Zhoushan Island.

Then Yao Xingjuan suddenly reached out and grabbed E'zhe by the back of the collar.

"Now we deal with your problem."

E'zhe blinked.

"What problem?"

Yao Xingjuan raised his voice.

"Boys, tell this Mongol child what pirates do when they find a stowaway."

His old subordinates burst into laughter.

"Give him a plank and kick him into the sea. Let him fend for himself."

E'zhe turned pale.

"No. Please. I cannot swim."

"Begging is useless," Yao Xingjuan said solemnly. "Pirates are cold blooded."

Several pirates rushed forward and grabbed the struggling boy. He shrieked wildly.

"I was wrong. I will never do it again. I truly was wrong. Do not throw me."

A splash rang out.

He hit the water.

However, before tossing him overboard, the pirates had tied a rope around his waist. The moment he splashed down, they hauled him right back up, soaked and sputtering but entirely unharmed.

The deck erupted in laughter.

E'zhe lay there dripping, glaring at them furiously.

Yao Xingjuan crouched beside him.

"Remember this. A cunning rabbit needs three burrows. If you sneak aboard again, at least prepare an escape route."

Out at sea, Little Black One continued forward, steam churning steadily, leaving behind not conquest, but quiet seeds of influence that would take root in their own time.

Chapter 1215 Calling the Enemy Father

Dabie Mountains. Mazong Ridge.

Nearly one hundred thousand bandits, together with the Shanxi merchants who had thrown their lot in with them, were entrenched across the ridges and valleys like ants clinging to a broken hive.

The Eight Great Kings looked somewhat travel worn, but his spirit remained intact. Defeat did not weigh heavily on him. Being chased like a stray dog by Gao Family Village forces might humiliate an ordinary rebel, but not him.

"What is there to mind about losing a battle?" he snorted.

He had lost more times than he could count. He had been driven across provinces like a rat fleeing fire. This was not even his first time retreating into the Dabie Mountains. If anything, fleeing for one's life was a craft he had long since mastered.

"Are the pursuers close?" he asked, turning toward his adopted son, Sun Kewang.

Sun Kewang shook his head. "Not yet. Those musket troops move slowly. They are advancing cautiously."

The Eight Great Kings chuckled.

"Of course they are slow. Their advantage lies at long range. If we slip close through the forests and rob them of that distance, they are finished. So they dare not rush. They march a short stretch, then raise one of those strange sky balls to scout from above. Only after confirming there is no ambush do they move again."

With that method of marching, speed was impossible.

That was how the bandit army had shaken off Cheng Xu's forces so easily.

Sun Kewang frowned. "But we cannot gather a large force on a peak and counterattack either. The moment we concentrate troops, they bombard us with those strange shells."

Two days earlier they had tried exactly that. Heavy forces had assembled atop a ridge, rolling logs and stones prepared, determined to crush Cheng Xu in one decisive blow.

However, countless hot air balloons floated in the sky like watchful ancestors. Cheng Xu had seen through the plan instantly and simply barked, "Blow them apart."

Shells had rained down upon the mountaintop. The bandits had howled in agony. Even the balloons floating above them had been blasted apart.

Only then had the Eight Great Kings understood.

Against these peculiar musket troops, holding a fixed defensive position was suicide.

Gather together and be shelled. Split into small groups and they advanced cautiously, never allowing close engagement.

Impossible to win.

Absolutely impossible.

So he could only keep running.

At that moment, the Shanxi merchant Zhai Tang approached.

"Eight Great Kings, we cannot continue north."

The rebel leader nodded slowly. "You mean their reinforcements from Henan are closing in from that direction."

Zhai Tang inclined his head. "The north will certainly be their main force. We cannot go east or south either. That leaves only the west."

The suggestion was reasonable.

The Eight Great Kings rose, brushing dirt from his robes. He glanced southeast and spotted another strange balloon rising in the distance. His expression darkened.

"Pass the order. We head west."

The bandit army moved quickly, climbing and descending slopes, winding through forest paths as they pushed westward.

What they did not know was that in the western Dabie Mountains, another army had just entered the range.

Leading them was Flat Rabbit, who had advanced overland after exiting Sichuan.

He stood before the rolling mountains, hands behind his back, eyes bright with calculation.

Beside him, Zheng Gouzi spoke up.

"Rabbit, we should start raising the hot air balloons. These mountains are vast. Without aerial scouting, we could easily walk into an ambush."

Flat Rabbit shook his head and grinned.

"No. Not here."

Zheng Gouzi blinked in surprise. "Why not?"

Flat Rabbit snorted softly.

"The Eight Great Kings were defeated days ago by Instructor He and Shi Kefa. He has already seen our balloons. He knows that wherever a balloon floats, our troops stand below. He will avoid them."

Zheng Gouzi scratched his head.

"That makes sense. But even if he avoids them, we have encircled him from all sides. The instructors have divided their forces. He cannot escape forever."

Flat Rabbit looked at him with pity.

"That is exactly how a dog thinks. Relying on numbers and pack tactics."

Zheng Gouzi shot him a glare. "What is wrong with outnumbering the enemy?"

"That is why you are a dog," Flat Rabbit replied smugly. "Rabbits think differently."

"Oh? And how do rabbits think? Do rabbits bite when cornered?"

Flat Rabbit raised his chin proudly.

"I shall educate you. The way of the rabbit is called a cunning rabbit has three burrows."

Zheng Gouzi folded his arms. "And how does that help here? Do you intend to dig three holes in the mountain and hide in them?"

Flat Rabbit burst into laughter.

"Gouzi, I have completely crushed you in intelligence. Listen carefully to my brilliant plan."

He gestured toward the surrounding peaks.

"Whenever the enemy sees a hot air balloon, he assumes our troops are directly below. In his eyes, each balloon is one of my burrows. If I raise many balloons, he will believe I have many burrows."

He spread his arms theatrically.

"I have surpassed three burrows. I now possess many burrows."

Zheng Gouzi's eyes widened slightly.

Flat Rabbit continued, pointing left, right, forward.

"On that ridge. And that one. And the slope beyond. Raise balloons there. He will avoid them. He will go this way instead, then that way, then pass through that valley, circle around that gorge..."

His finger stabbed toward a narrow mountain pass.

"And he will inevitably choose this route."

His grin turned feral.

"And I, the great Flat Rabbit, will lie in ambush right here with our main force. The moment he enters the valley, we rain shells and grenades upon his head."

Zheng Gouzi wiped sweat from his brow.

"Rabbit Lord... have you always been a genius?"

Flat Rabbit planted his hands on his hips.

"When have I not been a genius?"

"Since forever."

"Enough nonsense," Flat Rabbit snapped cheerfully. "Deploy the burrows."

He turned toward the troops and shouted, "Brothers, time to set up rabbit holes."

Laughter erupted among the militia.

"Following Rabbit Lord is always entertaining."

The soldiers dispersed swiftly, climbing the designated peaks and launching hot air balloons into the sky one by one.

Meanwhile, Flat Rabbit led the elite core of the militia into the chosen valley and concealed them along the most treacherous terrain.

Thus began the grand and glorious operation of the many burrow rabbit.

And somewhere beyond the ridges, the Eight Great Kings marched confidently west, unaware that he was already hopping along a path carefully arranged for him.

Chapter 1216 How Do You Know?

From Mazong Ridge in the Dabie Mountains, the Eight Great Kings led his army westward.

Their destination was Macheng.

He had taken this road many times before. In fact, he knew it better than most county magistrates knew the streets of their own towns. Years ago, when Lu Xiangsheng had driven him deep into the Dabie Mountains, he had escaped by slipping along this very mountain path. The ridges, the ravines, the hidden gullies where fog gathered at dawn, all of them were etched into his memory.

The rebel army pushed forward with difficulty, climbing slopes, descending narrow tracks, dragging carts, hauling the wounded, cursing the rocks beneath their feet.

Several days passed.

Cheng Xu's musket troops had been left far behind.

Sun Kewang wiped sweat from his brow and said, "Adoptive Father, once we cross a few more ridges and travel several more li through the mountain road, we will reach Macheng."

The Eight Great Kings nodded slowly.

"If Macheng does not have their men stationed there, we will break out cleanly. From there we can circle back toward the outskirts of Wuchang and start again."

He had barely finished speaking when Pan D'ao pointed toward the western sky.

"Look. That thing again. The oversized Kongming lantern."

All the rebel leaders raised their heads.

Sure enough, above the peak ahead floated a massive sphere.

It was one of those peculiar hot air balloons used by the strange musket troops for reconnaissance.

But this one was different.

Painted boldly across its surface was a gigantic rabbit head. Even from a great distance, the smiling rabbit could be seen clearly.

"What does the rabbit mean?" someone muttered.

"No idea."

The Eight Great Kings cursed under his breath.

"So they have blocked the west as well. They truly mean to leave me no road of survival."

Sun Kewang hesitated.

"Adoptive Father, what should we do? Change direction?"

"No need."

A smug smile slowly spread across the Eight Great Kings' face.

"These strange musket soldiers have made a grave mistake. Their reconnaissance balloon."

Sun Kewang blinked.

"The balloon lets them look down from high altitude and track my movements. But because it floats in the open sky, it is equally conspicuous. It exposes their own position."

He gestured around them.

"I know this terrain well. Once I know where their musket troops are stationed, I can easily go around them."

Sun Kewang's eyes lit up.

"So that is it."

The Eight Great Kings waved his arm decisively.

"Turn the army. Take the gully to the left. Advance half a li, then turn right."

The rebel army shifted direction and plunged into the left-hand ravine. The path twisted and curved through dense forest. The more they walked, the farther they moved from the direction of that balloon.

The Eight Great Kings finally exhaled.

Then he looked up.

Ahead, above another peak, floated yet another balloon.

"Adoptive Father, another one!" Sun Kewang cried.

The Eight Great Kings snorted.

"I know that peak. The ground below is steep and defensible. It would indeed be an excellent place to block me. But they have revealed themselves. Do they think I will foolishly walk into them? Hah. Turn left again. Enter this ravine."

The rebels continued weaving through the mountains like a swarm of confused locusts.

"Another balloon over there!"

"That does not trouble me. Follow me. There is a hidden path here."

"Rabbit on this one too. And it is smiling. I hate that smile."

"Ignore it. This way."

They walked and walked.

Finally, a concealed valley appeared before them. Once inside, the terrain dipped inward in such a way that balloons floating overhead would be unable to see within. It was a perfect place to evade surveillance, to rest, to gather strength before striking back.

When they reached the valley floor, the Eight Great Kings burst into laughter.

"Now we need not worry. No matter how many troops they send to encircle me, I can grow strong again here."

He had just finished speaking when a head popped out from the rocky cliff beside him.

The man laughed twice.

"Even if you are cunning as a ghost, Eight Great Kings, you must still drink this Rabbit Lord's foot-washing water."

Before the Eight Great Kings could react, another man appeared and yanked the first one backward.

"Rabbit Lord, the battle has started. Stop posturing."

"Hey, Gouzi, let me finish showing off."

"Show off your head. You have ruined the ambush effect."

He turned and shouted, "Do not wait for the rabbit's order. He has a problem. Open fire."

The Eight Great Kings froze.

A thunderous boom split the valley.

Ambush.

Cannons roared from both sides.

Flat Rabbit did not command an enormous force. He and Zheng Gouzi each led one thousand veteran Gao Family Village militia, two thousand in total. In addition, several thousand newly recruited militia from Sichuan had joined them, but these recruits were still undergoing ideological and political training. They could not yet be entrusted with advanced weapons.

Thus the primary firepower came from the two thousand veteran militia.

Light howitzers.

Grenades.

Explosions rained down from both sides of the valley.

Within moments the valley became a cauldron of fire and smoke. The sound of blasts rose and fell like waves crashing against stone.

The Eight Great Kings' face drained of color.

Trapped in a valley and bombarded from above.

This was disaster.

Large numbers of rebels lost all will to flee. They collapsed to the ground, trembling, hands over their heads.

Those who lay down and did not move would inevitably be captured alive.

The Eight Great Kings refused such an ending.

With a furious roar, he gathered his closest and most ferocious bandits and turned back toward the way they had come.

The valley floor was chaos. His own men lay everywhere, some wounded, some simply paralyzed by fear.

He did not care.

He stepped on their backs as he ran. Once his foot slipped and there was a sharp crack beneath him. He had crushed one man's neck.

He did not even glance down.

Dead was dead. Survival came first.

As he ran, a cluster of his own subordinates blocked the narrow exit path.

"Move!" he roared.

They were too terrified by the explosions to respond, running in circles like headless flies.

The Eight Great Kings drew his blade and began cutting.

He slashed through his own men, carving a path forward in blood.

His savagery stunned even his loyalists.

Those non-core followers who witnessed the scene felt a chill creep into their hearts.

His second adopted son, Zhang Dingguo, could not help shouting, "Adoptive Father, you cannot treat our own men like this."

The Eight Great Kings barked back, "Anyone who blocks my path is not my own man."

Zhang Dingguo fell silent.

The Eight Great Kings continued hacking forward.

Suddenly, a dull thud sounded nearby.

He turned his head.

A grenade had landed close by, its fuse hissing.

Without hesitation, he grabbed a terrified subordinate from beside him and pulled him in front as a shield.

The grenade exploded.

Fragments tore into the subordinate's body.

The Eight Great Kings, sheltered behind him, remained completely unharmed.

He tossed the corpse aside and continued running.

Zhang Dingguo inhaled sharply.

In that instant, for the first time in his life, a faint thought rose within him.

Perhaps he had mistaken a thief for a father.

Perhaps this adoptive father was not worth having.

Perhaps he should reclaim his original name.

Li Dingguo.

The thought had barely formed when a deafening explosion erupted behind him. A wave of heat struck his back and hurled him forward through the air.

He hit the ground heavily.

Darkness swallowed his vision.

And he knew nothing more.

Chapter 1217 Returning to Yan'an

Silence gradually returned to the valley.

The main force of the Eight Great Kings had collapsed. More than forty thousand men threw down their weapons and lay flat on the ground, trembling. The moment they saw Gao Family Village militia approaching with firearms in hand, they shouted in unison.

"Hero, do not kill me. I surrender. I surrender."

The veteran militia stood guard along the outer perimeter with muskets ready.

Meanwhile, Jiang Daliang led a group of Sichuan recruits armed with cold weapons to clear the battlefield, bind prisoners, and collect the wounded.

One soldier ran over and saluted.

"Report. We have captured tens of thousands. There are too many. What should we do with them?"

Flat Rabbit grinned widely.

"The old method. Send them all back and throw them into labor reform camps. We withdraw temporarily to Macheng, process the prisoners there, then reenter the mountains."

"Yes, sir."

Someone shouted from the side.

"There is a young man here. Judging from his clothing, he looks like an important bandit leader. He is injured from the explosion but not dead."

Flat Rabbit waved his hand casually.

"Treat prisoners well. Dress his wounds. Take him back to Macheng. When he recovers a little, we will question him properly."

Thus a few men came forward, dug shrapnel out from the muscles of the young man's back, applied disinfectant and anti-inflammatory medicine bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun, whether it truly matched the injury or not was beside the point. Applying medicine was the symbol of humane treatment. Whether he lived or died afterward depended on his own fate.

The army of Flat Rabbit escorted tens of thousands of prisoners and returned to Macheng in high spirits.

...

In darkness, Li Dingguo heard voices.

"Hey, this young fellow did not die. Took a grenade blast and still breathing."

"Youth is good. Recovers quickly."

"Change his dressing."

"Are we being too kind to these bandits? I would rather they all died."

"You cannot say that," another voice replied. "Tianzun said our country has nine hundred something thousand square kilometers. Anyway, it is huge. Yet the population is still under one hundred million. Spread across such a vast land, people barely make a ripple. If we want to build the nation well, we need many, many, many labor reform inmates."

"That is true. I heard the seventy thousand captured from Chuang Wang are building a road from Hanzhong to Guangyuan. Cutting through the mountains of Shu is no easy matter. Seventy thousand men working for so long and the progress is still limited."

"Exactly. We lack manpower. If we kill them all, who will do the work? You?"

"Hahaha. Fine. Change his medicine."

Li Dingguo felt coolness spreading across his back.

Then he sank into darkness again.

When he awoke once more, several days had passed.

He opened his eyes and saw a man in clean cotton clothing. Around the man's sleeve was a white armband marked with a red cross.

The man glanced down at him.

"Oh. Awake?"

Li Dingguo's voice was weak.

"You are..."

"Gao Family Village militia. Second Regiment of the village. Medical corps."

"Gao Family Village... militia?" Li Dingguo frowned. "The ones who defeated us were militia? Not imperial troops?"

The medic laughed.

"Imperial troops are worthless trash."

Li Dingguo fell silent.

The medic shouted loudly.

"Rabbit Lord. Rabbit Lord. The prisoner is awake. He can speak. Mind seems clear."

Two men in their thirties or forties walked in.

Neither wore any clothing that signaled high rank. There was no aura of distant authority about them.

The one in front grinned.

"This great hero's Jianghu nickname is Flat Rabbit. Also known as the Number One Divine Sword Under Heaven. One slash chills forty provinces. Sword energy sweeps thirty thousand li. You may address me as Rabbit Lord."

Li Dingguo nearly fainted again from the introduction alone.

Flat Rabbit continued cheerfully.

"This beside me is Zheng Gouzi. Also known as..."

Zheng Gouzi cut him off.

"Do not fabricate nonsense. I am not as foolish as you. No need to invent titles to inflate your face."

Flat Rabbit cleared his throat.

"Very well. Now introduce yourself."

Li Dingguo hesitated.

"Zhang... Li... Dingguo."

Flat Rabbit's eyes widened.

"Zhang and Li? Are you playing games with me?"

"My original name was Li Dingguo. At ten years old I followed the Eight Great Kings in rebellion. He adopted me as his son. I changed my surname to Zhang."

Flat Rabbit let out a long whistle.

"So you are indeed someone important. An adopted son of the Eight Great Kings. Interesting. If I put a blade to your neck, perhaps I could force him to crawl out of the mountains and surrender."

Zheng Gouzi shook his head.

"That is not our village style."

Li Dingguo gave a bitter smile.

"My adoptive father would not surrender for me. I understand now. In his heart there is only himself."

Flat Rabbit tilted his head.

"Then you are useless?"

Li Dingguo closed his eyes.

"Yes. I am useless. Kill or punish me as you wish."

At that moment, the mass produced Dao Xuan Tianzun walked in from outside.

"Rabbit Lord, I heard this battle went rather well."

Li DaoXuan's first sentence was praise.

Flat Rabbit lit up like a lantern.

"Tianzun is here. Hehe. I was clever this time, was I not? Actually I am always clever."

Li DaoXuan smiled and patted his shoulder.

"Well done. Keep it up."

Flat Rabbit was overjoyed. With that encouragement, he would have material to boast for months. His greatest flaw in life was boasting, and he had no intention of correcting it.

Li DaoXuan's gaze shifted to the stretcher.

"Has this man's identity been confirmed?"

"Yes, Tianzun," Flat Rabbit replied. "His name is Li Dingguo. Adopted son of the Eight Great Kings."

Li DaoXuan raised an eyebrow slightly.

Li Dingguo.

One of the Southern Ming's twin pillars in later years. A land general as rare as Zheng Chenggong was at sea. If Zheng Chenggong was a rare naval card, Li Dingguo was a rare land card.

But he had been captured too late.

There was little time left to cultivate him before the campaign to liberate the Ming was complete.

Li DaoXuan sat beside the bed and looked at Li Dingguo with an unreadable expression.

Li Dingguo sensed something and opened his eyes again. A young man sat at his bedside. Handsome, composed, dignified. Yet there was something faintly uncanny about him, though he could not explain why.

"Li Dingguo," Li DaoXuan said with a faint smile. "You have followed Zhang Xianzhong for seven years. Tell me, what do you think of him?"

The question struck like thunder.

Li Dingguo's pupils contracted.

"How do you know my adoptive father's name? And how do you know I followed him for seven years?"

Chapter 1218 Run!

Li Daoxuan made a show of pinching his fingers as if calculating fate itself, then smiled lightly.

"I know that you were born on the eleventh day of the sixth month in the first year of the Tianqi era. You were born in Yan'an, into a poor peasant family. At the age of ten, in the third year of the Chongzhen era, you joined Zhang Xianzhong's army. And now, you are only seventeen."

Li Dingguo froze completely.

It felt as though the other man had peeled open his entire life with a single sentence. Terrifying. There was no other word for it.

The shock was so violent that he forgot the pain in his back and shouted, "How do you know all this? You... you couldn't have taken my clan... all of them..."

If the man knew his background this clearly, then perhaps his entire nine generations had already been destroyed.

Cold sweat streamed down his face.

Li Daoxuan smiled calmly.

"Relax. Your clan is fine. Yan'an is now peaceful and orderly. They are living better lives than you are. In my territory, one man's crime does not implicate his relatives."

"Your territory?" Li Dingguo repeated.

"Yes."

In that instant, several clues clicked together in his mind.

This was a militia. Their leading commander carried a ridiculous Jianghu nickname like Flat Rabbit. And this young man in front of him casually referred to Yan'an as his territory.

Put together, the meaning was obvious.

This man was a rebel too.

The strange musket troops must be his forces.

Li Dingguo clenched his teeth. "So you are robbing the robbers."

Li Daoxuan merely smiled and did not deny it.

Flat Rabbit, Zheng Gouzi, and Jiang Daliang, who had just stepped inside, were instantly furious.

"What kind of nonsense is that?" Flat Rabbit barked. "What do you mean robbing the robbers? Dao Xuan Tianzun shines in golden brilliance. If anything, it is gold devouring black."

Li Dingguo shut his eyes. "Since I've fallen into your hands, there's nothing left to say. Kill me."

"If I wanted to kill you, why would I treat your wounds?" Li Daoxuan replied evenly. "Besides, you probably haven't committed any real atrocities yet. Or perhaps you are simply too young to have had the chance."

The Li Dingguo of history would not truly enter the stage until four years later. At twenty one, he would disguise himself as an imperial soldier, seize Xiangyang, and begin the road toward becoming a renowned general. Before that, he was merely a boy following Zhang Xianzhong from place to place.

Which meant that now, he had barely done anything worth judging.

At most, he would be treated like the elderly and women among the roaming bandits, sent to a labor reform camp for a while. After experiencing it, most people earned reduced sentences.

Li Dingguo remained silent.

Li Daoxuan continued in an almost conversational tone. "Let us return to the original question. You have followed Zhang Xianzhong for seven years. How does it feel? Is he truly someone worth following?"

Li Dingguo bit his lower lip. He did not answer, but his hesitation spoke loudly.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "If you truly admired him without doubt, you would be shouting right now that your adoptive father is a great man. But you are not shouting. That silence already answers me."

"I'm not. I didn't," Li Dingguo protested.

"Admit it."

"I didn't!"

Li Daoxuan did not pursue the argument further.

"Rabbit, Gouzi, arrange a squad to escort this young man back to his hometown. I will have his family waiting for him at Yan'an Railway Station."

After saying that, he even winked at Li Dingguo.

That single gesture nearly frightened the boy out of his wits.

"Do not harm them. My rebellion has nothing to do with them."

Li Daoxuan had already said that relatives would not be implicated, yet the boy clearly did not believe him. Since that was the case, there was no need to repeat it. In an instant of shared perception, Li Daoxuan's awareness returned to Yan'an.

Soon afterward, the Gao Family Village Committee issued a notice. Dao Xuan Tianzun was seeking a Li family in Yan'an whose household once had a son named Li Dingguo, born on the eleventh day of the sixth month in the first year of Tianqi.

An edict personally issued by Dao Xuan Tianzun was no trivial matter.

The entire city of Yan'an was stirred into action.

...

Li Dingguo was soon carried on a stretcher to Wuchang. From there he boarded a small boat that traveled upstream toward Hanzhong.

The journey was long, and his injuries improved with each passing day.

He could now sit upright. From the deck, he observed that the Han River was far busier than before. Numerous small cargo ships moved back and forth, transporting vast quantities of goods toward Wuchang.

He was astonished. Where had Shaanxi found such production capacity? It had always been poor.

Several times during the upstream journey, he had opportunities to vault over the railing and leap into the river to escape. Yet the thought never truly formed. He had already sensed the immense power of these people. Since Dao Xuan Tianzun had spoken, his clan must already be waiting in Yan'an.

If he ran, what would happen to them?

He did not dare imagine it.

After many days, they arrived at Hanzhong Prefecture.

Escorted ashore, Li Dingguo saw a newly constructed and imposing building near the northern gate. Inside stood a massive iron vehicle that radiated mechanical power.

"This is Hanzhong North Railway Station," the escorting soldier explained. "It used to be nothing more than a shabby ticket shed. Not long ago, the Crown Prince of Qin, Zhu Cunji, wrote angrily to reprimand the Prince of Rui. Only then did the Prince of Rui finally spend money to rebuild it. Looks impressive now, does it not?"

Impressive was not the point. What shocked Li Dingguo was the sight of countless commoners boarding the iron vehicle with smiles on their faces. Some chatted cheerfully about visiting Xi'an, about what they would buy.

What exactly was happening in Shaanxi?

"Board."

The militia escorted him onto the train. When the iron machine began to move, roaring and breathing steam, his shock deepened further. Its capacity for transport was astonishing.

After a long journey, they reached Xi'an.

Even before disembarking, Li Dingguo saw piles of goods stacked along the platform at Xi'an South Station. Clearly, they would be sent onward to Hanzhong. He recalled the cargo ships he had seen on the Han River.

Understanding dawned. The goods would be transferred onward to Huguang and Sichuan.

In the past, Shaanxi had relied on grain shipments from Huguang and Shanxi to survive famine. Now it was exporting supplies to rescue others.

His heart filled with complicated emotions.

He wished to see more of Xi'an, but there was no chance. The escorts transferred him to Xi'an North Station, where he boarded another train bound for Yan'an.

The train crossed the great bridge erected under Dao Xuan Tianzun's guidance and continued north.

On both sides of the tracks, the fields were lush and green, utterly different from the desolation he had seen seven years ago when he first rose in rebellion with his adoptive father.

Chapter 1219 I Am Deeply Honored

The train had barely come to a stop at Yan'an Station when Li Dingguo saw his relatives waiting on the platform.

His parents had long since passed away, but his second uncle, fifth uncle, third aunt, and several others were still alive. They stood together in a nervous cluster, faces tight with anxiety, eyes fixed on the arriving train as though it carried a verdict.

The moment the carriages rolled in, they craned their necks toward each door.

Li Dingguo stepped down from the train.

Not a single one of them dared approach him.

From the age of ten to seventeen, a boy changes beyond recognition. Limbs lengthen, voice deepens, features sharpen. The thin, stubborn child who once followed Zhang Xianzhong into rebellion had become a tall, hardened youth.

Li Dingguo recognized them immediately.

They did not recognize him.

"Second Uncle, Fifth Uncle, Third Aunt..."

He called out.

The group erupted at once and rushed forward.

"Dingguo? You've grown so tall."

"When you followed the Eight Great Kings back then, we told you not to go, told you again and again..."

Their voices overlapped in a jumble of relief and complaint.

Li Dingguo felt a knot tighten in his chest.

"Who is in charge here now? The man who summoned you, he won't harm you, will he? Don't let my rebellion bring disaster upon you."

Second Uncle laughed.

"This is the liberated zone of Dao Xuan Tianzun. Dao Xuan Tianzun is in charge. He treats us better than our own kin. Why would he harm us? Look at what I'm wearing."

Li Dingguo looked carefully.

His second uncle was dressed in a full set of cotton cloth garments. Proper cotton cloth, thick and clean. That was not cheap. Second Uncle's family had always been poor, poorer even than Li Dingguo's parents had been.

And now he dressed like this.

Li Dingguo turned to look at Third Aunt.

In her hair was a silver hairpin.

That single ornament would cost at least five taels of silver to craft. It was a luxury item beyond imagination for a peasant household.

Yet she wore it casually.

"You've... all improved your lives?" Li Dingguo asked slowly.

Fifth Uncle snorted.

"Open your eyes and look around. Is there anyone here dressed worse than us?"

Li Dingguo swept his gaze across the station.

It was true.

Nearly everyone wore cotton cloth. Several women wore small pieces of jewelry. The atmosphere was not one of famine and desperation, but of ordinary, stable life.

"Yan'an... really has changed."

He swallowed.

"How did Dao Xuan Tianzun make everyone prosper like this?"

Second Uncle waved a hand.

"That is a long story. Dao Xuan Tianzun governs with benevolence. Even if we talked for a whole day and night, we could not explain it all. You must watch Gao Family News every evening. Watch it for a while, and you will naturally understand."

"Gao Family News?" Li Dingguo blinked. "What is that?"

"All right. The family reunion ends here."

The soldier escorting him stepped forward.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has decreed that, considering Li Dingguo has committed relatively few crimes, he may receive a lighter punishment. But punishment there must be. He will be sent immediately to Yan'an Labor Reform Camp."

Li Dingguo stared blankly.

Second Uncle and the others immediately surrounded him again. Some patted his shoulder. Others ruffled his hair.

"Dingguo, when you get to the labor camp, behave well."

"Reform actively."

"Work hard. Don't slack off. Strive for early release."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is merciful. As long as you reform sincerely and put in real effort, your sentence will be reduced."

Third Aunt added warmly, "I'll come visit you from time to time and bring you something good to eat."

Li Dingguo could only stand there, utterly confused.

He did not understand the rules of this place at all. Why were they speaking of prison as though it were a school? Why did they look relieved instead of devastated?

A whole group of relatives followed the escort soldiers, accompanying him all the way to the Yan'an Labor Reform Camp.

The camp was not far from the city center. It sat upon Pagoda Mountain.

It was a small camp, nothing like the vast complex at Huanglong Mountain. The number of inmates here was limited. Most of them had relatives in Yan'an, making it convenient for family members to visit and bring small comforts.

People like this reformed faster than those whose families were long dead.

After all, who did not long to be released and live again with their loved ones?

...

After being ambushed by Flat Rabbit, the Eight Great Kings fled north in disgrace. The bandits following him grew fewer with each passing mile.

When they crawled out of the ambush valley, only sixty thousand men remained.

The Shanxi merchant Zhai Tang and his group deliberately chose a different road and separated from him. As they marched, small leaders began peeling away with their own followers, each seeking his own fortune.

Bandits were never an army of justice. They were a rabble brought together by desperation and greed. Loyalty was a thin thread.

After marching through the forests for some time, scouts returned.

"Once we exit this stretch of mountains, Shangcheng County lies ahead."

The Eight Great Kings began, "Let us hope there is no—"

He stopped.

A massive hot air balloon was rising above Shangcheng County.

He exploded in anger.

"That trick again? They think I am a fool? There are no troops directly beneath that balloon. It's just to scare me into changing direction. Forward. Advance toward the balloon."

This time he was determined not to be deceived.

He led the main force charging toward Shangcheng. But before they could even exit the Dabie Mountains, as they reached the mountain pass, they saw an army blocking the road.

A great banner fluttered at the front.

"Pu City Garrison, Commander Nan."

"Imperial troops?" the Eight Great Kings muttered.

Before he could determine whose forces these were, the familiar sound rang out.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Old Nan Feng was cold and efficient. He disliked unnecessary speech. He opened with artillery. Shells first. Then muskets. Swift and clean. No wasted words.

The Eight Great Kings' forces had no time to react. They broke instantly, scattering in panic.

He could not exit the mountains. He was forced to retreat back into the Dabie range.

After counting heads, he discovered that in the blink of an eye, more than ten thousand had been captured by Old Nan Feng. Others had fled entirely. Fewer than thirty thousand now remained with him.

Lost in the mountains, unsure of direction, he picked a random ravine and pushed forward in disarray. By the next morning, judging by the rising sun, he realized he was heading east.

"Fine. Then east it is."

They crossed ridges and valleys in exhaustion until they saw a county town in the distance beyond the mountains.

The Eight Great Kings recognized it immediately.

"That is Jinzhai County. It has no walls. I tore them down a year ago. We'll rest there."

Just as he finished speaking, another force appeared ahead on the mountain road.

A banner read, "Hedong Military Defense, Xing."

The Eight Great Kings felt his scalp prickle.

A woman's voice rang out.

"Eight Great Kings, you are surrounded. Lay down your weapons and surrender."

Xing Honglang stepped forward. Unlike Old Nan Feng, she had grown up in the jianghu. She preferred at least a few formalities.

"Though even if you surrender," she added coolly, "I cannot promise your life."

"Imperial troops again?" the Eight Great Kings snarled.

A subordinate hurriedly said, "No. Not imperial troops. Xing Honglang had firearms many years ago—"

Boom. Boom. Boom.

The cannons answered before he could finish.

The Eight Great Kings swore violently.

"Damn it. Run."

Chapter 1220 Sichuan Is Getting Better

Gao Family Village. Main Fort.

Third floor balcony of the watchtower.

Li Daoxuan and Gao Yiye were sitting side by side, eating fruit together.

Yao Xingjuan had discovered a stretch of coconut trees along the shores of Yizhou Island. Naturally, she had immediately ordered a large basket of coconuts harvested and shipped back to the main village.

Gao Yiye had never seen such a thing before and insisted on trying one. As for Li Daoxuan, a devoted food enthusiast, there was no way he would let such an opportunity pass.

"Wow. This fruit is filled entirely with water." Gao Yiye held the opened coconut with both hands, her eyes shining with curiosity. "How can something so strange exist?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "The world is vast. There are far stranger things out there."

As he drank from his own coconut, he cast a sidelong glance at the large basket that remained. There were still many left. Drinking them all as plain coconut water felt somewhat wasteful.

A thought flashed across his mind.

He smiled.

"Yiye, let's create a new dish."

"A new dish?" Gao Yiye's curiosity flared instantly. "What kind?"

"Coconut chicken," Li Daoxuan replied with a grin. "If you have coconuts, this dish is mandatory."

"Then we must start by slaughtering a chicken." Gao Yiye rolled up her sleeves enthusiastically, clearly prepared to do it herself.

At that moment, they noticed Liu Maopao.

He was dressed in a clean and proper scholar's robe, every fold neat and deliberate. He was walking through the corridor of the main fort, evidently heading toward the administrative hall for work.

Li Daoxuan leaned over the balcony railing.

"Handsome Maopao."

Liu Maopao turned at once. Seeing Dao Xuan Tianzun calling him personally, he was overwhelmed with flattered panic. He hurriedly bowed deeply toward the third floor balcony.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun. What instructions do you have for me?"

Li Daoxuan smiled. "I'm about to create a new dish. Would you like to learn it? When you return, you could add it to your family restaurant's menu. It might become a bestseller."

"Ah." Liu Maopao blinked. "Speaking of my family's restaurant, I actually have something to report to Dao Xuan Tianzun and the Holy Maiden. This timing is most fortunate."

Li Daoxuan raised a brow. "Come up and speak."

"If I may."

He quickly entered the watchtower. Moments later, the sound of his hurried footsteps echoed up the staircase. Soon he stood before them again and offered another formal bow.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, after discussing with my parents, we wish to transfer our family restaurant and our shares in the wool sweater factory to the Village Committee at a low price. We only wish to know whether the Committee is willing to accept."

Li Daoxuan paused slightly.

Then a knowing smile spread across his face.

Interesting.

Gao Yiye looked confused. "What are you talking about? Why would you transfer your factory and restaurant to the Village Committee?"

Liu Maopao cleared his throat and spoke solemnly.

"I have the honor of serving as a cadre of the Gao Family Village Committee. To speak bluntly, I now hold significant authority. If I were to abuse that power even slightly and tilt policy toward my family's businesses, I could channel enormous benefits to them."

Gao Yiye blinked. "How would that work?"

"For example, I could arrange for the militia to procure wool sweaters from our factory. Or subtly guide customers toward dining at our restaurant."

He sighed.

"There are countless methods to ensure my family earns immense profits."

Gao Yiye stared at him. "So that's possible?"

Li Daoxuan gently pulled her behind him and patted her shoulder.

"Handsome Maopao," he said with amusement, "your mind works quickly. You've only been a cadre for a few days, and you've already devised countless methods of corruption. Truly talented."

Liu Maopao looked embarrassed.

"To be honest, Dao Xuan Tianzun, I frightened myself. In recent days, whenever I find a moment of idleness, my mind calculates. If I do this, my family earns several hundred taels. If I do that, several hundred more. I know these methods are wrong, yet I cannot prevent the thoughts from arising. Wealth stirs the human heart. I am but an ordinary man. I cannot pretend to be immune to temptation."

He drew a long breath.

"After much reflection, if I wish to avoid missteps in the future and avoid being sent to a labor reform camp, there is only one solution. I must cut off the root of temptation."

"So after discussing overnight with my parents, we decided to transfer the restaurant and our shares in the wool sweater factory to the Village Committee at a reduced price. Let these enterprises become collectively owned. My family will cease all commercial activity. In that way, I will have no private interest to protect."

He hesitated slightly.

"I only hope the Committee is willing to accept. If not, I will need to advertise on Gao Family News to seek buyers."

Li Daoxuan began applauding.

"Excellent. Very good thinking."

He had long observed Liu Maopao's talent for networking, his effortless familiarity with everyone he met. The young man was capable, perhaps dangerously so. If allowed to straddle both political authority and private business, the risk of eventual misjudgment would be real.

But now it was clear.

This was a son of the new era raised under Dao Xuan Tianzun's governance. The new generation of Gao Family Village had received education, grown up in stability, and been shaped by ideals rather than decay.

When a system is in its sunrise phase, it produces people like this. Individuals who genuinely believe in a better future, who restrain their own greed for the sake of that vision.

Li Daoxuan patted Liu Maopao's shoulder.

"Your restaurant and wool sweater factory will be acquired by the Village Committee at fair market value. Reliable managers will be appointed. Their reputation will not be tarnished."

He smiled.

"As for you, keep working hard. I have high hopes for you."

Liu Maopao was overjoyed and bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun. I will devote myself fully and strive to make Gao Family Village even better."

"Good."

Li Daoxuan clapped his hands lightly.

"Now that official matters are settled, let us make coconut chicken together."

Liu Maopao's face brightened.

"I am deeply honored."