

## **Great Ming 1221**

### Chapter 1221 Dao Xuan Tianzun Helped at Mingyue Gorge

Sichuan Governor Wang Weizhang had been living rather comfortably lately.

The bandits had been driven out of Sichuan by the tusi tribal troops. After that, they vanished into the perilous mountain border between Sichuan and Shaanxi. The Shaanxi governor, Sun Chuanting, never reported any bandits entering his jurisdiction.

It was as if those rebels had evaporated into thin air.

The heavy stone that had pressed on Wang Weizhang's heart simply dissolved.

Then came good news after good news.

Every few days, a county magistrate would submit a report. The local mountain bandits troubling his county had been wiped out by a civilian militia somewhere in such and such valley.

A few days later, another prefect would report that the troublemakers in his prefecture had been eliminated in some ravine by local militia forces.

Public security across Sichuan suddenly reached a level not seen in years.

At the same time, agriculture and commerce began rising in tandem.

Wang Weizhang, the highest administrative official of the province, was essentially coasting. He had done nothing remarkable. Yet somehow, internal affairs across Sichuan were improving at an astonishing pace.

On the Chengdu Plain, rice paddies had begun using something called chemical fertilizer. Even Wang Weizhang, who understood little about farming, could see with the naked eye that the rice stalks were growing stronger and greener. The entire plain seemed to radiate the aura of an inevitable bumper harvest.

Outside the Chengdu Plain, in the mountainous regions, the transformation was even more dramatic.

For reasons unknown to him, the common people had begun planting large quantities of foreign crops from the Western seas. Potatoes. Corn. Sweet potatoes.

It was painfully obvious that autumn would bring a harvest beyond previous comprehension.

Agriculture was surging forward. Commerce was even more outrageous.

Large merchants from Shaanxi had poured into cities across Sichuan, establishing factories everywhere. At first, the factories were relatively ordinary. Hunting farms. Chicken farms. Cement plants. Paper mills.

But before long, they began venturing into forbidden territory.

Coal mining. Iron extraction. Salt production.

These were state monopolies.

How could private individuals be allowed to meddle in such affairs?

Alarmed, Wang Weizhang ordered local officials to investigate.

They returned soon after, faces pale.

"My lord," one of them reported, "the local tusi are backing them. I brought over thirty yamen runners to inspect a coal mine. All the workers were Miao tribesmen. The moment I mentioned sealing the mine, they began summoning reinforcements. Within half an hour, the tusi himself arrived with five hundred tribal soldiers. I did not dare approach. I could only watch them continue their illegal mining."

At the mere mention of tusi, Wang Weizhang shrank internally.

In Sichuan, you could offend anyone except the tusi.

He cleared his throat and changed his stance instantly.

"If these activities occur within territories governed autonomously by the tusi, then let the tusi manage them. We shall not interfere."

And thus, he dared not intervene.

Factories of every conceivable type flourished.

Hardworking commoners found employment. Wages rose. Living standards improved.

When the people have money, consumption follows naturally.

There was an old saying. If I have money, do you still need to teach me how to spend it?

As the political and economic heart of Sichuan, Chengdu felt the surge most vividly.

The streets were bustling. Every trade guild displayed its finest skills. Traffic flowed like water.

Wang Weizhang walked through the busy avenues with his entourage, staring in disbelief.

"I have done nothing," he muttered. "How has Chengdu suddenly become prosperous? Should I report this achievement to the court?"

At that moment, loud commotion erupted ahead. Over a hundred voices gasped in unison.

"Wow, it's huge!"

"What kind of strange thing is that?"

"There are no horses pulling it. How is it moving?"

"Incredible!"

Wang Weizhang frowned. "What is causing the disturbance?"

A subordinate hurried ahead and returned shortly.

"My lord, there is a large iron vehicle in the middle of the street. It emits smoke and moves slowly. The people are surrounding it."

An iron vehicle?

Wang Weizhang pushed forward.

When the crowd parted, he froze.

A massive iron machine was indeed rolling forward slowly. No horses. No oxen. Smoke rose from its top. Strange sounds clanked and hissed as it moved.

The driver spoke in a thick Shaanxi accent.

"Brothers, make way, make way. If you crowd me like this, I'm afraid I'll hit someone. My foot's been pressing the brake so long it's cramping."

Wang Weizhang stepped forward and blocked its path.

"You there. What is this vehicle? Where did it come from?"

The driver sized him up. Recognizing the governor's rank, he showed slightly more courtesy but not fear.

"My lord, I'm a pathfinder from Shaanxi."

"A pathfinder? What path are you exploring?"

"The route from Hanzhong to Guangyuan, and from Guangyuan to Chengdu."

Wang Weizhang's heart skipped.

"That route passes through the Shu Road. The most perilous terrain in all of Shu. Even wheelbarrows struggle there. How did you cross?"

The driver grinned.

"The road is being repaired. Seventy thousand workers building it together. Progress is fast. The stretch from Hanzhong to Mingyue Gorge is nearly leveled. It's not paved with cement yet, but a flattened dirt road works if you drive slowly."

He lowered his voice slightly.

"As for the most dangerous section of the Shu Road, it's not fully opened yet. So Dao Xuan Tianzun reached down, picked up me and the vehicle, and whoosh, carried us across."

Wang Weizhang stared at him.

This was absurd.

He had been hearing the name Dao Xuan Tianzun more frequently lately. Stories. Legends. Ridiculous exaggerations. The last merchant who tried to preach such nonsense to him had been beaten with twenty strokes.

And now this.

Yet the iron vehicle stood before him, undeniable. There was no conceivable way such a machine could traverse the old Shu Road unaided.

His brows knitted.

Perhaps... he needed to see it with his own eyes.

Sichuan was thriving inexplicably. Bandits were gone. Internal affairs improved without his intervention. If he left Chengdu briefly to inspect the Shu Road, surely nothing would collapse.

Besides, even Li Bai once traveled the Shu Road to compose poetry.

Why should he not follow in such refined footsteps?

A diligent official would remain buried in paperwork.

But Wang Weizhang had ample time for an officially funded excursion.

Soon, the governor's procession was arranged.

He departed Chengdu with a sizable escort, crossed the flourishing Chengdu Plain, reached Guangyuan, and changed into more practical attire suitable for arduous travel.

Standing at the threshold of the legendary mountain road, he drew a deep breath.

"Shu Road," he declared solemnly, "I have come to compose poetry."

Chapter 1222 Have You Ever Been Corrupt?

The moment Wang Weizhang left Guangyuan, he felt something was off.

The road here was unexpectedly good.

The official road had clearly been widened and leveled. It was even comparable to several of the main roads near Chengdu. For a road this close to the Shu route, this was completely out of place.

After traveling a while, he saw a large group of workers repairing the road ahead.

He called over one of them.

"Why are you repairing the road here? Who's paying for it?"

The worker, clearly a local from Guangyuan, replied in thick Sichuan dialect:

"Some lord from Shaanxi paid for it. I don't know his name. Long as there's money, I work. Doesn't matter who pays."

Wang Weizhang: "!"

Asking a laborer was useless, so he found the foreman. After much questioning, he finally learned the truth.

The man funding the project was no ordinary figure, it was Sun Chuanting, Governor of Shaanxi. On top of that, Prince Qin's heir Zhu Cunji and Prince Rui Zhu Changhao had each contributed additional funds.

Sun Chuanting had ordered the construction of a standard official road. But Zhu Cunji and Zhu Changhao added extra money, instructing workers to dig out another path beside it, saying it would later be used to lay a "railway."

The foreman didn't know what a railway was. He only knew he was paid to level ground.

Wang Weizhang was stunned.

"Guangyuan is clearly under my jurisdiction as Governor of Sichuan. Yet Sun Chuanting, Governor of Shaanxi, is building roads into my territory! Should I reap the harvest? Or reap the harvest? Or reap the harvest?"

In the end, he decided not to worry.

Once the road was completed, it would fall under his authority anyway.

He continued forward.

Ahead lay the most treacherous section of the Shu Road, the ancient plank road of Mingyue Gorge.

In ancient times, a road had been carved directly into the sheer cliffs of Mingyue Gorge. Its danger defied description. Who knew how many people had died building it?

Wang Weizhang refused to believe that the massive iron vehicle he'd seen before could possibly pass through Mingyue Gorge.

Impossible. Absolutely impossible.

He walked toward the gorge with his head lowered.

Suddenly, one of his subordinates shouted, pointing ahead:

"Look! Quick! A giant! A giant!"

Wang Weizhang looked up.

And nearly inhaled a mouthful of cold Sichuan jelly in shock.

There, atop the mountain above Mingyue Gorge, sat a colossal figure, tens of zhang tall.

He wore flowing Daoist robes like an immortal of legend, elegant and transcendent.

Yet his face was youthful, not the aged visage one expected of typical immortals.

He gazed down upon the gorge.

Wang Weizhang screamed and staggered backward several steps.

Only now did he truly believe the merchant's story.

He deeply regretted having ordered twenty strokes of the rod on the man earlier. If only he had listened properly instead of scaring him off.

Just as he stood trembling, he heard the rumble of wheels behind him.

A merchant caravan approached.

The leader was none other than the same merchant he had beaten.

Their eyes met.

Wang Weizhang immediately felt awkward.

The merchant's expression was strange. He glanced at Wang Weizhang, then pointed at the Dao Xuan Tianzun seated atop the mountain.

He didn't say anything.

But the meaning was clear:

What about those twenty strokes?

Wang Weizhang felt his toes nearly dig a three-bedroom house into the ground from embarrassment.

But he was an official.

In the hierarchy of scholar, farmer, artisan, merchant, officials stood at the top.

How could he apologize to a mere merchant?

So he pretended nothing had happened.

"You're here," Wang Weizhang forced out.

"I travel this route year-round," the merchant replied. "Of course I'm here."

Awkward silence.

"What goods are you carrying this time?"

"Nothing special. Some Sichuan specialties to sell in Xi'an. Then I'll bring some Shaanxi goods back to Chengdu."

Wang Weizhang glanced at the convoy and froze.

The wagons were large.

Horse-drawn cargo wagons.

There was no way those could pass the ancient plank road.

"Your carts... seem rather large," he said carefully. "They don't look like they could cross the gorge."

"In the past," the merchant said, "I used wheelbarrows. Sometimes we didn't even use carts. Just carried everything on our backs."

"But ever since Dao Xuan Tianzun began sitting atop the mountain, we can use large wagons."

Wang Weizhang's heart skipped.

"Tianzun grabs your carts?"

"Yes."

"You expect me to believe that? An immortal has time to meddle in this?"

The merchant shrugged.

"Otherwise, why do people say Tianzun is compassionate? He's not like other immortals. He often looks after the suffering of the mortal world."

"Even so," Wang Weizhang said, "he can't possibly sit here all day waiting to grab carts."

"Of course not," the merchant laughed. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is busy. He oversees the whole world. Most of the time, he's spiritually roaming the realm. Though this giant Dharma body sits here, his spirit isn't necessarily present."

"Then how do you cross?"

"It's about timing. I calculated it carefully. Every day at noon, Tianzun lets his spirit return to the Dharma body and takes a look. If there's no caravan, he leaves again. If there is, he helps."

He pointed upward.

"Look at the sun. It's almost noon."

Wang Weizhang raised his head.

The sun was directly overhead.

At that moment—

The enormous Dao Xuan Tianzun moved.

His head turned slightly. He looked north toward Shaanxi's entrance of the gorge.

Then his gaze shifted south toward Guangyuan.

It locked onto the caravan.

"Crossing the gorge?" Tianzun's voice boomed, echoing through Mingyue Gorge.

The sound vibrated through the cliffs.

Wang Weizhang collapsed onto the ground in fright.

The merchant, already accustomed to this, calmly cupped his fists.

"May Tianzun lend us aid. As usual, I will donate ten percent of this trip's profits to charitable works and relief for the poor."

Tianzun smiled.

A warm, auntie-like smile.

Then—

A colossal hand descended from the sky and grabbed one of the massive wagons.

Wang Weizhang, sitting nearby, saw the enormous hand sweep down beside him and lift the entire cart in one motion.

He rolled several times in panic to get out of the way.

The great hand soared across Mingyue Gorge in a flash

Depositing the wagon on the other side.

The merchant turned to his men.

"Let's go. We'll cross the gorge and retrieve our goods."

"Tianzun is mighty!" the workers cheered.

The caravan marched briskly through the narrow plank road.

Only after they were gone did Wang Weizhang slowly crawl back to his feet.

His entire body trembled uncontrollably.

Chapter 1223 No Hot Air Balloons Here

It took quite a while before Wang Weizhang's legs stopped trembling.

Only after a long moment did he finally manage to stand up. The instant he got to his feet, he saw Dao Xuan Tianzun grabbing another vehicle. This time it was not a cargo cart but another enormous iron carriage. With a single motion, the giant hand scooped up the carriage, driver and all, from the Shaanxi side and placed it down in front of them.

The driver, speaking in a strong Shaanxi accent, cupped his hands toward the mountain peak. "Many thanks to Tianzun. I will continue on to Chengdu."

Dao Xuan Tianzun waved a hand. Even that casual gesture stirred up a gust of mountain wind.

The great iron carriage let out a deep whistle and rumbled off toward Guangyuan. The official road there had already been leveled and widened by the people of Guangyuan. As long as the iron carriage did not go too fast and kept a steady pace, the journey posed no problem.

Wang Weizhang steadied his breathing and suppressed the churning in his chest. After taking a deep breath, he turned to his subordinates. "Let us go. We will cross Mingyue Gorge and take a look at Shaanxi."

"Governor, you must not leave Sichuan so lightly. If the Emperor finds out..." one subordinate cautioned.

Wang Weizhang snapped, "Is this the time to talk about that? Look at what is happening here. What harm is there if I go to Shaanxi to see with my own eyes?"

He had a point.

With a god of such unimaginable size sitting above them, who still had space in their mind to worry about the Emperor?

Wang Weizhang led his entourage onto the ancient plank road of Mingyue Gorge. Step by cautious step, legs still weak, they made their way across. After much difficulty, they finally reached the Shaanxi side.

The moment they arrived, they were stunned by the bustle.

There were people everywhere. So many people.

A glance was enough to tell that there were at least tens of thousands of laborers, stretching along both sides of the official road as far as the eye could see.

The merchant who had crossed before them had already retrieved his cargo carts and was leading his caravan along the road under construction. Whenever a caravan approached, the workers paused their labor and stepped aside, as if forming an honor guard. Once the carts passed, they returned to their work.

Wang Weizhang stared in shock. "Where did they get so many workers?"

A subordinate suddenly cried out, "Governor, I see Mantianxing."

"Mantianxing?" Wang Weizhang frowned. "The bandit who ravaged Sichuan months ago?"

"Yes, that's him. Look, he is carrying stones over there."

Sure enough, Mantianxing was struggling under the weight of a large rock, sweat pouring down his face. He looked utterly exhausted. Yet when he glanced up at Dao Xuan Tianzun seated on the mountain peak, he grit his teeth and continued without daring to slack off.

Wang Weizhang burst into laughter. "Mantianxing, so this is your fate."

Mantianxing shot him an awkward look but said nothing. He had no time for idle talk. He hurried to the worksite, set the stone down, adjusted it carefully, filled the gaps with earth, and moved on.

Wang Weizhang turned and spotted another notorious bandit leader. "Mizhuangjiang! So you too have fallen this low. Hahaha!"

Mizhuangjiang shook his head and walked away quickly. He had no time to argue.

Wang Weizhang ran about the construction site, laughing loudly. "I recognize you, Waguang King. And you, Sweeping King."

He threw his head back in laughter. "Weren't you all so mighty? And now you are here building roads."

The former bandit chiefs had tried to ignore him, but finally one of them snapped, "Damn it, Wang Weizhang. We are building roads because of Tianzun, not because of you. What are you so proud of? Useless official. One day you may end up building roads with us."

"I never rebelled," Wang Weizhang retorted.

Guotianxing snorted. "Have you ever taken bribes? Embezzled money?"

Wang Weizhang scoffed. "And if I have?"

The words had barely left his mouth when Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice boomed across the gorge.

"Those who embezzle large sums or commit serious offenses shall be sentenced to imprisonment of up to three years and fined. Those who embezzle huge sums or cause grave consequences shall be sentenced to three to ten years and fined or have their property confiscated. Those who embezzle especially enormous sums or cause particularly severe damage shall be sentenced to over ten years or life imprisonment, along with fines or confiscation of property. If the losses to the state and the people are especially severe, the punishment may be life imprisonment or death, with confiscation of property."

Wang Weizhang shuddered violently. "Ah?"

He had never expected that his casual remark would draw a direct response from Tianzun. His entire body went numb.

With a thud, he dropped to his knees.

Dao Xuan Tianzun lowered his gaze. "Wang Weizhang, how much have you embezzled? How many years of labor reform would that earn you? Speak."

Wang Weizhang trembled uncontrollably. "I... I did not... not..."

Tianzun raised a single hand and smiled faintly. "With a mere calculation, I can determine every single copper coin you took. Shall I calculate it now?"

He formed a hand seal as if about to divine the truth.

Wang Weizhang's soul nearly left his body. He cried out miserably, "Tianzun, spare me. Do not calculate. Please do not calculate."

The raised hand lowered again. "If you wish me not to calculate, then return what you have taken. If you show initiative in restitution, your punishment may be lightened."

Wang Weizhang's voice quivered. "Return... I will return it at once. But... to whom should I return it?"

That was indeed the crucial question.

Surely it was not simply a matter of handing it back to the court.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice rang with authority. "What was taken from the people shall be returned to the people."

"I understand," Wang Weizhang stammered. "I will go back immediately and distribute silver to the common folk. I will give money to everyone I see."

"Give it to everyone?" Tianzun snorted. "And what of criminals and idlers?"

"I understand now. I will use the money to build roads. To build roads."

Only then did Tianzun's stern expression soften. He waved a hand. "Very well."

Wang Weizhang finally exhaled in relief. His wandering soul seemed to settle back into his body.

At that moment, a commotion broke out among the workers nearby. A small rocky hill stood directly in the path of the road, three or four zhang high, like a small building.

"Break it apart and move it piece by piece."

"Bring the sledgehammers. And the steam engine with pulleys."

"Get some crowbars ready."

The workers were busy discussing methods when Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly leaped down from the mountain peak. His landing shook the earth with a thunderous boom.

He raised his foot and kicked.

Another deafening crash echoed as the hill toppled over.

Bending down, he grasped the exposed rock and dragged the entire mass aside.

The workers erupted in cheers. "Tianzun is mighty."

He rolled the rocky mass into a nearby depression, not only clearing the road but also leveling a hollow in the terrain. Then he said nothing more. He returned to the mountain peak, seated himself once again, and gazed down upon the land in silent contemplation.

Wang Weizhang could find no words.

He could only look up in awe.

Chapter 1224 An Unknown Bandit Chief

Chuang Wang, Li Yan, Li Guo, and Liu Zongmin led the Fengtian Changyi Battalion northward after passing through the Fengyang region.

Just as Chuang Wang had predicted, Fengyang held special symbolic meaning for the Ming court. Because of that, the mysterious musket corps did not deploy forces there to intercept them.

Of course, Chuang Wang understood something else very clearly. The moment he stirred up trouble in Fengyang, that same mysterious musket corps would receive word and pursue him without hesitation.

Low profile. Absolutely low profile.

They moved carefully, quietly, like a school of fish gliding through shallow water, slipping past Fengyang without incident.

The rear scouts soon galloped back with news.

"Big Brother Chuang Wang, not long after we entered Fengyang, a heavy armored cavalry unit moved into the Huainan region. They've even raised hot air balloons there. It's obvious they've sealed off Huainan. No large force can pass through that area now."

Chuang Wang let out a long breath. "Good thing we moved quickly. Otherwise we would have been trapped."

Then he paused. "Heavy armored cavalry?"

The scout nodded. "Yes. Ironclad riders."

Chuang Wang's eyes narrowed. "That reminds me of someone. Lao Huihui commanded heavy armored cavalry. After we split forces at Xingyang, I heard little from him. Could it be..."

The scout hesitated. "That unit did resemble Lao Huihui's cavalry."

Chuang Wang gave a slow nod and sighed. "Wang Er followed the mysterious musket corps. Now even Lao Huihui has gone over. Thinking about it carefully, both Wang Er and Lao Huihui were men who valued rules and discipline. They must have been drawn by the leader of that musket corps. If only I had met Mr. Li Yan earlier, perhaps those two would have followed me instead."

There was genuine melancholy in his voice.

Wang Er and Lao Huihui were true heroes, far more capable and honorable than fellows like Guotianxing, Mantianxing, Sweeping King, or Waguang King. Yet clearly, Chuang Wang's own charisma had not been enough to command their loyalty.

A pity.

Li Guo spoke up. "Uncle, where do we go now?"

"Continue north," Chuang Wang replied. "We've slipped out of the encirclement. The sky is high and the sea is wide. Since the musket corps is determined to fight for the Central Plains, we will leave the Central Plains. We cross the Yellow River and head to Shandong, to Beizhili."

Liu Zongmin frowned. "Shandong and Beizhili are close to the capital. The court might..."

"If the court were truly strong," Chuang Wang interrupted, "would the Jianzhou tribes have broken through the passes and scared them into hiding in the capital like frightened turtles? In my view, the capital may well be the easiest place to bully right now."

The others thought about it.

"Hey... that actually makes sense."

All the capable generals of the court were stationed outside. Hong Chengchou, Lu Xiangsheng, Qin Liangyu. None were in the capital.

It seemed that the most convenient place to operate was precisely the area around Beijing.

Meanwhile, in the mountains.

Zhai Tang was leading a small group of Jin merchants through dense forest.

He had deliberately separated from the Eight Great Kings. When the latter was not paying attention, Zhai Tang took his own men and slipped into a narrow ravine, twisting and turning until they shook off pursuit.

He had already noticed something important. The hot air balloons floating in the sky could easily detect large forces, but small groups were much harder to spot.

So he had to split off.

Zhai Tang did not possess the overwhelming combat strength of the Eight Great Kings, but as a Jin merchant, he had a different kind of power. He had traveled countless trade routes.

The Dabie Mountains were complex and rugged, yet among the Jin merchants there was always someone who had once run goods through these hills.

"Master, we head northwest from here," one subordinate said while leading the way. "If we cut through here, we reach Huangbaishan. After crossing Huangbaishan and the Guan River, we can slip out through Guangshan County."

Zhai Tang nodded. "Guangshan County may also have their troops. Do not let your guard down. Watch the sky carefully. If we see a giant sky lantern, we abandon this route immediately."

They answered in unison.

They crossed Huangbaishan. Ahead flowed a small river, the Guan River. Because their numbers were few, crossing was easy. They found a shallow stretch and waded through.

All along the way, no hot air balloon appeared in the sky.

At last Zhai Tang allowed himself a thin smile. "Heh. Perhaps Guangshan County truly is our escape."

At that same moment, in Guangshan County.

Tie Niaofei was leading a logistics unit stationed within the county seat.

For years, Tie Niaofei had been responsible for transporting supplies to the northern frontier troops. Normally he would not be here. But this time was different.

Gaocun had mobilized multiple armies at once. The Northern Route Army alone fielded thirty five thousand men, divided into several columns advancing in parallel like a massive net.

The strain on logistics was enormous.

The supply teams were running themselves ragged. Reinforcements were needed.

So Tie Niaofei had temporarily left the frontier routes and joined the logistics effort for the grand encirclement.

However, a lifelong merchant suddenly turned logistics officer was clearly out of his depth.

"How do you even use this hot air balloon?" Tie Niaofei muttered, staring at the limp, uninflated mass before him.

A subordinate grumbled, "The village really dropped the ball this time. They gave us a balloon but no trained scout to operate it. What are we supposed to do with this thing?"

Tie Niaofei waved him off. "Do not blame the village. This campaign is massive. Even they are stretched thin. Our problem right now is manpower shortage."

The complaint died there. The men gathered around the balloon, studying it with furrowed brows.

"Boss, maybe we fasten these two rings together."

"This brazier must be for heating air. Once the hot air fills the sack, it should rise."

"Boss, I think I understand it now."

He promptly fumbled and dropped a rope into the brazier.

"Ah! The rope's on fire!"

Chaos erupted. They stomped and flailed until the small blaze was extinguished.

The balloon remained stubbornly on the ground.

Tie Niaofei finally threw up his hands. "Forget it. I, Tie Niaofei, have roamed the world as a merchant for decades. I never used such a contraption before and did just fine. I even sold private salt around here back in the day. I know these roads like the back of my hand. What's there to fear? Move out. We must deliver these provisions to General Luo Xi as soon as possible. He entered the mountains three days ago. He should be running low on grain."

With that, Tie Niaofei led his unit out of Guangshan County and plunged straight into the mountains.

Chapter 1225 Great Fortune, Tonight We Eat Chicken

The absence of a hot air balloon in the sky made Tie Niaofei uneasy.

After all, this was the Dabie Mountains. Bandits prowled these hills like wolves.

But then he thought of Luo Xi. Three days earlier, Luo Xi had entered these mountains by this very route. In theory, if Luo Xi passed safely, the road should not be too dangerous.

With that comforting logic, Tie Niaofei increased his marching speed. He did not creep forward cautiously. He moved with confidence.

Meanwhile, Zhai Tang glanced up at the empty sky and quickened his own pace.

No hot air balloon meant opportunity.

He had to break out of the Dabie Mountains through Guangshan County before the enemy patched this gap in their encirclement. If he was even a little too slow, the hole might close.

With a subordinate who knew the terrain leading the way, Zhai Tang's men moved swiftly.

Ahead.

Tie Niaofei pointed forward. "There is a cliff ahead. Once we turn past it, the view opens up."

At nearly the same moment, Zhai Tang gestured toward a large rock. "That stone blocks the view. Go around it and we can see farther."

Both parties surged forward.

They rounded the bend.

And collided head on.

For a heartbeat, both men stared.

Recognition flashed in their eyes almost simultaneously.

Tie Niaofei roared, "Zhai Tang. Pay with your life for my old subordinates."

Zhai Tang blurted, "What the hell. Tie Niaofei? Why are you here?"

Even as they spoke, both drew their blades.

Unfortunately, neither man was a peerless martial hero. Their swordplay was stiff and awkward. Steel clanged once. Then, as if by prior agreement, both leaped back and shouted to their men.

"Get them!"

Zhai Tang's followers drew sabers and swords.

Tie Niaofei's men raised muskets.

Zhai Tang's side cursed in unison. "That is cheating!"

Tie Niaofei's side answered with one word. "Fire!"

Bang bang bang.

The mountains echoed with gunshots. Zhai Tang's men dropped in clusters.

Amid the thunder of muskets, Tie Niaofei howled, "Do not kill Zhai Tang. I want him alive. I will flay him alive. Three thousand cuts. I will avenge my old brothers."

"How are we supposed to control that?" someone yelled back.

"Boss, you only remember the old subordinates. What about us new ones? I am heartbroken."

Tie Niaofei's eyes were bloodshot. "Idiot. I am furious right now. No jokes."

The joking subordinate took one look at his commander's face and realized he was serious. Boss values loyalty, he thought. Even the dead are remembered. If I die someday, he will remember me too.

Wait. Why am I thinking such unlucky thoughts?

Zhai Tang's men were inferior in number, equipment, and morale. They stood no chance.

Within moments, they were scattering for cover.

A few desperate fighters charged forward in a last attempt, only to be cut down by musket fire and bayonets. After that, Zhai Tang's men lost the courage to rush. They ducked behind rocks instead.

Once hidden, they pulled out their own bird guns and three eyed divine muskets, fumbling to load powder and shot.

When their crude firearms appeared, Tie Niaofei's men hesitated as well. Charging recklessly into a volley could still get a man killed. Their Gaocun armor was excellent, but not bulletproof.

Separated by rocky ground, the two sides began trading shots.

Zhai Tang shouted from behind a stone, "Tie Niaofei, damn your ancestors. I killed a few of your men and you ruined the Jin merchants' border trade for years. You son of a dog."

Tie Niaofei shouted back, "My brothers' lives are worth more than your traitorous smuggling business."

"Damn you!"

"Damn you!"

Gunfire crackled again.

Then came the reload lull.

Seizing the moment, Tie Niaofei pulled out a hand grenade, lit the fuse, and hurled it behind the rocks.

Boom.

Two men who had been loading ammunition were blown into the air.

Tie Niaofei yelled, "Zhai Tang, be careful. Do not get shot. Do not get blown up. Stay alive so I can carve you into three thousand slices myself."

Zhai Tang spat curses.

The exchange continued. With each passing moment, more of Zhai Tang's men fell.

He quickly realized that a positional battle meant slow death. His side's old firearms required formation volleys to be effective. Firing singly from behind rocks was nearly useless. Bullets flew wild.

Meanwhile, the enemy's new muskets were accurate and deadly. Even peeking half a head above cover risked instant death. And the grenades made hiding behind rocks no guarantee of safety.

If this dragged on, his men would be eaten away piece by piece.

Retreat.

The thought bloomed in Zhai Tang's mind.

He glanced at his men, still fighting desperately.

Then he quietly began to slip backward.

As long as he escaped alone, that was enough. Who cared about these subordinates? With his wealth, he could always hire more.

He rolled into tall grass, crawled swiftly, then slid into a shallow ditch. He scrambled through a narrow rocky gap.

The gunfire faded behind him. Tie Niaoifei's curses grew faint.

Zhai Tang's heart swelled with relief.

Good. I escaped.

Alone, he would move faster. Even if one hundred thousand men surrounded the Dabie Mountains, surely a single man could find a gap.

Just then.

Bang.

A single shot rang out.

Pain exploded in his chest.

He looked down.

A bloody hole had opened over his heart.

He raised his head.

On the opposite slope stood a man with a musket. Then another appeared. Then another. More and more emerged until an entire force revealed itself.

At their head stood Luo Xi, garrison commander of Shangnan.

Luo Xi was not much better with hot air balloons than Tie Niaofei. He had been stationed farther away. Hearing musket and grenade fire, he guessed friendly forces were engaged and rushed over to reinforce them.

He had not even had time to order the target captured alive.

An eager soldier, hungry for merit, had already fired.

Zhai Tang collapsed slowly to the ground.

Luo Xi walked over and looked down at the corpse. "Ah. He is dead. No idea which bandit chief he was. Hard to report merit like this."

He paused, then waved a hand.

"Record it. One unnamed bandit leader killed."

Chapter 1226 A Life Thinner Than Paper

During the cleanup of the battlefield, Tie Niaofei sat alone off to the side, gloomy and silent.

A few subordinates wanted to comfort him, but none knew what to say.

"Zhai Tang got away. We didn't catch him."

"Boss must feel awful."

"How do you even comfort someone about that?"

"No idea."

Suddenly Tie Niaofei threw his head back and roared at the mountain peak before him.

"Ahhh! How did that bastard escape? My old brothers' vengeance is unfinished!"

"Hey, hey, Master Tie, why shout so fiercely?"

Walking toward him with a grin was Luo Xi, garrison commander of Shangnan. He waved cheerfully. "Heard explosions and musket fire over here. Figured it was you. How did it go? I assume you won."

Tie Niaofei answered gloomily, "Won, yes. But Zhai Tang slipped away. I am furious. After all these years, finally found that bastard, and he escaped."

Luo Xi had joined Gaocun later and did not know the old feud between Tie Niaofei and Zhai Tang. He could only pat the man's shoulder. "It is fine. We will catch him next time."

Tie Niaofei sighed. "Who knows when that next time will be."

Wanting to distract him, Luo Xi quickly changed the subject. "Master Tie, you must have earned great merit this time. Killed quite a few bandits, I bet. Lucky you. Me, I only shot one unnamed bandit chief. Hard to even report that."

Tie Niaofei shook his head. "In Gaocun, merit is not counted by bodies. It is counted by whether you completed the strategic objective. Fulfill the objective, that is true merit."

Luo Xi blinked. "Ah? Then that unnamed bandit chief I shot probably counts for nothing. No strategic objective there."

"Probably not much meaning," Tie Niaofei replied.

Luo Xi groaned. As a court born general, he cared deeply about military merit. Hearing this, he felt utterly dejected. He waved at his men. "No need to carry that unknown bandit chief's corpse back for identification. Just bury him somewhere. What rotten luck."

His men answered and carried Zhai Tang's body over.

Tie Niaofei's subordinates had already dug pits for burial. So Luo Xi's men simply brought the corpse over, intending to toss it in and cover it together with the others.

But just as they laid the body down, one of Tie Niaofei's men shouted, "Boss! Come look at this. Quickly!"

Tie Niaofei waved him off. "I am in no mood to look at anything."

"Boss, come look. It is..."

"Not looking."

"It is Zhai Tang!"

"What?"

Tie Niaofei shot up like a startled tiger.

In two strides he reached the corpse and stared.

Then he burst into wild laughter.

"Hahahaha! Thought that dog escaped. Turns out General Luo took care of him. Hahahaha! General Luo, I thank you. I truly thank you."

Luo Xi blinked repeatedly. "Eh? Eh?"

Tie Niaofei drew his blade with a flash and chopped down onto the corpse. "Run, why don't you run again? Pay back my brothers' lives."

"Boss, he is already dead," a subordinate muttered. "No need to keep chopping."

"Of course I know he is dead. Even dead, his head comes off. I am taking it to my old brothers' graves."

And so he did.

Several swift chops later, Zhai Tang's head was severed. It was placed in a box with lime to preserve it. Tie Niaofei slung the box over his back as if it were a priceless treasure.

After this mission ended, he could finally go home and pay respects to his fallen men.

They would like this offering very much.

Off to the side, Luo Xi quietly pulled out his merit record book and scratched out "unnamed bandit chief." In its place he wrote: "Zhai Tang, heinous leader of the Jin merchants."

He stared at the entry.

Then his eyes lit up.

This should count as real merit. Strategic significance.

...

Dabie Mountains, northeast corner. Red Stone Valley.

When the Eight Great Kings entered the valley, fewer than five hundred men remained at his side.

From over one hundred thousand strong to this.

Inside the Dabie Mountains, his army had dissolved piece by piece.

Each time he tried to break out, Gaocun forces blocked the mountain passes. Then came bombardment. Thousands surrendered. Thousands scattered.

Again and again.

In the end, more than one hundred thousand men had turned to dust.

Only five hundred hardened bandits remained.

Yet he did not fear.

As long as even a handful still followed him, he could rise again.

This was not the first time he had been reduced to scraps.

Red Stone Valley was filled with crimson rocks.

The Eight Great Kings led his men around a massive red boulder.

From the opposite side of a narrow gully, another figure emerged.

The two locked eyes.

Recognition struck instantly.

"Eight Great Kings!"

"Zuo Liangyu!"

It turned out that after suffering consecutive defeats at the hands of Shi Kefa and the Eight Great Kings, Zuo Liangyu had also fled into the Dabie Mountains. Like his rival, he had wandered endlessly, unable to find a gap in the tightening encirclement.

Gaocun's converging armies had compressed the space again and again, forcing both sides into Red Stone Valley.

With the poisonous ring of encirclement shrinking steadily, it was inevitable that the Eight Great Kings and Zuo Liangyu would collide in the final circle.

Without hesitation, both drew their blades.

The scene echoed the earlier clash between Tie Niaofei and Zhai Tang.

But unlike that encounter, there were no disciplined musket volleys here to decide matters in an instant.

Both sides could only raise sabers, spears, and halberds.

With a roar, they charged.

Red Stone Valley became a killing ground.

The loser would be eliminated.

The winner, great fortune. Tonight, we eat chicken.

...

On a distant hilltop, a scout ran up to Gao Jie. "General Gao, two li to the east in Red Stone Valley, two armies are fighting."

Gao Jie raised a brow. "Who?"

"One side appears to be the Eight Great Kings. The other is an official army unit without banners."

Gao Jie laughed. "Then it is likely Zuo Liangyu. Dog bites dog. Let us go watch."

On another hill to the northeast, Henan's Provincial Governor Fan Shangjing received the same news.

"Red Stone Valley. The Eight Great Kings and Zuo Liangyu are fighting."

Fan Shangjing smiled. "Let us go enjoy the show."

Cheng Xu, Shi Kefa, Bai Yuan, Xing Honglang, Flat Rabbit.

One after another, Gaocun's converging militia forces received word.

All of them began moving toward Red Stone Valley.

Chapter 1227 Four Fronts, Six Corners, a Net Cast on All Sides

The Eight Great Kings tilted his head, narrowly dodging the blade that Zuo Liangyu slashed toward him, then snapped out a kick in retaliation. Zuo Liangyu twisted his waist and slipped aside. In the same motion, both men spun and hacked at each other's vital points.

Clang.

Their sabers collided midair, sparks bursting between them.

Zuo Liangyu might have been rotten in character, but his martial skill was real. The Eight Great Kings was hardly a saint either, yet his blade work was first rate. Steel rang again and again as they traded blows, neither able to gain the upper hand.

At that moment, a shout rose from the side.

"Father, I'll help you!"

Zuo Menggeng came charging in with his saber raised.

From the other side, Sun Kewang roared, "Godfather, I'll deal with Zuo Menggeng!"

The two young men crashed together in their own duel.

All across Red Stone Valley, fighting erupted in chaotic knots. Neither the official troops nor the Eight Great Kings' men could form ranks. The valley was a forest of jagged rocks. No formations were possible. It became a simple matter of hacking at whoever stood in front of you.

Then, on the eastern cliff, a head popped up.

It was Gao Jie. He pointed down at the melee. "Not bad blade work from the Eight Great Kings. That strike nearly got Zuo Liangyu."

Soon another head appeared beside him.

Fan Shangjing shook his head. "Zuo Liangyu's last swing was a pity. Almost had him."

On the western cliff, Flat Rabbit stuck his head out, glanced over the valley, and sighed. "All sabers. Not a single sword user. Morals decline, hearts grow old."

From the southwest ridge, Cheng Xu leaned out. "Oh ho, quite lively. Everyone's here."

Shi Kefa also peered down. "Cold steel against cold steel. Quite a spectacle."

Tie Niaofei called out, "Zhai Tang's dead. I'm free of burdens. Perfect day to watch a show."

Luo Xi muttered, "If they kill each other, what happens to my military merit?"

Lao Nanfeng shouted, "Chen Qianhu, bring out the camera that Tianzun granted me. Quickly!"

Gao Chuwu craned his neck. "My wife's on the opposite cliff. She looks beautiful."

Zheng Daniu grumbled, "Watching a show without food feels wrong. Chuwu, give me some of your rations."

"You ate yours already?"

"Finished them yesterday."

Bai Yuan smiled faintly. "Even a gentleman must sometimes sit and watch from the wall."

Wang Er snorted. "He who commits many injustices will surely destroy himself."

Ma Shouying stood cold and silent, saying nothing at all.

Then the mass produced Tianzun made his entrance. His first words were, "Place your bets. Small wagers for entertainment."

Unlike the others, Li Dao Xuan did not need to shout across cliffs. The embroidered icons on everyone's chest carried his voice. Within moments, the entire force knew the betting had opened.

"I'll wager five taels. Eight Great Kings wins."

"Three taels on Zuo Liangyu."

"Five hundred taels on the Eight Great Kings."

"Too much. I said small wagers. No more than five taels."

"Fine, five taels then."

The cliffs ringing Red Stone Valley were now lined with spectators, as if seated around a grand theater.

Time passed.

Suddenly the Eight Great Kings feinted, then drove his blade straight into Zuo Liangyu's chest.

Zuo Liangyu screamed, blood spraying from his mouth, and collapsed. He was clearly finished.

The Eight Great Kings raised his saber high and laughed wildly. "Zuo Liangyu, you dog. Just you? Hahaha. With you dead, great fortune indeed. Tonight, we celebrate with chicken."

No sooner had he spoken than cheers and wails erupted from the cliffs.

"Yes! I won. Eight Great Kings took it. Five taels earned!"

"Damn it. Why did I bet on Zuo Liangyu? Am I stupid?"

The Eight Great Kings froze.

He looked up.

The cliffs were packed with spectators, all staring down at him with amusement.

A chill ran through him.

The next instant, the mass produced Tianzun spoke calmly. "All right. Time for us to act. Begin."

Cannon thunder exploded.

Howitzers, small mortars, grenades.

From both sides of the valley, explosives rained down like a storm. Gaocun's forces had gathered in unprecedented numbers, over fifty thousand strong. Including the weaker Henan garrison troops, Anqing garrisons, the Prince of Chu's guards, and the new Sichuan militia, the total exceeded eighty thousand.

Eighty thousand men throwing explosives into a confined valley.

The sight was indescribable.

A moment earlier, the Eight Great Kings' rebels and Zuo Liangyu's soldiers had been locked in joyful, savage melee.

In a blink, the era changed.

Boom.

Two fighters, one rebel and one soldier, were blown into the air.

Boom.

Shrapnel scythed through a cluster of men.

Grenades fell as if free of cost. Blossoms of fire bloomed everywhere in Red Stone Valley. Smoke rolled thick and heavy, filled with screams and howls.

Ordinary soldiers were not even the worst off.

When people threw bombs, they aimed for the leader.

The Eight Great Kings stood at the center of the densest barrage.

Boom.

A shell blasted him skyward.

Before he hit the ground, another explosion hurled him sideways.

He flew back and forth like a scrap of paper caught in a gale.

As long as the explosions continued, he kept flying.

A life thin as paper.

Not far away, Sun Kewang and Zuo Menggeng had long since stopped fighting. Both lay flat on the ground, staring in horror.

After a long moment, Zuo Menggeng muttered, "Your father's dead."

Sun Kewang snarled, "Yours too."

They both cursed, leapt up, and charged at each other again.

Boom.

A grenade detonated beside them.

Both were thrown backward and did not rise again.

At the mouth of the valley, Pan Du'ao tried to lead a handful of hardened bandits in a breakout.

They burst out of the gorge only to find ranks of musket troops waiting in formation.

The exit was sealed tight.

Not even a rat could slip through.

At that point, even the fiercest bandit could only raise his hands.

"I surrender! I surrender!"

Shi Kefa stepped forward and sighed deeply. "You were once a scholar. Why become a bandit?"

Pan Du'ao replied bitterly, "The court was unjust. Corrupt officials seized my land."

Shi Kefa closed his eyes briefly. "As a former magistrate, I regret that deeply. Reform yourself well. After your sentence, come assist me in restoring the rule of law."

And thus, under the net cast on all sides, Red Stone Valley fell silent.

Chapter 1228 The Day the Wandering Bandits Were Swept Away

Capital City. Imperial Study.

Zhu Youjian sat hunched over the empire's rotting account books, his brows twisted so tightly they could have tied a knot by themselves. His mood rose and fell like a man strapped into a drop tower.

"Silver. I still lack silver." He slapped the desk in frustration. "Why? I have worked so hard. Why is there still no money?"

At his side, the grand eunuch Cao Huachun cautiously leaned forward. "Your Majesty, Lian Guoshi, Left Vice Minister of Revenue in Nanjing, has submitted a memorial."

"Nanjing's Ministry of Revenue?" Zhu Youjian frowned. Even he knew that the Nanjing Six Ministries were largely retirement posts. Memorials from there usually ended up buried in the pile marked unimportant. He read them only when in a good mood, and avoided them entirely when in a foul one.

Yet Cao Huachun had brought this up personally.

"Did you take Lian Guoshi's money?" the emperor asked bluntly. "Why are you specially presenting his memorial?"

Cao Huachun nearly dropped to his knees. "This servant would not dare. Not a single copper coin was taken. It is only that this memorial may benefit Your Majesty in your present difficulties. I mention it solely to share Your Majesty's burdens."

"Oh?"

Zhu Youjian took the memorial and read carefully.

It proposed formally lifting the maritime prohibitions in Fujian and Shanghai.

In truth, although the Great Ming claimed to enforce a sea ban, maritime trade had never fully ceased. Quanzhou remained active. Macao, leased to the Portuguese, bustled with commerce. Merchants traded quietly through Hangzhou and Shanghai while the court pretended not to see.

Lian Guoshi's proposal was simple. Since the ban was already half broken in practice, why not bring it into the open? Legalize it. Tax it.

Zhu Youjian nodded slowly. "He says the ban has long been secretly breached. Better to legalize it openly and allow the court to collect duties."

"Yes," Cao Huachun replied. "It may bring in some silver."

Silver.

At that word, the emperor's heart leapt.

"Approved. Lift the maritime ban in Fujian and Shanghai. Open trade to support military expenditures."

Cao Huachun continued, "Lian Guoshi also suggests that Nanjing's Six Ministries have too many redundant officials and should be streamlined."

That was something Zhu Youjian had long suspected. Since someone had raised it plainly, he might as well save money while at it.

"Cut eighty nine redundant posts in Nanjing," he declared, listing positions with brisk satisfaction.

How much silver would that save?

Before he could savor the thought, a young eunuch rushed in, breathless.

"Urgent military report! Urgent military report!"

The emperor straightened. "Speak."

The eunuch blurted, "Henan Governor Fan Shangjing, Anlu Governor Shi Kefa, Pucheng Garrison Commander Lao Nanfeng, Hedong Military Intendant Xing Honglang, Shangnan Garrison Commander Luo Xi, the Prefect of Wuchang, the Prince of Chu's Guard, Henan General Gao Jie, Henan Suppression Commander Zuo Liangyu and multiple other forces jointly advanced, encircled the Dabie Mountains, and killed the Eight Great Kings in Red Stone Valley. The bandit scourge that plagued the Central Plains for years has been pacified."

For a moment, Zhu Youjian felt as though he had been strapped to a soaring rocket.

Joy.

Wild joy.

Utter, unrestrained joy.

Not long ago he had heard that the Chuang forces were nearly annihilated in Sichuan by coordinated provincial troops. Now the Eight Great Kings was dead as well. Add those together and what did that mean?

Peace under Heaven.

His smile spread uncontrollably.

He threw his head back and laughed. "Hahaha! I have turned the tide. I have saved the realm. The empire is restored under my rule!"

Then he paused.

Something felt off.

"You just listed a long string of names. Should most of them not have been stationed elsewhere? Why were they in Huguang?"

The eunuch wiped sweat from his brow. "They were not supposed to be there."

"Summon the Minister of War, Yang Sichang. I want an explanation."

It did not take long.

Yang Sichang entered the Imperial Study, already aware of the report. The moment he saw the list of names, he had known disaster loomed. Such a massive troop movement without the emperor's knowledge could cost him his head.

He had no intention of following his father into a meaningless death.

By the time the summons came, his mind had already forged a path of survival.

He entered wearing a calm, confident smile.

Zhu Youjian tossed the urgent report before him. "Explain this. So many officials left their posts. I demand a reasonable answer."

Yang Sichang coughed lightly. "Your Majesty worries unnecessarily. They did not leave their posts without authorization. They acted under secret orders from the Ministry of War."

The emperor blinked. "Secret orders? Why was I not informed?"

Yang Sichang lowered his voice. "There is a traitor within the court who has repeatedly leaked our troop movements to the bandits, allowing them to escape encirclement. I do not know who it is. But I know the traitor is close to Your Majesty."

Zhu Youjian recoiled. "What?"

Yang Sichang pressed on smoothly. "Therefore, the Ministry of War devised a confidential plan known only to a select few. It was called the Four Fronts, Six Corners, Ten Sided Net strategy."

"The what?"

Yang Sichang spread his hands as if lecturing on grand strategy. "The realm is like a body. The capital is the head. The northern garrisons are the arms. The Central Plains between the Yellow River and the Yangtze are the vital organs. External threats may wound the limbs, but internal bandits poison the heart. If the heart festers, the body dies."

He let the metaphor sink in before continuing.

"I secretly redeployed elite forces to form an encirclement around the Central Plains. Four main armies advanced directly. Six supporting armies tightened from the flanks. A net cast on ten sides. Only after the bandits were destroyed in the Dabie Mountains did we reveal the plan. Thus the traitor could not leak it."

Silence filled the Imperial Study.

The emperor stared at him.

The plan sounded suspiciously improvised.

And yet.

The bandits were dead.

Chapter 1229 A Most Peculiar Fruit

Inside the Imperial Study, Zhu Youjian listened to Yang Sichang finish his explanation and found himself oddly persuaded.

If there truly was a spy in court, then secrecy made sense. And the result had been good, had it not? The Eight Great Kings was dead. The bandits were scattered.

No.

Good my foot.

Tens of thousands of troops had moved, and he, the Son of Heaven, had known nothing.

If Yang Sichang could secretly redeploy armies to Huguang, what would stop him from secretly redeploying them to the capital? Would Zhu Youjian only learn of it when soldiers were already at the city walls?

This precedent could not be allowed.

His face darkened.

"Yang Sichang, you mobilized vast forces without imperial approval. That borders on treason. However, since you have destroyed the bandits, I will consider merit to offset fault. I spare your head. But you shall no longer serve as Minister of War."

Yang Sichang's heart unclenched instantly.

Head intact.

A mere dismissal was a bargain.

He bowed, thanked the emperor, and withdrew at a speed that betrayed his relief. As former Minister of War, he understood the empire's military situation better than anyone. The troops that had marched to suppress the bandits did not truly obey him. Nor did they truly obey the emperor.

Then whose troops were they?

He did not dare pursue the thought. Better to keep one's head down and one's neck unsevered.

After he left, Zhu Youjian fell into fresh anxiety. The post of Minister of War was now vacant, and in these times that chair burned hotter than a brazier in winter.

After long hesitation, he gave the order.

"Summon the Three Border Governor Hong Chengchou to the capital. He shall serve as Minister of War."

---

Meanwhile, in every city and village of Tianzun's liberated territory, celebrations erupted.

The festival had, naturally, been invented on a whim by Dao Xuan Tianzun. The earliest villagers of Gaocun already knew that Tianzun delighted in creating strange new holidays out of thin air. This one was called the Day of Pacifying the Wandering Bandits.

The name hardly mattered.

What mattered was revelry.

In Xi'an, at the Caishikou market square, a giant liquid crystal screen broadcast the news. Two fresh faced anchors declared in unison, "The wandering bandits have been pacified!"

Cheers exploded. Hats flew skyward.

Behind Zhu Cunji, the bound and seated Mi Qianhu wore an expression worthy of a painter. This loyal Jinyiwei officer had watched the entire campaign through the news broadcasts. The army he had witnessed chilled him to the marrow.

If that terrifying force ever encircled the capital, what army in the Great Ming could stop it?

A voice rose from the crowd.

"Hey, why hasn't Tianzun bestowed a special food this time?"

"Yes, where's the heavenly delicacy?"

The people looked puzzled.

Zhu Cunji leaned over the balcony and shouted down, "Wait, Tianzun usually grants special food on festivals?"

"Of course!" someone yelled back. "At the Sudden Whim Festival in Gaocun, he gave us a gigantic piece of braised beef. Fragrant beyond words."

Zhu Cunji grew anxious. "Why not this time? Does this heir not deserve a taste of heavenly cuisine?"

Mi Qianhu snorted. "Fraud. All fraud. I do not believe in any Tianzun. Your so called immortal artifacts are nothing but clever craftsmanship. Even that treasure mirror of yours is manufactured trickery."

"Shut up, idiot," Zhu Cunji snapped. "It's because of stubborn fools like you that Tianzun has not bestowed food. You've doomed us."

They argued fiercely.

Outside the box, Li Dao Xuan was extremely busy.

He had just ordered over a hundred KFC snack buckets. Delivery riders in yellow uniforms had arrived one after another, so many that KFC had nearly needed a freight truck. Carrying more than a hundred buckets upstairs by himself, without revealing the secret of the box, had required several exhausting trips.

Now, at last, distribution could begin.

He reached into a bucket.

Fried drumstick.

Excellent.

With a flick, he dropped it into Gaocun.

The villagers erupted in cheers. "A giant drumstick!"

Next came a piece of popcorn chicken, tossed toward Luoyang.

More cheers.

Then his gaze shifted to Xi'an.

From the balcony, Zhu Cunji shouted at the heavens, "Tianzun! If Xi'an has done wrong, we shall correct it at once. Please do not disdain us. Grant us a heavenly delicacy!"

Li Dao Xuan laughed.

His hand brushed against an Orleans roasted chicken wing. Perfect.

He lowered it gently into the Caishikou square.

Below, the crowd scrambled back as a colossal roasted wing descended from the evening sky, glistening with oil, fragrant beyond belief.

Zhu Cunji beamed. "Tianzun has not forsaken Xi'an!"

Mi Qianhu stared upward, mind shattered.

He had dismissed everything as technological trickery. He had equated Dao Xuan Tianzun with heterodox cult idols like the Unborn Mother. Yet now, with his own eyes, he saw low clouds part in the dusk, and from that gap a gigantic roasted wing several zhang long slowly descend into the square that moments before had been packed with citizens watching the news.

The crowd parted with excitement rather than fear.

"How do we divide this?"

"Line up, line up. No trampling."

Shaanxi Governor Sun Chuanting leaped forward with yamen runners to maintain order.

"Four lines at every street entrance!"

The people complied swiftly. Officials carved slices from the enormous wing and handed them out one by one.

"I eat a lot. Cut me a bigger piece."

"I eat little. Smaller is fine. Don't waste."

Laughter filled the square as distribution proceeded smoothly.

Zhu Cunji dragged his consort downstairs and squeezed into a queue. When his turn came, he stretched out both hands. "This heir eats neither much nor little. A piece the size of my fist will do."

His wife declared, "I want one the size of my head."

The crowd gasped, eyes drifting toward her waist.

She flared instantly. "I am slim. My waist is slender. I simply eat well. What are you staring at?"

Laughter rippled through the square as everyone tactfully looked away.

Chapter 1230 Such a Method

Mi Qianhu was completely stunned by the sight of the "immortal giant chicken wing" before him, his mind blank and his tongue useless.

A group of local Xi'an Jinyiwei approached, escorted the tightly bound Mi Qianhu and his men downstairs, and rather unexpectedly placed them into the queue.

The local Jinyiwei Baihu spoke earnestly.

"Tianzun has said that you and your men have not truly committed any crime. You were restrained only to prevent news from reaching the capital. To be honest, that measure was somewhat improper, merely an expedient and not entirely just. Therefore you should not be treated as criminals. This Day of Pacifying the Wandering Bandits is a celebration for all. You should share in the joy and receive a portion."

Mi Qianhu's mouth opened and closed twice, but no words emerged.

When his turn finally came, the local Jinyiwei untied his ropes and nudged him lightly.

For reasons he could not explain, Mi Qianhu extended both hands as if accepting alms.

"I... I have a hearty appetite. A larger piece, please."

The yamen runner brought his blade down and cut a generous slab of chicken into Mi Qianhu's palms.

He bit down.

Fragrance exploded across his tongue. The Orleans roasted flavor was unlike anything he had tasted in his life.

He lifted his head slowly, gazing at the drifting clouds above.

"So there truly are immortals," he murmured. "No wonder everything I have seen in Shaanxi has felt unreal."

Zhu Cunji leaned closer. "Well? Will you still report everything here to the capital?"

Mi Qianhu swallowed.

"Even... even if immortals exist... my loyalty to His Majesty remains unwavering. The presence of immortals does not diminish my loyalty."

Zhu Cunji raised a brow. "And how will you write your report? That there is a god in Shaanxi teaching the emperor how to govern, and that His Majesty should kneel properly to receive instruction?"

Mi Qianhu froze.

He knew very well that such words, once spoken, would cost him his head.

After a long pause, he lowered his gaze in pain.

"Then... it is better not to report this matter."

Behind him, his twenty four subordinates nodded in unison. "Better not to report."

Mi Qianhu frowned. "Why are your voices so unclear?"

One of them replied thickly, "We are eating chicken."

He turned around.

All twenty four men stood there with mouths gleaming with oil. One still had a chunk of meat bulging in his cheek, chewing industriously.

Mi Qianhu suddenly felt that perhaps, just perhaps, silence was the wisest form of loyalty.

---

At the same time.

Yan'an. Baota Mountain Reform Through Labor Camp.

Li Dingguo sat before the television, watching the news broadcast to its conclusion. When the report declared that the Eight Great Kings had been shot dead in Red Stone Valley of the Dabie Mountains, tears slipped quietly down his face.

In the final moment before their separation, he had seen clearly the kind of man his adoptive father truly was. Now, hearing of his death, an indescribable complexity twisted within his chest.

After a long silence, he sighed softly.

"So this is what people mean by good rewarded and evil repaid."

---

While the mainland rejoiced in the destruction of the bandits, the sea roared with a different story.

Boom.

A cannon roared. A shell from a Dutch culverin slammed into the hull of Xiao Hei No.1 with a metallic crash. The aluminum alloy armor plate deflected it cleanly, but the impact transmitted a violent tremor through the ship's frame, causing sailors behind the plating to feel the shudder in their bones.

Ten year old E'zhe was thrown to the deck and rolled twice.

He still could not maintain balance like the veteran sailors. Any sudden vibration would send him sprawling.

Yet Mongol children were sturdy and uncomplaining.

He sprang back to his feet with a quick kip up and laughed.

"The enemy cannot penetrate our armor!"

Clang.

A second shot struck.

E'zhe hit the deck again.

From the deck not far away came the furious roar of Yao Xingjuan.

"Seven ships against one. We withdraw for today!"

E'zhe protested, "They cannot break our armor. Why retreat?"

Yao Xingjuan barked a laugh. "Child, what do you know? At this range we can at most punch holes in their hulls. Sinking them outright is nearly impossible. We are too few to board them. If we close in for hand to hand fighting, their numbers will overwhelm us. We fire a few rounds and leave. That is the proper course."

E'zhe paused, then nodded.

He understood now. A single ship against seven meant boarding was suicide. Once locked in close combat, artillery became useless, and manpower would decide the outcome.

"If only Mongol cavalry could ride across the sea," E'zhe muttered. "Send ten thousand men aboard and chop the Dutch to pieces."

Yao Xingjuan burst into laughter. "Then we would need a ship capable of carrying ten thousand men. Imagine the fleet required."

E'zhe fell silent.

"The strength of a navy lies in how many ships it possesses," Yao Xingjuan continued, "not in how many men stand on one deck. Helm, turn about. Withdraw."

Xiao Hei No.1 pivoted and disengaged.

Its speed far surpassed that of the Dutch sailing vessels. Once the steam paddle wheels spun to full power, it surged forward, leaving the wind driven ships cursing in its wake. Soon even their foamy trails vanished from sight.

Ahead, the shoreline came into view.

It was the same village Xiao Hei No.1 had previously aided with grain and weapons.

This time, the villagers did not flee in fear. Many ran to the shore, waving enthusiastically at the approaching vessel.

At Yao Xingjuan's order, Xiao Hei No.1 drew close.

A villager with darkened skin and features suggesting Southeast Asian heritage stepped forward, bowed deeply, and spoke in a rapid tongue none aboard could understand.

Soon several villagers carried a large wicker basket to the beach and set it down.

Clearly, they meant to offer a gift to their benefactors.

A sailor from Gaocun jumped ashore and examined the contents, looking baffled.

"Boss, it appears to be some sort of fruit. Strange shape. Like the clustered bumps atop a Buddha statue's head."

Yao Xingjuan laughed heartily. "A curious thing indeed. I have never seen its like."

He picked one up, turning it in his hands, uncertain how to eat it.

On shore, a villager demonstrated by splitting one open, revealing snow white flesh within, and taking a bite.

Understanding dawned.

Yao Xingjuan followed suit, cracked one apart, and bit down.

Sweetness burst across his tongue.

"Excellent!" he declared. "You bring us such a basket of rare fruit, and we must of course return the courtesy. Bring them another basket of grain."

The sailors promptly carried a basket of grain ashore and set it upon the sand.

The villagers' faces lit with joy. They waved vigorously at the ship, making expressive gestures that transcended language.

Though no words were shared, all understood the meaning.

Welcome back again.