

Great Ming 1291

Chapter 1291 Is One Hundred Thousand Taels Still Not Enough?

Early in the morning, Zhu Youjian had already started reviewing memorials.

The emperor of the Great Ming worked with frightening diligence. The sky had not even fully brightened yet, and he was already buried under mountains of paperwork, working harder than any model laborer anyone could imagine.

His eyes swept across the account books submitted by the Ministry of Revenue.

After a few pages, he could not help but shake his head in despair.

Poor.

The Great Ming was poor beyond belief.

The treasury revenue reported by the Ministry of Revenue was so pitiful that even the emperor himself felt like throwing the job aside and quitting.

At that moment, Zhu Youjian's mood felt exactly like riding one of those amusement park drop towers. Straight down.

"Your Majesty."

A young eunuch slipped quietly into the room.

"The Grand Secretary He Fengsheng requests an audience."

"Oh?"

Zhu Youjian glanced at the sky outside.

It was barely dawn.

That was strange.

Since taking office, this newly appointed Grand Secretary had been the very definition of laziness. He drifted through his duties like a piece of wood floating on water, offering not a single useful suggestion. The emperor had already been considering replacing him with someone who actually wanted to work.

So why was he here before sunrise today?

What medicine had he taken to suddenly become so diligent?

Something abnormal was definitely going on.

"Let him in," Zhu Youjian said with a snort. "I want to see what trick this decorative Grand Secretary is up to today."

Soon enough, He Fengsheng entered the imperial study.

The interesting part was that two eunuchs followed behind him, each carrying a large flower pot.

Two plants grew in the pots.

One plant looked extremely vigorous, leaves lush and thriving.

The other looked completely ordinary.

Zhu Youjian stared at them in confusion.

"What are you trying to do? Bringing these strange flower pots into my imperial study?"

He Fengsheng's face was glowing with excitement.

"Your Majesty, this humble official has good news to report."

"Oh?"

Zhu Youjian raised an eyebrow.

"What kind of good news?"

He Fengsheng pointed at the two pots.

"Your Majesty, can you tell which of these plants is growing better?"

"What nonsense!"

Zhu Youjian glared at him.

"Do you think I'm blind?"

He Fengsheng chuckled.

"These two plants were originally identical. They were planted in my household garden. However, a few days ago I obtained a miraculous fertilizer called chemical fertilizer. I applied it to only one of these pots."

He pointed to the thriving plant.

"Less than half a month later, Your Majesty can see the result."

Zhu Youjian stared.

Then he let out a quiet "Eh?"

Only a single second passed before the emperor's brain made the leap.

"If this were used on crops...!"

He Fengsheng immediately clasped his hands and bowed.

"Your Majesty truly lives up to the throne. Brilliant insight. You immediately understood the purpose of chemical fertilizer."

He continued excitedly.

"This humble official also brought an entire sack of fertilizer, along with a manual titled Scientific Use of Chemical Fertilizer. I humbly request that Your Majesty examine them."

Soon a large burlap sack filled with fertilizer was carried into the room.

Along with it came a book.

Scientific Use of Chemical Fertilizer.

Zhu Youjian grabbed the booklet and began flipping through it rapidly.

The book explained everything in incredible detail.

Which crops were suitable.

How to apply the fertilizer.

Recommended quantities.

Even soil conditions.

Everything was clearly listed.

After reading quickly through it once, Zhu Youjian suddenly had the strange feeling that he himself might be able to farm now.

"This thing is excellent!"

The emperor burst into joy.

"I will test it first on my own imperial estates. If it truly doubles the harvest as the book claims, that would be extraordinary."

Now his mood felt like riding a jet plane straight upward.

He immediately stopped reviewing memorials.

"Guards! Bring the fertilizer!"

Clutching the instruction manual in his own hands, Zhu Youjian strode out of the palace at once.

They were heading to the Imperial Estates.

These were farmlands directly managed by the Ming imperial family, mainly located in the northern Zhili region across eight prefectures.

Among them, Shuntian, Baoding, and Hejian held the largest areas.

Moving at the fastest speed possible, Zhu Youjian soon arrived at one of the estates in Shuntian Prefecture.

As he walked along a rural path inside the estate, he noticed an official inspecting the countryside ahead.

Zhu Youjian pointed.

"Who is that? Out inspecting villages so early in the morning. Quite diligent."

He Fengsheng quickly explained.

"That is the newly appointed Assistant Prefect of Shuntian, Liang Shixian. He previously served as magistrate of Chengcheng County."

Zhu Youjian nodded.

"So the famous 'three fires of a new official taking office.' No wonder he's already working at dawn."

He Fengsheng leaned closer and spoke softly.

"Your Majesty, the chemical fertilizer I just presented was actually delivered by Liang Shixian."

"Oh?"

Now the emperor became interested.

"Call him over."

A guard ran over and shouted a few times.

Soon Liang Shixian approached, performed a deep formal salute, and then respectfully accompanied the emperor.

As they walked toward the fields, Zhu Youjian asked:

"I hear the fertilizer was your contribution?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Did you test it while serving in Chengcheng County?"

"I did. The results were excellent."

Zhu Youjian frowned slightly.

"Then why have I not heard of Chengcheng County's tax revenue increasing?"

Liang Shixian had clearly anticipated this question.

He clasped his hands calmly.

"Although Chengcheng County's grain production increased, since the third year of the Chongzhen reign, all bandits in Shaanxi who were disbanded were sent to Chengcheng County for resettlement. The extra grain produced there was used to feed those surrendered bandits."

He paused.

"Your Majesty can verify this easily."

Zhu Youjian turned his head slightly and glanced at Cao Huachun.

The eunuch stepped forward immediately and whispered into the emperor's ear.

"This is indeed true. After Hong Chengchou executed the rebel leaders back then, the captured followers were sent to Chengcheng County for handling. Additionally, the censor Wu Shen also sent surrendered bandits there."

He continued quietly.

"According to Wu Shen's report, the bandits were settled in the Huanglong Mountains, given rations, and they did not rebel again afterward."

Zhu Youjian looked shocked.

"Why was I never informed of this?"

Cao Huachun replied calmly.

"You did read the memorials, Your Majesty. However, you believed Wu Shen was using the one hundred thousand taels of silver you granted, so you did not investigate further."

Zhu Youjian blinked.

"One hundred thousand taels wasn't enough? They also had to use Chengcheng County's grain?"

Cao Huachun looked at him with the expression one might use when staring at a fool.

Of course, he realized that was terribly disrespectful.

He quickly blinked and replaced the expression with big innocent watery eyes.

Zhu Youjian coughed lightly.

Something about that look earlier seemed suspicious.

Had he just said something stupid?

Better not pursue it.

He waved Liang Shixian over.

"Come with me. Let's test this fertilizer ourselves."

Liang Shixian bowed.

"This humble official obeys."

The group soon arrived at a stretch of farmland inside the imperial estate.

Zhu Youjian flipped through the instruction manual again.

Soil acidity. Soil alkalinity.

When he read the book earlier it all seemed perfectly clear.

Now that he stood beside an actual field...

His mind went completely blank.

How exactly was this supposed to work?

At that moment, Liang Shixian crouched down beside the soil.

He stuck a finger into the dirt.

Then he brought the muddy finger to his mouth.

And licked it.

Zhu Youjian nearly jumped in shock.

Eating dirt?!

Wasn't that filthy?

Liang Shixian carefully tasted the soil.

"This field is slightly alkaline. That's why the crops aren't growing well."

He nodded seriously.

"It must be treated with potassium dihydrogen phosphate."

Zhu Youjian:

"..."

Everyone else nearby:

"..."

Total silence.

Not a single person understood a word.

Liang Shixian clearly knew they wouldn't understand anyway, so he simply got to work.

He opened the fertilizer sack, grabbed a handful of potassium dihydrogen phosphate, and scattered it evenly across the soil surface.

Then he used a rake to gently loosen the dirt so the fertilizer mixed evenly with the soil.

He clapped the dust from his hands.

"All done."

Then he said casually:

"Just repeat this process across the entire field."

Chapter 1292 Dao Xuan Tianzun Zibo Barbecue Festival

Zhu Youjian stood where he was and did absolutely nothing.

The eunuchs, however, immediately sprang into action.

They ran around the Imperial Estates shouting instructions, summoning a large group of farmers. Soon the whole place was bustling. Under the guidance of Liang Shixian's earlier demonstration, everyone began copying the process, carefully spreading the chemical fertilizer across the fields.

After a busy stretch of work, half a sack of fertilizer had been used up.

A large patch of farmland was now properly fertilized.

Zhu Youjian was extremely eager to see the results.

Unfortunately, crops did not care about imperial impatience.

Fertilizer did not perform miracles overnight. The only thing to do was wait.

And wait.

Three days later, Zhu Youjian had already forgotten the entire matter.

A whole month passed before Cao Huachun cautiously reminded him.

"Your Majesty, the people from the Imperial Estates have come to report something. They say the fields where fertilizer was applied are growing extremely well."

Zhu Youjian blinked.

"What?"

He looked puzzled.

"What fertilizer?"

Cao Huachun froze.

This was... awkward.

He had no choice but to help the emperor recover his lost memory.

After a long explanation, Zhu Youjian suddenly slapped his thigh.

"Ah! Right, right! The fertilizer I personally applied!"

Cao Huachun silently rolled his eyes inside.

You personally applied it?

Since when?

Zhu Youjian jumped up excitedly.

"If the results are visible now, we must go take a look immediately!"

Cao Huachun muttered under his breath.

"When did you ever personally apply any fertilizer..."

Zhu Youjian turned his head.

"What are you mumbling about?"

Cao Huachun instantly raised his voice.

"I was saying that Your Majesty is wise and mighty, personally overseeing every matter!"

Zhu Youjian nodded with satisfaction.

"Good. Let us go."

The emperor hurried off toward the Imperial Estates again.

Before long, Zhu Youjian was standing at the edge of the farmland.

He lifted his eyes and looked across the fields.

Then he froze.

The crops in the fertilized section were growing vigorously. The difference was obvious even to someone who knew almost nothing about farming. Compared with the neighboring fields, the plants here were taller, greener, and visibly stronger.

The contrast was almost ridiculous.

Even Zhu Youjian could tell that this patch would produce far better harvests than the others.

The emperor burst into laughter.

"This chemical fertilizer is truly amazing! If every field in the empire could increase its harvest like this, I would never have to worry about money again."

Cao Huachun immediately bowed.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty! Such a miraculous fertilizer..."

At that moment, the steward of the Imperial Estates hurried over and bowed.

"Your Majesty, I must report something."

He looked miserable.

"The fertilizer... only half a sack remains. It will only last for one more application."

Zhu Youjian stared.

"What? Who presented this fertilizer in the first place?"

Cao Huachun replied.

"It was presented by Grand Secretary He Fengsheng and the Assistant Prefect of Shuntian, Liang Shixian."

Zhu Youjian waved his hand casually.

"Then have them present more."

Very soon, He Fengsheng and Liang Shixian were summoned to the Imperial Estates.

Liang Shixian stepped forward and spoke calmly.

"Your Majesty has already seen the effect of the fertilizer. But a sack of this size can only support the fields in front of us for about two months."

He gestured toward the vast farmland.

"Your Majesty's Imperial Estates are enormous. There are countless fields like this one."

He continued counting.

"Besides the Imperial Estates, there are also the lands of princes and nobles, the estates of local gentry, and the fields of ordinary farmers."

Liang Shixian shook his head.

"If we want all these lands to use fertilizer, the small quantity I brought from Shaanxi is nowhere near enough."

Zhu Youjian nodded.

"That makes sense. So how do we produce more fertilizer?"

Liang Shixian smiled.

"Build factories."

He followed the emperor's train of thought perfectly.

"If we build fertilizer factories and produce large quantities, we will be able to supply the surrounding farmland."

Zhu Youjian did not hesitate for even a moment.

"If that is the case, then build them immediately."

When the emperor spoke the words "build them immediately," those four simple characters instantly became the highest priority of the entire court.

Liang Shixian soon received an imperial edict.

He was authorized to build a Gaocun-style factory in Shuntian Prefecture.

Liang Shixian chuckled.

Then he rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

Meanwhile.

Outside Jinan City.

Panlong Mountain.

The army of Chuang Wang had been stationed here for several days. Yet Jinan City stubbornly refused to open its gates and surrender.

Li Guo approached his uncle.

"Uncle," he said quietly. "Our food supplies are starting to run low."

Chuang Wang frowned.

The situation was not good.

A few days earlier, Niu Jinxing had tricked Li Yan out of the camp, planning to deal with him in a secluded place. In the end, Niu Jinxing died instead, while Li Yan disappeared.

No one knew whether he had defected to the firearm rebels.

Chuang Wang had suddenly lost two strategists.

Only Song Xiance remained.

But losing strategists was not the worst problem.

Food was.

The rebel army had to keep moving constantly, attacking cities and seizing supplies in order to survive.

But Jinan had not been persuaded by the famous nursery rhyme.

If they tried to take such a large city by force, the cost would be enormous.

Chuang Wang finally made a decision.

"We cannot remain here in a stalemate with Jinan."

He stood up.

"We need to attack another city and open their official granaries. Only then can we keep the army alive."

Li Guo nodded.

"East of Jinan there is a county called Zibo. It is not large and should be easier to take."

Chuang Wang slapped the table.

"Good. We will attack Zibo."

The rebel army immediately set out.

Three days later they arrived outside Zibo City.

Their agents had already spread the famous nursery rhyme there.

But when the army appeared outside the city walls, the gates were tightly shut.

There was no sign of anyone coming out to welcome Chuang Wang.

Chuang Wang waved his hand.

Five hundred professional insult-shouters stepped forward and began yelling toward the city.

"Eat his mother, wear his mother, and still not enough. Only Chuang Wang can give you more!"

"Open the gates and welcome Chuang Wang!"

"When Chuang Wang arrives, there will be no taxes!"

"Poor people of the city, what are you waiting for? Kill the corrupt officials and open the gates!"

After the shouting ended, the magistrate of Zibo appeared on the city wall.

In his left hand he held a skewer of Zibo barbecue.

With his right hand he pointed toward the rebel army and shouted angrily.

"This official is eating dinner and you choose this moment to attack my city?"

"Have you no shame at all? Can a man not eat in peace?"

Seeing this scene, Chuang Wang suddenly had an idea.

He waved his hand again.

The five hundred insult-shouters immediately resumed their yelling.

"Look at your dog magistrate!"

"He is eating barbecue while you are starving!"

"Why are you still waiting? Overthrow him!"

The moment the shouting stopped, dozens of heads popped up along the city wall.

They were members of the local militia and ordinary citizens.

Every single one of them was holding a barbecue skewer.

They shouted back at the rebels.

"You liars! Stop trying to trick us!"

"The 'no taxes' thing is obviously fake!"

"We are not falling for that nonsense!"

"We are currently holding the Dao Xuan Tianzun Zibo Barbecue Festival and having a great time!"

"Can you stop making trouble for a moment?"

A huge question mark slowly appeared above Chuang Wang's head.

"What on earth is the Dao Xuan Tianzun Zibo Barbecue Festival?"

At that moment another person appeared on the city wall.

It was Li Yan.

The moment Chuang Wang saw him, his expression turned awkward.

The rebel soldiers also froze.

Li Yan enjoyed tremendous prestige within the rebel army. Many soldiers respected him deeply.

Now he was standing inside an official city.

Half of the hundred-thousand-strong rebel army instantly fell into confusion.

Li Yan said something.

But his voice was too soft.

The wind carried his words away before they reached the rebels.

Then another scholar-like figure appeared beside him and handed him a metal speaking trumpet.

Li Yan took the device and cleared his throat.

"Hello. Hello. Can you hear me?"

For some reason, everyone who used such a device for the first time always said that.

After testing the sound, Li Yan sighed.

"Brother Chuang Wang."

"The nursery rhyme about not paying taxes was taught to you by me."

"But now I realize that I was wrong."

"I was naive."

"I discovered my mistake too late."

He looked straight at Chuang Wang.

"But you were different."

"You knew from the beginning that I was wrong."

"You never exposed me. Instead, you pretended to believe me and followed my plan."

Li Yan's voice became heavier.

"In reality, you were only using me."

"You never truly intended to abolish taxes."

"Am I right?"

Chapter 1293 After War, Eat Barbecue

Li Yan's words instantly put Chuang Wang in an awkward position.

Not just him.

The entire army of one hundred thousand rebels froze.

Suspicious glances flew in every direction and eventually converged on Chuang Wang like arrows.

Chuang Wang felt a chill in his heart.

This was bad.

But showing weakness now would be fatal. He quickly arranged his face into an expression of sincerity, warmth, and righteous humanity.

"Mr. Li," he said gently, "you are wronging me. Of course I support the policy of no taxes. I have always respected your ideas. Whatever you suggested, I followed."

Li Yan looked straight at him.

"Then why did you send Niu Jinxing to kill me?"

The words floated across the battlefield.

Yet they struck like thunder.

The hundred thousand rebels erupted into restless movement like waves on the sea.

Chuang Wang opened his mouth.

Then closed it again.

He simply did not know how to respond.

After all, he was a rough man with little education. Even the most eloquent scholars might have struggled to answer such a question on the spot.

And Chuang Wang was no scholar.

But a rough man had rough methods.

Suddenly Chuang Wang roared.

"Fengtian Changyi Battalion! Attack!"

"Do not let him continue spreading nonsense and shaking our morale!"

The Fengtian Changyi Battalion would never be shaken by Li Yan's words.

Because they had never followed Chuang Wang for the "no taxes" policy in the first place.

They followed him for something else.

The ancient dream of rebellion.

"Are kings and nobles born to rule?"

They wanted glory.

They wanted to become ministers of a new dynasty.

More than a hundred core veterans from the old Eight Companies immediately rushed forward.

Their charge ignited the entire Fengtian Changyi Battalion.

One thousand men surged toward the city wall.

Then the momentum spread further.

More rebel soldiers joined.

Soon nearly ten thousand men were advancing toward Zibo City.

On the city wall, the county magistrate's Zibo barbecue skewer fell from his hand.

Clack.

He was completely stunned.

But the militia and townspeople beside him showed a very different reaction.

They shoved their skewers into their mouths, stripped the meat off the sticks with their teeth, chewed quickly, and shouted while chewing.

"The liars are attacking!"

"Defend the city!"

From within the crowd, Liu Maopao's head suddenly appeared.

"We only need to hold for a short time!" he shouted.

"Sun Chuanting's reinforcements will arrive soon. Do not panic!"

The defenders immediately began preparing.

"Bows!"

"Rolling stones!"

"Logs!"

Someone suddenly shouted in panic.

"Hey! Do not take that oil pot! I still need that oil to grill skewers!"

Another man cursed.

"Damn it, the oil pot is a defensive weapon! Stop thinking about barbecue!"

"But today is the Heavenly Festival Barbecue Day!"

"You idiot! Even the festival name is wrong!"

"It is the Dao Xuan Tianzun Zibo Barbecue Festival!"

The militia and civilians fell into a chaotic argument.

Li Yan watched the scene from the wall.

Despite the noise, anxiety still filled his heart.

These militia and civilians were brave.

But how could they possibly resist a hundred thousand rebels?

Just as fear began creeping into his mind...

Something moved.

The statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun that had been placed in the city for the festival mascot suddenly shifted.

In fact, that statue was not a statue at all.

It was one of the mass-produced Tianzun avatars.

Li DaoXuan stretched his arms and legs and stood up.

Liu Maopao's eyes lit up with excitement.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun personally joins the defense!"

"This battle is secure!"

He had barely finished shouting when Li DaoXuan casually grabbed a barbecue skewer and stuffed it into his mouth.

"Hahaha!"

"Zibo barbecue! Smells amazing. Fantastic."

Liu Maopao fell silent.

Li Yan also fell silent.

After finishing the skewer, Li DaoXuan finally looked around.

He saw everyone rushing toward the wall carrying stones and logs.

"Oh?"

"Is there a battle happening?"

Liu Maopao jumped over quickly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, the rebel army is attacking!"

"What?"

Li DaoXuan exploded with anger.

"Can they not let people enjoy Zibo barbecue in peace?"

"Do they know how hard it is for someone from Chongqing to eat authentic Zibo barbecue?"

Liu Maopao scratched his head awkwardly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun... with respect, you are a deity. Not a Chongqing resident."

Li DaoXuan ignored him completely.

With a leap he landed on top of the city wall.

He faced the rebel army outside the city with the posture of a lone warrior guarding the pass.

"Damn it!"

"Hurry up and fight!"

"Once the battle is done, we can go back to eating skewers!"

Liu Maopao was still confused.

But his mind was quick.

In that split second he suppressed every question and immediately performed his role as Tianzun's hype man.

He took a deep breath and roared.

"Divine decree from Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"Finish the fight quickly and then eat barbecue!"

The militia and assisting civilians were instantly swept up in the momentum.

They shouted together.

"Finish the fight and eat barbecue!"

"Finish the fight and eat barbecue!"

The entire city of Zibo echoed with the chant.

The sound shook the sky.

The rebels outside the city stared in disbelief.

"What kind of slogan is that?"

Meanwhile the Fengtian Changyi Battalion continued their charge.

"Attack!"

Li DaoXuan calmly removed the palms from his hands.

Two small cannons emerged.

Boom.

Boom.

The thunderous blasts marked the beginning of the siege battle.

The rebels soon discovered something terrifying.

The figure on the city wall was a monster.

He was completely fearless.

While arrows and gunfire flew through the air, he leaped around the wall as if dancing.

His arms were equipped with small cannons.

After firing them he casually reattached his hands.

Then he pulled out a matchlock gun and fired randomly.

A moment later he grabbed a huge log and threw it down at the attackers.

If he did not fear death...

Then the ones who feared death became the rebels.

The soldiers of the Fengtian Changyi Battalion were brutal bandits who normally feared nothing.

Yet watching this inhuman creature jumping around on the wall destroyed their morale.

Their attacks grew weaker.

Even climbing the wall felt exhausting.

Soon the first assault was completely repelled.

The rebels paused to rest and recover morale.

Suddenly voices rose from the western horizon.

Reinforcements had arrived.

Sun Chuanting was leading the Capital Army.

At the front rode a general with a terrifying face that looked born for killing.

He roared and charged directly toward the rebels.

Even from a distance his face alone was enough to frighten them.

Not a single rebel commander dared challenge him.

Behind him marched six hundred elite soldiers.

Their combat power was extremely fierce.

At a glance one could tell they were frontier veterans.

More frightening was their equipment.

Lightweight aluminum alloy armor.

New matchlock guns with bayonets.

Grenades.

And red tassel broadswords hanging at their waists.

They were armed from head to toe.

Six hundred men looked like six hundred iron juggernauts.

Behind them followed five thousand soldiers from the Capital Army.

Most were newly recruited rookies.

But their presence alone was impressive enough.

When this force entered the battlefield and swept across the flank...

The rebel army began collapsing.

If all one hundred thousand rebels had fought together, they could have easily overwhelmed a few thousand enemies.

But at this moment only ten thousand were actually fighting.

The other ninety thousand were still stunned by Li Yan's earlier words.

Ten thousand rebels against Sun Chuanting's forces were simply not enough.

The result was immediate.

The rebel army collapsed.

Soldiers scattered across the mountains and fields in complete chaos.

The hundred thousand army had arrived quickly.

And now it disintegrated just as quickly.

In the blink of an eye, the battlefield turned into a cloud of fleeing dust.

Chapter 1294 Let Him Finish Speaking

The Real Rebels Are the Ones Who Owe My Army Its Pay

"Report to His Majesty! Wonderful news! Wonderful news!"

A young eunuch stumbled into the imperial study, nearly tripping over his own robes. He wailed excitedly as he rushed toward the desk.

"Minister of War Sun Chuanting has defeated the rebel Chuang Wang at Zibo. One hundred thousand rebel troops have been completely annihilated!"

The man sitting behind the desk, Zhu Youjian, shot to his feet.

"Is this true?"

At that moment his mood rose like a rocket blasting toward the heavens.

"Absolutely true!" the eunuch replied breathlessly. "A secret report from the Embroidered Uniform Guard arrived at the same time as Sun Chuanting's official dispatch. There is no mistake."

Zhu Youjian felt so delighted that for a moment he did not even know what to say.

Chuang Wang's forces were the last major bandit army in the realm.

With them destroyed, the interior of the empire was finally peaceful.

Only the external threat remained, the Jianzhou tribes in the northeast still stirring trouble.

He laughed loudly.

"Excellent! Excellent! As expected, I am the emperor destined to revive the Great Ming. A ruler of a prosperous age!"

Just then another eunuch slipped into the room.

It was Gao Qiqian.

His face looked full of grievance.

"Your Majesty," he said pitifully, "please do not let your joy make you forget what Sun Chuanting's men did to this old servant. They beat me and showed no respect for Your Majesty's authority."

Zhu Youjian nodded slowly.

"Do not worry."

"The humiliation you suffered will be avenged."

Outside Jinan City, nearly one hundred thousand captured rebels were being held under guard.

When Chuang Wang's army collapsed, the rebels scattered in every direction.

Li Yan relied on his personal reputation and shouted desperately on the battlefield. His voice convinced several tens of thousands to remain behind and surrender on the spot.

Meanwhile Sun Chuanting dispatched troops to intercept and pursue the rest.

The situation of the realm had changed in recent years. Bandit armies no longer roamed everywhere as they once had.

So the fleeing rebels quickly discovered that there was nowhere left to run.

North led directly toward the capital.

They did not dare go that way.

South meant entering the rich lands of the southern provinces.

They did not dare go there either.

To the east lay only the sea.

What were they supposed to do, jump into the ocean?

The fleeing rebels wandered in panic for days until Sun Chuanting's soldiers caught up with them.

In the end they had no choice but to surrender and gather outside Jinan.

Now the full hundred thousand stood there, anxious and confused.

None of them knew what fate awaited them.

Worse still, they had run out of food.

Chuang Wang had attacked Zibo because the army was already starving.

After their defeat and days of chaotic flight, the rebels had eaten the last scraps of grain they carried.

One hundred thousand mouths.

All gathered outside Jinan.

The local authorities could never feed so many people.

Their eventual fate looked grim.

Just as panic spread through the crowd, two figures appeared before them.

Li Yan.

And Liu Maopao.

Li Yan glanced at Liu Maopao as if asking permission.

Liu Maopao gave a small nod.

Only then did Li Yan climb onto the city wall.

From that height he could see the sea of captured soldiers stretching across the plain.

He raised a metal speaking trumpet and called out.

"Everyone, do not be afraid."

"Most of you are not like the bandits of the past who burned villages and slaughtered people."

"You are ordinary citizens who were misled by my mistaken idea of 'no taxes.' Your hands are not stained with blood."

The massive crowd froze in surprise.

They had expected Li Yan, now apparently working with the government, to condemn them.

Instead he spoke like this.

Li Yan continued calmly.

"The bandits of the past robbed and killed in order to satisfy their own greed."

"But most of you are different."

"You only wanted to resist harsh rule. You only hoped life might become a little easier."

"You did not harm poor commoners."

"At most you robbed government granaries."

The rebels exchanged uneasy glances.

Robbing the government sounded like a serious crime.

Surely the officials hated them for it.

Li Yan suddenly changed tone.

"I was wrong about the policy of no taxes."

"But I was not wrong about one thing."

"Resisting tyranny."

"If a government becomes corrupt and cruel, ignoring the people's livelihood while exploiting and oppressing them, then rising up to overthrow such a government is not wrong."

A loud uproar exploded across the crowd.

The hundred thousand prisoners could hardly believe their ears.

Li Yan was defending them.

But this was happening right in front of the city of Jinan.

Officials were listening.

Common citizens were listening.

Was this not dangerously rebellious talk?

Naturally, trouble arrived immediately.

The Prefect of Jinan rushed out in fury, followed by clerks, constables, and a group of Embroidered Uniform Guards.

One of the guards pointed at Li Yan.

"You scholar! What treasonous nonsense are you speaking?"

"We allowed you to address the prisoners out of respect for Governor Sun, believing you to be his advisor."

"But these are rebellious words."

"You will be arrested immediately. Come down from the wall!"

Li Yan laughed softly.

"I have not finished speaking."

"I cannot come down yet."

He turned back toward the prisoners.

"Most of you will not be punished."

"Only a small number among you are guilty."

"We will identify those guilty individuals and deal with them according to the law."

"As for the innocent, I will arrange proper settlements for you."

"Rest assured."

"You will not be handed over to the imperial court for punishment."

The Prefect of Jinan shouted angrily.

"Seize that scholar!"

His constables rushed toward the stairs leading up the wall.

The prisoners outside the city began shouting in agitation.

Some even tried to surge forward to help Li Yan.

But their weapons had long been confiscated, and Sun Chuanting's soldiers surrounded them.

They could only shout their support.

Then something astonishing happened.

The government troops blocked the stairway.

They physically stopped the prefect's men and the Embroidered Uniform Guards.

The prefect stared in shock.

"Governor Sun... what is the meaning of this?"

Sun Chuanting shrugged.

"It means nothing special."

"He has not finished speaking yet."

"It seems rude to arrest a man before he finishes."

"At least let him say his piece."

The prefect nearly choked with anger.

"These are dangerous words spoken before one hundred thousand prisoners and countless citizens of Jinan!"

"The consequences could be terrible!"

"How can you allow him to continue?"

"Governor Sun, you..."

Sun Chuanting waved his hand impatiently.

"Enough chatter."

"Men, detain the Prefect of Jinan and his companions."

"Would it not be better if everyone quietly listened to Mr. Li?"

Instantly more than a hundred matchlock guns were raised and aimed at the prefect.

A certain Chen Qianhu stepped forward through the soldiers.

He tried to look friendly and spoke in a gentle tone.

"Your Excellency, please come with us for a moment..."

Before he could finish the sentence, the prefect looked at Chen Qianhu's terrifying face and sinister aura.

He screamed in panic.

"Ah!"

"Do not kill me!"

Chen Qianhu froze awkwardly.

Then he turned toward the Embroidered Uniform Guards.

They immediately lowered their weapons and raised their hands.

Inside their hearts they were thinking the same thing.

This was bad.

Sun Chuanting had unleashed his terrifying household troops on them.

Could it be that he had joined forces with the rebels?

Li Yan glanced back.

Seeing the situation under control, he felt relieved.

He raised his voice again.

"Remember this spirit."

"If tyranny ever appears above your heads again, never forget to resist."

"That is all I wished to say."

"Now, please bring forward the former core troops of Chuang Wang, the veterans known as the Old Eight Companies."

"As for the rest of you..."

"You are all free of guilt."

"You may go."

Chapter 1295 Anyone Who Pays Me, Is My father.

"Boom!"

The moment the announcement was made, the one hundred thousand captives erupted like a pot of boiling water.

Joy spread through the crowd faster than wildfire.

Soon the people began searching through the prisoners on their own.

"You! You were in the Old Eight Companies. Hao Yaoqi!"

"And you too! Old Eight Companies!"

"I recognize you!"

In the blink of an eye, more than fifty members of the Old Eight Companies were dragged out of the crowd and pushed forward.

Someone even found the final strategist of Chuang Wang, Song Xiance, hiding among the prisoners. They twisted his arms behind his back and shoved him out as well.

When Song Xiance saw Li Yan, he immediately gave a helpless smile.

"Strategist Li, the matter of Chuang Wang and Niu Jinxing plotting to kill you... I truly had no knowledge of it."

Li Yan sighed softly.

"That, I actually believe."

He looked at Song Xiance with a complicated expression.

"Mr. Song has never been a wicked man. Once, after Chuang Wang tricked a city into opening its gates, Niu Jinxing began brutally torturing the local gentry to force them to hand over their wealth. It was Mr. Song who stepped in and said, 'The celestial signs are grim, the sun is dim, punishment must cease immediately.' Because of those words, a meaningless massacre was avoided."

Beside them, Liu Maopao chuckled.

"Oh? If that's the case, he sounds a lot like our Third Steward."

Li Yan blinked.

"Third Steward? Who is that?"

Liu Maopao grinned.

"The most famous softhearted fool in our village."

Since Li Yan himself said Song Xiance was not a bad person, the people of Gao Family Village had no intention of making things difficult for him.

Liu Maopao even waved him over.

"Mr. Song, any interest in joining us? We're terribly short on manpower, especially people who can read and write. Those are treated like treasure here."

Song Xiance already knew this group was not imperial troops but rather musket rebels.

Then again, he himself had always been a rebel.

Switching from one rebel army to another did not seem like much of a psychological burden.

So he bowed deeply.

"Then I look forward to your guidance."

At that moment, a soldier saluted Sun Chuanting.

"Report. Chuang Wang has not been found."

Sun Chuanting frowned slightly.

"He ran away again? That fellow really is good at escaping."

The soldier nodded.

"His nephew Li Guo also escaped. General Liu Zongmin is missing as well. When the hundred thousand troops scattered earlier, they must have slipped away through mountain paths during the chaos."

He paused, then added:

"We pursued very closely this time. He even abandoned many of the Old Eight Companies. He probably has only a dozen men left with him."

Sun Chuanting let out a long sigh.

"If he only has a dozen men... then he'll be impossible to find."

Even in modern times, with surveillance cameras everywhere, a dozen people escaping through mountain roads would be difficult to track.

In this era, it was simply impossible.

Sun Chuanting shook his head.

"Evil men will eventually meet their fate. He will not end well."

While they were chatting, another problem had appeared.

The one hundred thousand commoners who had just been released.

Yes, they were free now.

But they still had no food.

No property.

If they returned to their hometowns, they would likely starve.

What were they supposed to do?

Right at that moment, something astonishing appeared on the Yellow River north of Jinan.

A massive fleet of ships.

Every vessel was a flat motorized cargo boat.

The decks were piled high with grain.

Each ship probably carried over one hundred thousand jin of food.

When so many ships sailed together, the sight stunned everyone.

The citizens inside Jinan.

The hundred thousand freed peasants outside the city.

Even the detained Prefect of Jinan and the Embroidered Uniform Guard officials.

None of them had ever seen transportation on such a scale.

"What... what is this?"

"Why is so much grain suddenly arriving?"

Liu Maopao lowered his head and listened to the embroidered Tianzun on his chest.

After hearing the instructions, his eyes lit up.

He leaped onto the city wall, grabbed the metal loudspeaker from Li Yan, and shouted.

"People of the city and the countryside, listen carefully!"

"These supplies are a gift from Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"Starting today, an operation called the Shandong Grand Development will begin!"

He gestured toward the enormous fleet behind him.

"We will recruit large numbers of workers to develop Shandong. Bridges will be repaired, roads rebuilt, and factories constructed."

"The grain on these ships will be used to pay wages!"

He raised his voice even louder.

"Recruitment begins now!"

"Laborers who perform heavy work will receive three jin of flour per day!"

"Skilled workers will earn three taels of silver per month!"

He had barely finished speaking.

The entire region exploded.

"I! I! Pick me!"

"I'm a carpenter!"

"I'm a mason!"

"I'm a blacksmith!"

"I can do heavy labor!"

Hands shot up everywhere.

Even one of the Prefect of Jinan's hangers-on suddenly raised his hand.

"I know carving techniques! Can I get three taels a month? If that's the salary, why would I stay a useless assistant?"

The Prefect of Jinan stared in disbelief.

"Damn it!"

Liu Maopao laughed.

Then he patted the shoulder of a low-ranking Embroidered Uniform Guard soldier.

"Want to join us as a soldier?"

"Monthly pay is five taels of silver. Food and lodging included. Meat with every meal. Extra subsidies during festivals."

"Oh right. There's also a fixed annual home leave."

The guard's mouth fell open.

"What? That's better than our pay in the Embroidered Uniform Guard!"

He looked around nervously.

"You... you people are rebels, right?"

Another guard beside him slapped him hard.

"Watch your mouth!"

Then he turned respectfully toward Liu Maopao.

"Speak politely to my future boss!"

He snorted.

"Anyone who pays me silver is my father. The court that owes me wages is the real rebel."

The Prefect of Jinan nearly fainted.

"Five taels a month and you call the imperial court rebels?! You people are unbelievable!"

Meanwhile.

South of Jinan.

At the foot of Mount Tai.

Chuang Wang, Liu Zongmin, Li Guo, and about a dozen surviving bandits from the Old Eight Companies were fleeing south in a miserable state.

Li Guo was still indignant.

"This defeat makes no sense. That Li Yan is truly a bastard. A few speeches and he scattered our hundred thousand troops."

He snorted.

"Niu Jinxing was right to want him dead. That man only ruins our army's morale."

Chuang Wang's face was dark.

"It's fine."

"Even if we only have a dozen men left now, we have faced worse before."

He spoke coldly.

"As long as we escape alive, we can lie low for a while, rebuild our strength, and rise again."

Liu Zongmin rubbed his stomach.

"First we solve the problem of food. I'm starving."

He was not the only one.

Every one of the dozen fugitives was hungry.

Li Guo suddenly looked ahead.

A small village appeared in the distance.

Perhaps a few dozen households.

His eyes lit up.

"Uncle, there's a small village ahead. Should we go in, spread the 'No Taxes' song, and recruit them?"

Chuang Wang snorted.

"Recruit my foot."

"That nonsense Li Yan used only attracts unreliable people. Once they realize 'No Taxes' is impossible, they betray us immediately."

He grinned viciously.

"Better to go back to the old ways."

"Charge in and take what we need."

Li Guo's face lit up.

"Right!"

One of the bandits laughed loudly.

"To hell with the Fengtian Changyi Battalion! I'm not serving Heaven anymore!"

"Let's go back to being the Old Eight Companies!"

"That life was much more fun!"

With savage laughter, the group of hardened bandits charged toward the small village ahead.

The village was called.

Puzhao Village.

And the battle that would soon follow was about to begin.

Chapter 1296 The Battle of Puzhao Village

Chuang Wang, Li Guo, Liu Zongmin, and the last dozen or so hardened bandits charged toward the small village ahead.

The village was called Puzhao Village.

It stood not far from Mount Tai, with several patches of farmland surrounding it. Crops struggled weakly in the fields.

Shandong had not suffered the worst droughts of the era, but the Little Ice Age still cast its shadow. The harvests were poor and life for the villagers was harsh.

An old farmer was digging an irrigation trench beside the field, sweating under the pale sun.

At that moment the Old Eight Companies burst out of the trees.

The bandit at the front raised his blade.

A flash of steel.

A wet sound.

Blood sprayed high into the air as the old farmer collapsed instantly.

Nearby farm women screamed in terror and ran toward the village.

The bandits burst into laughter.

"Now this feels right!"

"Ever since Li Yan joined us we haven't had this kind of fun."

"Today I'm going to slaughter to my heart's content!"

With savage excitement the bandits rushed straight toward Puzhao Village.

Soon a sharp hollow sound echoed through the village.

Dong! Dong! Dong!

Hollow bamboo clappers.

The shrill alarm rang across the fields and climbed halfway up the mountain, loud enough for the monks of Puzhao Temple to hear clearly.

Puzhao Temple was an ancient monastery built during the Tang and Song dynasties. War had destroyed it many times, leaving only ruins behind.

During the third year of the Xuande era of the Ming Dynasty, in 1428, a Korean monk named Master Mankong climbed Mount Tai and discovered the abandoned temple. He spent more than twenty years restoring the complex, rebuilding the Bamboo Forest Temple and reviving Puzhao Temple. Thousands of disciples once gathered there to study the Dharma.

Now the alarm from the village below echoed into the monastery.

The monks hurried to the cliffside to look down.

Young monks cried out in panic.

"This is bad!"

"The village below is being attacked by bandits!"

"What should we do? Should we go help?"

"But we don't know martial arts!"

The temple quickly descended into chaos.

At that moment a visiting monk stepped out of the guest quarters and spoke loudly.

"I will go down the mountain and persuade those bandits to put down their blades."

The monks looked closely.

This monk was the abbot of Pujie Temple in Shanxi.

His Dharma name was Zhan Seng.

Pujie Temple and Puzhao Temple differed by only one character in their names, so the two monasteries had long maintained friendly relations. The abbots often exchanged letters.

Zhan Seng had come this time for a discussion of Buddhist teachings.

He had not expected to encounter bandits the moment he arrived.

The monks hurried to stop him.

"Master Zhan Seng, you must not go! Those bandits are extremely cruel. Look, they are still killing people!"

Zhan Seng shook his head calmly.

"A monk should hold compassion in his heart. If we see bandits murdering people, we should go stop them. How could we refuse simply because we are afraid?"

The monks protested.

"They will kill you too!"

Zhan Seng pressed his palms together.

"Ami-tuo-fo. Goodness, goodness."

"If I do not enter hell, who will? If this poor monk dies today because of this, then perhaps my merit will finally be complete."

With that he picked up a long wooden staff and ran down the mountain.

Meanwhile in the village.

Li Guo slashed a villager with his blade and kicked him to the ground.

The man lay there groaning heavily, too badly wounded to stand again.

Li Guo sneered and walked toward the small thatched house the villager had tried to protect with his life.

Inside the hut stood a young woman holding a baby less than a year old.

She stood beside a rice jar.

Her eyes moved between Li Guo and the wounded man outside the door.

Pain filled her face.

The jar contained only a thin layer of rice at the bottom.

That tiny amount of grain might not even last the family until the next harvest.

Yet the bandits had come to take even that.

Her husband had defended the rice jar with his life.

And now he lay dying outside.

The woman knew the truth.

Her whole family was doomed.

If the bandits did not kill them, they would starve to death.

She turned her head and looked up toward Puzhao Temple halfway up the mountain.

Her voice trembled.

"Buddha... please save me."

Li Guo burst into laughter.

"The Buddha is busy stuffing his face with meat and wine right now. He doesn't have time for your nonsense."

"Move aside."

"Maybe I'll spare your life."

"Otherwise one swing each and I'll send your whole family straight to see your Buddha."

The woman broke down in terrified sobs.

At that moment a powerful voice sounded behind him.

"Ami-tuo-fo! Goodness, goodness!"

"Benefactor, please listen to this poor monk."

"The sea of suffering has no shore. Turn back and you will find salvation."

"Lay down your butcher's knife and become a Buddha on the spot."

"Please spare this family."

Li Guo spun around.

Standing behind him was a large, powerfully built monk holding a wooden staff.

The monk looked at him calmly.

Li Guo narrowed his eyes.

"Oh? A monk wants to meddle in my business?"

Zhan Seng replied calmly.

"How can this be called meddling?"

Li Guo studied the man's build.

He could immediately tell the monk was capable of fighting.

He did not dare act carelessly.

He raised his fingers to his lips and blew a sharp whistle.

The shrill sound echoed across the village.

The bandits scattered throughout the settlement immediately dropped what they were doing and ran toward the whistle.

Soon the entire group gathered.

More than a dozen bandits.

Chuang Wang.

Liu Zongmin.

They spread out in a wide fan shape and surrounded Zhan Seng.

Yet the monk remained calm.

"Ami-tuo-fo."

"I beg all of you benefactors to show mercy and spare the villagers of Puzhao Village."

Someone suddenly shouted.

"Kill him!"

One bandit stepped forward and slashed at the monk's face.

Zhan Seng tilted his body aside.

His staff snapped forward and struck the attacker's wrist.

The bandit cried out as his saber flew from his hand and nearly hit one of his companions.

Zhan Seng quickly bowed.

"My apologies. I did not intend to harm you. A monk should act with compassion."

Before he could finish speaking, another bandit rushed forward and swung his blade.

Zhan Seng stepped aside again and thrust his staff toward the man's chest.

The strike would have landed solidly.

But just before contact he withdrew some of the strength from the blow, worried that a full strike might rupture the man's organs and kill him.

Thump.

The staff hit the bandit's chest armor.

It hurt but did not injure him.

The bandit staggered backward three steps before steadying himself.

For a moment he stood there stunned.

Then he realized.

The monk had held back.

Zhan Seng spoke gently.

"If you would only stop now..."

Before he could finish, Li Guo suddenly stepped forward.

His saber slashed down.

Zhan Seng turned to dodge.

Only then did he realize something.

This opponent was far stronger than the previous bandits.

The saber technique contained hidden variations.

This strike was difficult to evade.

Zhan Seng swung his staff in front of him, creating several whirling arcs of wood.

Clang after clang rang out as Li Guo's saber struck the staff repeatedly.

Each impact carried tremendous force.

Then came the moment when Li Guo's old strength had faded but new strength had not yet formed.

Zhan Seng hooked his foot forward.

Li Guo fell flat on the ground with a thud.

The monk spun his staff and brought it crashing down toward Li Guo's head.

But just before the blow landed, the staff suddenly stopped in midair.

Zhan Seng held back again.

He looked down at Li Guo.

"Please leave."

Chapter 1297 He Ping Has Arrived

The staff hovered directly above Li Guo's head.

The entire scene froze.

No one moved.

The martial skill displayed by the monk had shocked the bandits badly.

Even Chuang Wang could not help feeling wary.

He clasped his fists politely.

"Master, your martial skill is truly impressive. My nephew failed to recognize Mount Tai and offended you. Please show mercy and spare his life. We will leave immediately."

Zhan Seng looked at him.

"You are their leader?"

Chuang Wang nodded.

"Yes. What I say here counts."

Zhan Seng studied his face for a moment.

There really was something about this man. A certain presence. A natural air of leadership.

And his words had been spoken with proper humility.

The monk withdrew his staff from above Li Guo's head and spun it lightly before resting it behind his back. His left palm rose before his chest in a Buddhist salute.

"Ami-tuo-fo. If the benefactor is willing to stop here, that would be best."

Chuang Wang glanced at Li Guo.

"Let's go."

Li Guo climbed to his feet, brushed dirt from his clothes, and walked away a few steps.

Then suddenly.

Chuang Wang's face darkened.

"Attack together!"

"Stop going one by one!"

Li Guo instantly spun around and lunged back at Zhan Seng.

At the same time Liu Zongmin and the rest of the bandits rushed forward with sabers raised.

"Damn it!"

The monk blurted the curse before catching himself.

"That was improper. A monk should guard his thoughts."

But the moment had already arrived.

Li Guo's blade came first.

Zhan Seng raised his staff.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

Their weapons collided several times.

At the same time a blade attacked from the left.

Another from the right.

Zhan Seng twisted his body left, stepped aside right, narrowly dodging both attacks.

Another saber struck from behind.

He swung his staff backward to block it.

Meanwhile Li Guo slashed three more times in rapid succession.

The monk barely finished blocking those strikes when Liu Zongmin rushed in with a powerful attack.

Now Zhan Seng faced more than a dozen bandits alone.

Among them were Li Guo and Liu Zongmin, both formidable fighters.

Within moments the monk was forced onto the defensive.

The villagers watching nearby were terrified.

Up on the hillside, the monks of Puzhao Temple were shouting anxiously.

"This is bad!"

"Master Zhan Seng cannot defeat them!"

"He refuses to kill. Every strike holds back strength. Fighting like that is too disadvantageous!"

"Even if he wanted to kill, it would be difficult. He is using a staff. Staff techniques are meant to subdue enemies without killing."

"That kind of martial art rarely has killing techniques!"

"What should we do? Someone give the master a blade!"

The monks were panicking.

Meanwhile the villagers of Puzhao Village gripped their farming tools tightly.

Should they help?

Yes. They should help.

The villagers shouted and tried to rush forward.

But Chuang Wang simply turned and glared at them.

The villagers immediately shrank back in fear.

Zhan Seng struggled desperately.

His defense was beginning to break.

Suddenly Li Guo shouted and slashed with his saber.

The blade struck the monk's back.

Blood burst out.

The cut tore through both flesh and robe.

The monk's back was revealed.

A deep wound ran across it.

But something even more shocking appeared.

His back was covered with scars.

Old scars.

Blade wounds.

Sword wounds.

They crisscrossed his entire back like a twisted map.

Li Guo blinked.

"Huh?"

The bandits stared.

Even Chuang Wang frowned.

Something was wrong.

What kind of monk had a back like that?

At that moment the wounded monk suddenly roared.

His staff swept outward like a storm.

A wide circular arc exploded around him.

Every bandit was forced backward at the same time.

Even Li Guo and Liu Zongmin stumbled several steps away.

The monk reached back and touched the fresh wound.

When he brought his hand forward again, it was covered in blood.

He stared at it.

His eyes instantly turned red.

"Who dared draw my blood?"

His voice changed completely.

"Have you never heard the name He Ping, the Salt Bandit Who Eats Men?"

The monk's calm expression vanished.

The gentle Zhan Seng disappeared.

Standing there now was He Ping.

He grinned coldly at the bandits.

"I leave the jianghu for a few years and everyone forgets my name?"

"And now a bunch of stupid little thieves dare to show off in front of me?"

One bandit cursed.

"Stop pretending!"

He stepped forward and swung his blade.

The saber had barely reached halfway.

He Ping's staff shot forward like lightning.

Crack.

The staff smashed directly into the bandit's throat.

The sound of bones shattering echoed.

The man's neck broke instantly.

He collapsed dead.

Everyone froze.

Up on the hillside the monks stared with wide mouths.

"Wait."

"Didn't you just say staff techniques do not kill?"

"Why did the master kill someone with a single strike?"

The monks were completely confused.

He Ping laughed with a strange, vicious chuckle.

"Do you know where the phrase 'beaten to death with a single stick' comes from?"

He tossed the staff lightly in his hand.

"Because a staff is the most brutal weapon in the world."

"When it hits someone, they die."

"There are no survivors."

"Damn it!"

Several bandits rushed forward together.

Li Guo and Liu Zongmin exchanged a glance and attacked as well.

The battle began again.

Second round.

But this time the style of the fight was completely different.

He Ping was far faster than Zhan Seng.

Far more ruthless.

Zhan Seng's techniques were all about compassion. Repel the enemy without killing.

But He Ping had only one principle.

Beat the enemy to death.

If the enemy dies, the problem is solved.

He twisted his body and dodged Li Guo's blade.

His staff slammed down onto one bandit's skull.

The man collapsed instantly without even making a sound.

He Ping stepped backward.

His staff swung upward from below.

The strike landed directly between another bandit's legs.

A horrifying crack echoed.

The man doubled over in agony.

The staff continued rising.

The tip smashed into his chin.

Crack.

His head snapped backward violently.

The bandits shouted in panic.

"Attack him!"

"From behind!"

"Hit his flanks!"

The tactics were useless.

Left strike.

Another bandit's skull burst open.

Right thrust.

Another bandit's chest was pierced and his heart stopped instantly.

Just as He Ping had said.

Anyone hit by his staff died.

No survivors.

Seeing the situation turn disastrous, Chuang Wang shouted urgently.

"Retreat!"

Li Guo and Liu Zongmin immediately jumped backward with their sabers.

Chapter 1298 The Legend of Jiugong Mountain

Li Guo and Liu Zongmin leapt out of the fighting circle.

One moved to the left, the other to the right, shielding Chuang Wang as they prepared to run.

As for the other members of the Old Eight Team, well... those unlucky fellows were obviously about to be abandoned again.

While the remaining bandits were still tangled up with He Ping, the three of them had to escape quickly.

If they delayed even a little, they might not be able to run at all.

This was simply the way of jianghu bosses.

When danger appeared, the leader ran first.

That was the true secret of survival.

But then something felt wrong.

The moment the three men turned around, they froze.

Behind them stood more than a dozen villagers and over twenty monks.

Old men.

Young boys.

Women.

Children.

The villagers held hoes, sickles, pot lids, dung forks, and every imaginable farming tool.

The monks carried whistle staffs, monastic sabers, and heavy Buddhist staves.

Chuang Wang's heart sank.

This was bad.

He forced a fierce expression and shouted.

"Get out of the way!"

The next instant a woodcutter's chopper flew straight at his face.

Chuang Wang twisted aside to dodge it.

Before he could regain balance, a dung fork thrust toward his chest.

He barely avoided that attack when two hoes smashed down at him from different directions.

In the middle of it all a monk's staff swung toward his ribs.

If Chuang Wang possessed martial skill equal to the war monk, perhaps he could have dodged and countered.

Unfortunately he did not.

Faced with this chaotic mob attack, he had absolutely no solution.

Within seconds he was struck several times.

Beside him Li Guo and Liu Zongmin were not doing any better.

In the blink of an eye they were drowned under a storm of random weapons.

Inside the crowd Chuang Wang's furious voice could be heard.

"Get away from me, you useless trash!"

"I am Chuang Wang!"

"Who dares touch me?"

"Ow!"

"Stop hitting!"

"I won't rob you anymore!"

"I was wrong, alright?"

"Ahhh!"

His voice gradually grew weaker.

Then it disappeared entirely.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the battlefield, He Ping swung his staff in a wide arc.

Crack.

The last bandit's skull exploded.

The fight was finally over.

He Ping breathed heavily and collapsed onto the ground.

He was exhausted.

Fighting more than a dozen bandits in a row was truly tiring.

No one dared approach him.

He calmly took out a packet of healing medicine that Dao Xuan Tianzun had bestowed and applied it to his wound.

Before long the medicine began to work.

The pain faded.

A cool sensation spread across the wound.

He Ping closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the red color had vanished.

His pupils were black once more.

The war monk had returned.

"Eh?"

"What happened here?"

Zhan Seng suddenly looked shocked.

"Why are there dead bodies everywhere? Who killed all these people?"

He jumped to his feet and looked around.

The villagers and monks nearby were staring at him with fearful expressions.

Zhan Seng pressed his palms together.

"Ami-tuo-fo. Goodness. Goodness."

"I must have been knocked unconscious by the bandits earlier. Thank you all for saving me."

Everyone stared silently.

Zhan Seng continued speaking sincerely.

"I am deeply grateful. But Heaven cherishes life, and the Buddha teaches compassion."

"To save this one life of mine, you ended up killing all the bandits. That is not quite appropriate."

"It would have been better to capture them alive and give them a chance for reform."

Everyone rolled their eyes.

Zhan Seng remained perfectly serious.

"Ami-tuo-fo."

At that moment he noticed the villager who had been injured earlier while protecting his rice jar.

The monk hurried over and crouched beside him, taking out healing medicine to treat the wound.

The poor villager was terrified out of his mind but obediently accepted the treatment.

The surrounding crowd watched the scene in silence.

No one knew what to say.

It was impossible to connect this compassionate monk saving lives with the furious killing god who had just slaughtered bandits moments ago.

After treating the wounded villagers, Zhan Seng also recited prayers for the dead.

Not only for the villagers.

Even for the bandits.

Then he suddenly remembered something and turned to ask the villagers.

"Who were these bandits?"

"Did they say anything?"

One villager answered quietly.

"He called himself Chuang Wang."

"What?"

Zhan Seng instantly jumped over.

"Chuang Wang?"

"Yes. That one."

Someone pointed to a mangled corpse on the ground.

Chuang Wang had been beaten so badly that he barely resembled a human anymore.

Zhan Seng walked over and let out a long sigh.

He lifted the corpse onto his shoulder.

"Everyone, I must leave for a while."

"I will take this body to Jinan."

"It is a pity I cannot stay longer to discuss Buddhist teachings with the masters of Puzhao Temple."

The monks of Puzhao Temple trembled inwardly.

Good.

Leave quickly.

Who knew when this monster might suddenly turn back into He Ping again?

But of course they could not say that aloud.

The abbot stepped forward with a reluctant smile.

"Senior Brother Zhan Seng, please travel safely."

Zhan Seng placed Chuang Wang's corpse over his left shoulder.

In his right hand he held the whistle staff like a walking stick.

Then he strode northward.

Only after he disappeared did the monks and villagers gather again.

Someone whispered nervously.

"If we really killed Chuang Wang... that must be a huge matter, right?"

"Yes. Of course it is."

"There are still many bandits across the land. What if some of Chuang Wang's men are still alive?"

"What if they find out we killed him?"

"Will they come here for revenge?"

That sentence made everyone shiver.

The abbot of Puzhao Temple raised his hand.

"Listen carefully."

"The fact that Chuang Wang died here must never be spoken of."

"Everyone dig a pit and bury these bodies immediately."

Then he summoned a traveling monk.

"You head west."

"The farther the better."

"Go to Henan or Hubei, anywhere west."

"Spread a story that Chuang Wang was killed by villagers somewhere over there while fleeing."

"Just make up a location."

"Do not mention Mount Tai, Puzhao Temple, or Puzhao Village."

The traveling monk bowed.

"Understood."

"Go quickly."

The monk immediately set out westward.

He walked for a very long time.

Eventually a small mountain appeared before him.

Its name was Jiugong Mountain.

He figured he was already far away from Mount Tai.

So he began telling people everywhere he went.

"Have you heard about Chuang Wang?"

"Yesterday I passed a village nearby and heard the villagers killed him."

"Did you know? Chuang Wang died in a mountain village around here."

The monk repeated the story again and again.

To anyone who would listen.

"A monk never lies."

"Chuang Wang was killed by villagers near Jiugong Mountain."

"Really. Just look at my honest eyes."

"At first the people around Jiugong Mountain did not believe him."

But a few days later an official announcement arrived.

The government confirmed that Chuang Wang had been killed by villagers somewhere.

His body had already been delivered to Sun Chuanting, the Minister of War stationed in Jinan.

Soon it would be sent to the capital.

Now everyone believed it.

And so a legend was born.

The legend that Chuang Wang was killed near Jiugong Mountain.

But no one knew which village had actually done it.

Many years later, development from Gao Family Village eventually reached Jiugong Mountain.

To stimulate the local economy, Zhu Cunji, who was extremely skilled at tourism operations, designated Niujiuling Ridge on Jiugong Mountain as the place where Chuang Wang had been executed.

A scenic tourist site was built there.

Ticket sales earned enormous profits.

Local villagers opened farmhouse restaurants.

They sold ice jelly desserts, liangxia shrimp jelly, mashed potatoes, and roasted sweet potato skins.

And just like that, life improved dramatically.

Chapter 1299 Playing a Little Trick

Jinan.

Sun Chuanting had placed a large number of "loyal ministers" under house arrest. Among them was even the Prefect of Jinan himself.

Meanwhile the truly disloyal officials were recruited directly into Sun Chuanting's own camp.

Large quantities of supplies transported from Gao Family Village began arriving one after another. Under the management of Liu Maopao, construction projects spread across Shandong.

The great development of Shandong had begun.

The entire province seemed to wake up almost overnight.

The Little Ice Age was still ongoing, of course.

But once industry started moving, the people's fear of natural disasters suddenly became much lighter.

In the past, if crops failed, people starved.

Now they could work in factories funded by Gao Family Village and still earn food.

If the sky refused to cooperate, so what?

The earth could still feed them through industry.

The only truly unhappy person in Jinan was the Prefect himself.

His job had been stolen.

Stolen by Liu Maopao, some unknown rebel who had appeared out of nowhere.

That man now sat openly inside the prefectural office, conducting administration as if he owned the place, ordering around officials the prefect had never even seen before.

This situation was completely outrageous.

Absolutely insane.

But Sun Chuanting's army stood behind him.

No one dared protest.

So the Prefect of Jinan could only pray every single day.

"May Heaven bless me."

"Let the news reach the capital quickly."

"When His Majesty learns that Sun Chuanting is a traitor, the imperial army will surely come."

"When the court retakes Jinan, I will return to my rightful post."

"We must believe in the court."

"We cannot possibly lose."

He prayed with absolute sincerity.

And then something happened.

Sun Chuanting departed.

He returned to the capital with Chuang Wang's severed head.

The Prefect of Jinan was overjoyed.

"This is my chance!"

"With the rebel gone and no army suppressing the city, loyal officials will surely rise up and reclaim control."

But reality quickly slapped him in the face.

Not a chance.

Before leaving, Sun Chuanting had already established a new civilian militia in Jinan.

Most of the members came from the hundred thousand rebels who had once followed Chuang Wang but later surrendered after being persuaded by Li Yan.

These people had absolutely no loyalty to the imperial court.

But they deeply admired Dao Xuan Tianzun, the one who had given them a new future.

Now they carried weapons and received salaries from Gao Family Village.

Every day they trained.

And every day they protected the so called rebels who controlled Jinan.

The Prefect could do absolutely nothing.

He could not even leave his own residence.

Meanwhile, in the capital.

The Shuntian Fertilizer Factory was finally completed and had begun production.

The construction had been astonishingly fast.

The blue helmet workers from Gao Family Village already possessed a complete and mature system for building factories.

They had done it many times in Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, and Sichuan.

By the time they reached the capital, the entire process was routine.

And here they had powerful backing.

Liang Shixian, Deputy Prefect of Shuntian.

Grand Secretary He Fengsheng.

And even the emperor himself, Zhu Youjian.

With such support, how could construction possibly be slow?

The first phase of the factory was completed almost instantly.

Production began immediately.

Zhu Youjian stood before rows of fertilizer bags.

His heart was filled with delight.

"Minister Liang."

"The bag of fertilizer you presented earlier fertilized a field for two whole months."

"Now we have produced so many bags."

"Does this mean my entire imperial estate in Shuntian can use fertilizer?"

Liang Shixian bowed respectfully.

"Your Majesty, supplying the imperial estate this year will certainly not be a problem."

"However..."

He paused.

"Your Majesty's actions never go unnoticed."

"In recent days you have frequently visited the imperial fields."

"Many officials in the court have heard about it. Some even visited the fields personally."

"And now they have all set their eyes on our fertilizer."

"Quite a few have already approached me, offering to buy it."

"In that case..."

"These bags will not be enough."

"We will need to increase production and build additional factories."

Zhu Youjian blinked.

"Oh?"

He thought for a moment.

Of course.

Fertilizer could not exist only for the imperial estate.

It had to be sold to officials and common farmers across the land.

This was beneficial for the nation.

Especially for tax paying farmers.

If fertilizer doubled their harvests, the government's tax revenue would rise accordingly.

Then the treasury would no longer be empty.

"Very well."

"Then sell it."

Liang Shixian suddenly grinned.

"Your Majesty, when selling fertilizer, we should play a small trick."

Zhu Youjian leaned forward with interest.

"What trick?"

Liang Shixian lowered his voice.

"Our country lacks money."

Just that single sentence nearly made the emperor cry.

Zhu Youjian instinctively adjusted his dragon robe.

Because underneath it, the white inner garment he wore had patches sewn onto it.

If the ministers ever noticed, the emperor's dignity would vanish completely.

Liang Shixian continued quietly.

"The state needs revenue."

"And taxes are the obvious solution."

"But most farmland today belongs to princes and officials."

"They do not pay taxes."

"And attempting to tax them directly would provoke fierce opposition at court."

Zhu Youjian nearly burst into tears again.

He knew this problem better than anyone.

But he could not touch those people.

If he tried to tax them, his throne itself might become unstable.

Liang Shixian spoke softly.

"That is why I believe we should begin with commercial taxes."

The emperor lowered his voice.

"Commercial taxes are also difficult."

"Many officials are merchants themselves."

"If we attempt to collect commercial tax, they will oppose it just as fiercely as land tax."

Liang Shixian smiled.

"That is why I said we must play a little trick."

"We introduce a new tax."

"It will be called Value Added Tax."

"We will not collect it directly from merchants."

"Instead we add the tax to the price of fertilizer."

"The buyer will pay it."

Zhu Youjian immediately understood.

This was a classic transfer of contradiction.

Officials who conducted business hated paying taxes.

So the government would tell them something different.

"We are not taxing you."

"We are simply allowing you to raise the selling price slightly."

"The extra amount paid by buyers will be handed over as tax."

Because buyers paid the tax, merchants would accept the arrangement much more easily.

Zhu Youjian frowned slightly.

"There is one problem."

"If fertilizer becomes more expensive, farmers will earn less from their harvest."

"Would that not harm them?"

Liang Shixian shook his head with a grin.

"No, no."

"Fertilizer cannot be sold at any arbitrary price."

"The selling price can never exceed the value it creates."

"If farmers calculate their accounts and see fertilizer brings less profit, they will simply stop buying it."

"So fertilizer always has a natural price limit."

"It can never exceed that point."

The emperor nodded slowly.

He half understood.

Liang Shixian continued patiently.

"Merchants are clever."

"Even without this tax, they would still sell fertilizer at the highest price farmers can accept."

"With the tax added, the price will remain at that same limit."

"In other words, adding the tax will not actually harm farmers."

"It will only reduce the merchants' profits."

Now Zhu Youjian finally understood.

"I see!"

Then suddenly another thought struck him.

"Wait."

"You built this fertilizer factory yourself."

"Isn't this plan just tricking yourself?"

Chapter 1300 Sun Chuanting Returns

Liang Shixian smiled.

"You cannot trick this humble official. This factory may have been started under my lead, but I do not intend to keep any shares. I plan to sell them off."

Zhu Youjian blinked.

"Oh?"

Liang Shixian replied calmly, "An official should not do business, and a businessman should not be an official. I am very careful about that rule."

The truth behind this attitude had spread across Gao Family Village long ago.

Inside the Dao Xuan Tianzun Liberation Zone, Liu Maopao had once transferred his restaurant and wool textile factory to the village committee. After the story was broadcast on the news, it spread across the entire village.

According to information leaked by the saintess, after Liu Maopao made that decision, Dao Xuan Tianzun had been extremely pleased. The immortal had praised Liu Maopao enthusiastically and even invited him to cook coconut chicken together.

Cooking together with Dao Xuan Tianzun personally.

That was an honor so rare that many people turned red with envy just thinking about it.

Liu Maopao's story soon became a model example that everyone talked about.

The people of Gao Family Village finally understood something important.

Dao Xuan Tianzun did not like politicians who also ran businesses.

From then on the villagers began following the same principle.

If you were an official, you did not engage in business.

If you were a businessman, you did not serve as an official.

This rule had not yet been formally written into law, but everyone understood that the village was currently in a transitional stage.

Anyone who held both roles at the same time should quickly give one of them up.

Otherwise one day Dao Xuan Tianzun might become displeased. That would be extremely embarrassing.

Under this principle, even Miss San, the daughter of San Shier, voluntarily gave up all her shares in the fertilizer factory. The factory was turned into a village-run enterprise to prevent her father, the highest administrative officer of Gao Family Village, from channeling benefits toward her business.

If even San Shier family could do that, nobody else dared refuse.

Liang Shixian was one of the earliest officials from Gao Family Village. Naturally he would follow the same trend.

If he established a fertilizer factory here in the capital and later the Dao Xuan Tianzun Liberation Zone expanded into Beijing, then he would end up both an official and a businessman.

That was a major taboo.

So he absolutely had to withdraw from the fertilizer factory.

Before leaving, however, he needed to establish the tax system for it.

This would serve as a demonstration.

In the future, no matter who took over the fertilizer factory, they would still have to pay Value Added Tax. Whether the tax was paid to the court or to the next owner made little difference.

As long as the rules were established now, anyone who tried to overturn them later would face great difficulty.

Zhu Youjian naturally had no idea about Liang Shixian's real reasoning.

In his eyes, this small Assistant Prefect of Shuntian standing before him was a pure and honest official who devoted himself entirely to the country.

The emperor felt a bit touched.

He reached out and grabbed Liang Shixian's hand.

"Beloved minister, since you think of the nation in this way, I will certainly not treat you poorly."

Zhu Youjian immediately summoned a eunuch and began drafting regulations.

Many existing industries had already been controlled by merchants for generations. Collecting new taxes from them was almost impossible.

But the fertilizer factory was something new.

Establishing new rules for it was easy.

With a grand stroke of the brush, Zhu Youjian established a Value Added Tax.

Every time the fertilizer factory sold a batch of fertilizer, a certain percentage of tax would be included in the sale price.

The buyer would effectively pay the tax.

Both buyer and seller would keep invoices, which could later be used to verify accounts.

Of course, in an era without big data, merchants could easily falsify accounts or evade taxes. Manipulating invoices was also not difficult.

But as long as the rules existed first, the problems could be fixed gradually later.

That was still better than having no rules at all.

After finishing this arrangement, Zhu Youjian felt refreshed.

He felt as if a huge new stream of revenue was about to pour into the imperial treasury.

He even began counting on his fingers.

Which industries had the least resistance?

Which sectors could be targeted next with Value Added Tax?

He was happily calculating when suddenly someone came running.

The Grand Eunuch Gao Qiqian rushed over.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!"

Zhu Youjian looked puzzled.

"What is it?"

Gao Qiqian's face was full of excitement, mixed with a trace of vicious satisfaction.

"Sun Chuanting has returned from suppressing the bandits."

Zhu Youjian brightened.

"Oh! He has returned."

A few days earlier, news had already reached the capital that Sun Chuanting had defeated the rebel army. Shortly afterward came another report that Chuang Wang had been killed.

At that moment Zhu Youjian felt as if he had been strapped to a flying machine.

And now the victorious general himself was returning to the capital, bringing Chuang Wang's head with him.

This was truly joyous news.

The rebel leader was dead.

A new source of tax revenue had been found.

Under the wise leadership of Zhu Youjian, the Great Ming Empire would surely move toward a glorious future.

Zhu Youjian laughed loudly.

"Minister Liang, keep an eye on the fertilizer factory matters. I will go to the city gate and take a look at Chuang Wang's head."

Liang Shixian smiled faintly.

"Your Majesty may rest assured."

Zhu Youjian laughed again and departed under the protection of his guards.

Seeing how happy the emperor was, Gao Qiqian hurried to follow him. He leaned closer and spoke in a low voice.

"Your Majesty, you have not forgotten that Sun Chuanting once struck this old servant, have you?"

Zhu Youjian paused.

Gao Qiqian continued with indignation.

"He is simply a vicious warlord. He dared to strike the imperial supervisor you sent. Clearly he has no respect for Your Majesty at all."

The smile on Zhu Youjian's face slowly faded.

"Oh? Did something like that happen?"

Inside his heart Gao Qiqian cursed.

This fool forgot again.

He quickly retold the story about how Sun Chuanting's men had beaten him. Naturally he left out the part where he had forced his way into the military camp gate.

Zhu Youjian nodded.

"Ah, I remember now. That did happen."

He continued calmly.

"Those who have rendered merit must be rewarded. Those who have committed faults must also be punished. You need not worry."

Soon Zhu Youjian arrived at the capital's main gate.

A massive crowd had already gathered.

Officials stood in neat ranks while common citizens packed the surrounding streets.

For years the roving rebels had ravaged the land, leaving the empire in chaos. Officials and civilians alike had suffered greatly.

Sun Chuanting, however, had defeated two successive Chuang Wangs.

That was a legendary achievement.

By now he had become something like an idol in the capital.

People at the city gate were shouting his name loudly.

If he had not been such a high-ranking official, some people might have rushed forward and tossed him into the air in celebration.

When Zhu Youjian arrived, the crowd automatically split apart.

Sun Chuanting walked forward through the middle path.

On both sides stood cheering crowds.

In the center stood ruler and minister facing each other.

Zhu Youjian smiled.

"Minister Sun, where is the rebel Chuang's head?"

Sun Chuanting immediately raised a box with both hands.

Inside was the head of Chuang Wang.

Zhu Youjian took the box and glanced inside.

The moment he saw it, he burst into loud laughter.

"HAHAHAHA!"

Never before had he felt the empire so secure.

Everyone present believed he would reward Sun Chuanting on the spot.

Instead Zhu Youjian suddenly put on a serious expression.

"Minister Sun has worked hard in battle and traveled far. You must first rest peacefully for several days. After you have recovered, we will discuss state affairs."

Everyone around them froze.

"Huh?"

Sun Chuanting, however, showed no sign of surprise.

He simply smiled calmly.

"This minister obeys the imperial decree."

