

Great Ming 511

Chapter 511 Reinforcements from Gao Family Village

Meanwhile—while Lao Zhu was off meeting Yang He and the grown-ups discussed matters that smelled suspiciously like politics—

A massive troop transport ship creaked as it nudged up against the Yongji Ferry Dock.

The hull groaned. Ropes flew. Planks slammed into place.

Then a mountain of a man leapt straight down from the deck.

Thud.

The dockboards shuddered.

Zheng Daniu landed firmly, knees bent, boots planted, looking like a human battering ram that had decided gravity was optional today. Behind him, rows of Gao Family Village militia began disembarking in orderly lines—firearm soldiers, grenadiers, packs neat, eyes alert. Five hundred men, give or take, moving with the crispness of people who'd been yelled at by the same instructors for far too long.

They had arrived under the direct order of Dao Xuan Tianzun, sent to reinforce Yongji Ferry Dock.

Their mission was simple.

Kill Wang Guozhong.

Before Zheng Daniu could even straighten up, a blur rushed at him.

Thump.

A fist slammed squarely into his shoulder.

"Hey! Daniu!" Zao Ying grinned brightly, fist still planted like she was checking the ripeness of a melon. "Long time no see!"

Zheng Daniu staggered half a step, then broke into an enormous, guileless smile. "Instructor Zao! Long time no see."

Zao Ying folded her arms, chin lifting. "Miss me?"

"Of course!"

Her eyes lit up.

Then Zheng Daniu continued, utterly sincere:

"Only you ever treated me to good food. After you left, I haven't had any good food."

"...So that's all you missed me for?" Zao Ying asked slowly.

"Huh?" Zheng Daniu blinked. "What else is there to miss?"

Zao Ying leaned closer, eyes narrowing dangerously. "Then what exactly am I to you?"

He thought hard. Really hard.

"A kind person who treats me to snacks!"

"Pfft—"

Several people nearby immediately broke into cold sweat.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun stood a short distance away. Its wooden lips parted, as if about to say something profound, consoling, or at least vaguely divine.

Then it froze.

A moment passed.

Clack.

The wooden mouth closed again.

Zao Ying turned away, cheeks puffed, sulking dramatically. She took exactly three steps, counted exactly three heartbeats—

Then brightened up again.

She'd known he was like this since the first day. What was there to be angry about? An honest idiot like this was the least likely man alive to betray anyone. That alone made him precious.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a massive twist of fried dough, golden and fragrant.

"This is from Yongning Village, Zhangying Township, Shanxi," she said, handing it over with a smile. "I saved a special one just for you."

Zheng Daniu's eyes sparkled. "I knew it! Instructor Zao treats me the best!"

She tilted her head. "Am I not the woman who treats you best?"

"No!"

A vein popped on her forehead. "Who?! Who dares compete with me? I was just thinking how faithful you were!"

"My mom."

The vein instantly vanished.

"Oh." Zao Ying smiled sweetly. "Your esteemed mother, of course. Hehehe... hehehe..."

Zheng Daniu opened his mouth and crunched down, biting off half the mahua in one go. Loud chewing echoed across the dock, like a horse enjoying lunch.

At that moment, Xing Honglang and Gao Chuwu walked over.

Xing Honglang deliberately waited until the chewing reached a rhythm before speaking. "Daniu. How many troops did you bring?"

Zheng Daniu swallowed. "Five hundred firearm soldiers. Fifty grenadiers."

Gao Chuwu grinned. "Good. Our first hundred grenadiers are complete again."

The two exchanged a look, chuckled—

Then frowned.

"...Wait," Xing Honglang said. "Where's the third simpleton?"

Gao Chuwu scanned the dock. "Yeah. With this much noise, how is he not already shouting?"

"Where's flat rabbit?" he asked. "Didn't he come to see the excitement?"

Zheng Daniu scratched his head and pointed toward the ship's stern. "He's here. But he's seasick."

"...What?"

Even the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun let out a string of amused clicking sounds.

"That fellow," it mused, "gets seasick?"

From afar, a pale figure clung desperately to the railing.

"Someone..." flat rabbit croaked weakly, leaning over the gunwale, "someone help... this Rabbit Lord... off the ship..."

Gao Chuwu laughed. "Where's Zheng Gouzi? Isn't he helping you?"

Flat rabbit gagged. "He... he stayed behind... to guard... the Saintess... urgh..."

A few militia soldiers hurried aboard and half-carried, half-dragged flat rabbit down. He retched nonstop, aura of doom radiating outward, forcing everyone nearby to instinctively step back.

They parked him on a large river rock, letting the wind hit his face.

After a while, his color returned.

And with it—

Confidence.

Flat rabbit suddenly sprang to his feet, flung his sleeves wide, and roared:

"Shanxi! Your Rabbit Lord has arrived! With this lord here, the common people shall surely be rescued from dire suffering! Rejoice! Hahahahaha!"

A little girl washing clothes paused and tugged her mother's sleeve.

"Mommy... that man looks like Chief Xing's subordinate, doesn't he? You said they were all good people. But why does he look so silly?"

The woman immediately pulled her closer.

"Even good people can be silly, dear. Don't stare too long. You'll become silly yourself."

"Oh." The girl nodded solemnly. "I won't look."

Unaware his reputation had already sunk, flat rabbit struck a heroic pose.

"If any of you have difficulties," he proclaimed loudly toward the riverside dwellings, "just come to the Rabbit Lord! There is nothing I cannot solve—with this My Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord Sword!"

He drew his sword dramatically—

It slipped.

Clink.

Bounced off a rock.

Plunk.

Straight into the river.

Flat rabbit froze. "Oh no! My ancestral treasured sword!"

He leapt after it.

"Ahhh—! This Rabbit Lord can't swim! Someone save me!"

The crowd burst out laughing.

"The water's shallow!"

"Huh?"

His feet hit bottom.

Flat rabbit stood upright, water barely reaching his waist. He'd been flailing in waist-deep water the whole time.

"...Oh."

He laughed awkwardly, bent down, fumbled, retrieved the sword, wiped it clean, and sheathed it.

The women by the river all turned their heads away.

"You really shouldn't look at that man too much," one muttered. "You'll turn silly."

Flat rabbit shuffled back. "What an inauspicious start. My fate clearly conflicts with water. Rabbits don't like water—so that's normal, right?"

Everyone nodded in unison.

"No problem there."

Then Xing Honglang added calmly,

"But you're the strategist of this relief force. You arrived in Shanxi and didn't report for duty. Instead, you acted foolish in public. That is a problem."

Flat rabbit opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Said nothing.

Cheng Xu had long understood Zheng Danu's limits. Thus, despite Danu being the nominal commander, all strategic authority over this five-hundred-man reinforcement force had been placed in flat rabbit's hands.

Clearing his throat, flat rabbit hurriedly recovered.

"Of the five hundred firearm soldiers," he said, voice turning serious, "two hundred are equipped with Chassepot Rifles."

That caught attention.

"Instructor He said this is their first real combat. Training is one thing—battle is another. He hopes they gain experience against Wang Guozhong. And that the frontline commanders observe the strengths and weaknesses of the Chassepot Rifle, so future tactics can be refined around it."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun's mood instantly brightened.

So.

The breech-loaders were finally seeing blood.

Only two hundred—hardly a flood—but against a small fry like Wang Guozhong?

Plenty.

More than enough.

Hehehe.

Chapter 512 Two Sticks of Incense — The Path to Ruin

Two hundred Chassepot riflemen moved swiftly across the sandy riverbank, boots sinking slightly into the loose ground as they formed up in neat, disciplined ranks, their movements practiced and smooth, without shouting or disorder.

Li Daoxuan had placed the blueprints for the Chassepot Rifle into the diorama box back in the seventh year of Tianqi, in 1627. Now, it was already the height of summer in the fourth year of Chongzhen, 1631. Five full years had passed.

Back then, Li Daoxuan had estimated that producing this kind of rifle would take no more than one or two years at most. Reality, however, had been far less forgiving. It had taken a full five years before this weapon could finally stand here, solid and real, on the battlefield.

Springs that needed just the right elasticity, percussion caps that had to ignite reliably every time, airtight sealing at the breech so precious force would not leak away. Each problem was intricate, stubborn, and unforgiving. Li Daoxuan had not stepped in directly. Instead, he had nudged, hinted, guided from the shadows, allowing the little people to struggle, fail, rethink, and finally solve each issue with their own hands, one painstaking step after another.

Now, seeing these soldiers lined up before him, rifles steady and expressions firm, Dao Xuan Tianzun felt a quiet, private satisfaction rise in his heart.

Xing Honglang watched them for a moment, then could not help asking, "How fast can one of these fire now?"

A rifleman captain stepped forward, boots striking the sand sharply as he saluted. "Reporting, ma'am. One shot every ten blinks of an eye."

Xing Honglang tilted her head, curiosity plain on her face. "And just how long is 'ten blinks of an eye' supposed to be?"

Gao Chuwu grinned and said casually, "My dear wife, don't worry. I'll test it right now."

And with that, he actually began blinking in earnest.

Xing Honglang burst out laughing. "Oh, Chuwu, you're far too good to me."

"Honglang!" Gao Chuwu replied with exaggerated feeling.

With a soft, unceremonious thump, the two of them embraced right there.

Those standing nearby exchanged glances, faces filled with expressions that said everything and nothing at once.

Off to the side, Dao Xuan Tianzun shook his head faintly. "Fire a few rounds. Let everyone see."

Since the order had come directly from him, the soldiers answered in unison, voices crisp and loud. "As you command!"

Wooden targets were quickly set up and planted firmly in the sand, positioned two hundred paces away across the open riverbank.

The moment Xing Honglang saw the distance, her eyes lit up. "At that range, these must be rifled guns, right?"

Flat Rabbit laughed smugly, chin lifted. "Of course. Every Chassepot Rifle is rifled. Accuracy stays good even at several hundred paces. That said, hitting someone at that distance still depends on skill. These recruits are decent, but don't expect them to casually pick off enemy generals. Only this Flat Rabbit..."

He dragged out the last words with deep satisfaction.

Someone nearby could not help interrupting him. "Lord Flat Rabbit, is your marksmanship really that impressive?"

Flat Rabbit shook his head solemnly. "No. It's even worse than theirs."

Laughter erupted immediately.

"Then why did you say 'only this Flat Rabbit' just now?"

Flat Rabbit puffed out his chest, looking entirely pleased with himself. "Because this Flat Rabbit's real specialty is the sword, unlike all of you."

The laughter died at once.

Well. That explained everything.

The two hundred Chassepot riflemen had finished their preparations. The test firing was about to begin.

Li Daoxuan immediately shifted his perspective outside the box, fingers already poised, and readied his stopwatch.

"Fire!"

At Flat Rabbit's command, two hundred rifles roared at once.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

The sound crashed across the riverbank in a tight, thunderous wave. Almost the instant the last shot echoed, every soldier moved as one. Breeches snapped open at the rear of the rifles, ash and residue shaken free, fresh paper cartridges pulled from pouches and seated smoothly, breech covers closed and sealed with a sharp, decisive click.

Rifles rose again.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

A second volley tore through the air.

Li Daoxuan stopped the watch.

Exactly ten seconds.

A restrained thrill spread through him. Too fast. Far too fast. At this speed, six shots could be fired in a single minute.

Two hundred riflemen meant twelve hundred bullets in one minute.

In this era, such a rate of fire was nothing short of terrifying.

Against this, the nomadic tribes of the steppes might as well stop fighting altogether and go back to singing and dancing.

But then, a chill followed close behind that excitement.

Wait.

Not yet.

Firepower on this scale did not come without a price.

Twelve hundred rounds per minute also meant a crushing burden on logistics.

Li Daoxuan's resources were effectively limitless, but even he could only provide raw materials. Gunpowder and lead could be delivered, but finished bullets could not simply appear out of thin air. Firecracker powder had to be reworked and refined into proper granular black powder. Lead had to be melted down and recast into shot. Even the caps from toy snap-poppers needed careful modification before they could function as true percussion caps.

Paper had to be made. Each cap, each measure of powder, each lead bullet had to be wrapped by hand into a complete paper cartridge.

One minute of exhilarating gunfire at the front demanded countless hours of unseen labor behind it. This was not the industrial age. There were no machines endlessly stamping out ammunition.

Nearly every step depended on human hands.

"Stop!" Dao Xuan Tianzun called out sharply.

The two hundred riflemen halted at once. Yet in the span of only a few breaths, more than four hundred rounds had already been expended.

Li Daoxuan did not feel money burning away.

He felt people burning away.

The thought was genuinely painful.

"Ammunition goes frighteningly fast," Lao Nanfeng said quietly, having reached the same conclusion. "Flat Rabbit, how much do we actually carry?"

Flat Rabbit scratched his head and laughed awkwardly. "Not much. Only tens of thousands of rounds, I suppose. Making this stuff is a real headache. Right now, blacksmiths, powder makers, and papermakers are all tied up making cartridges. We've even hired many women from the village just to assemble bullets."

He paused, then sighed with faint regret. "Unfortunately, we can't let the women from the labor reform camp touch this work yet. Their reliability hasn't been proven, and we can't risk gunpowder passing through unsteady hands. Everyone involved in ammunition production has to be someone who's been tested over time. That limits output no matter how you look at it."

Lao Nanfeng nodded slowly. "That's unavoidable. This Chassepot Rifle is powerful, but it cannot be used carelessly. Otherwise, in the time it takes for two sticks of incense to burn, Gao Family Village could be reduced to nothing."

Zhao Sheng leaned in from the side. "And production cannot rely on Gao Family Village alone. We must also build an arsenal here at the Gudu Ferry in Yongji, so ammunition can be supplied closer to the front. Otherwise, long-distance transport will cripple us."

No one could argue with that.

A heavy, shared understanding settled over the group. The road ahead was long, and the burden immense.

Gao Family Village was strong, but the world beyond it was vast.

If they truly meant to pacify the realm and save the people, there was no room for carelessness.

"I'll return to Gao Family Village by boat," Zhao Sheng said decisively. "I'll bring back experienced senior artisans and establish a similar workshop here at the Gudu Ferry, with them as the core."

As he finished speaking, he gathered his robes and started to rush toward the boat.

Before he could take more than a step, two porters suddenly appeared, lifting him neatly into a sedan chair. "Sir, please don't run. You always forget that you lose your breath after a short dash. If you're traveling, let us carry you."

Zhao Sheng coughed lightly. "Ah. Then I'll trouble you."

The porters broke into a quick jog, sedan chair swaying slightly as they boarded the boat.

Xing Honglang clapped her hands together. "Alright. If the scholars handling logistics are pushing this hard, then we front-line fighters can't slack off either. Get ready for battle."

Flat Rabbit poked his head out. "By the way, who are we fighting this time?"

Gao Chuwu scratched his head. "A despicable bandit named Wang Guozhong. He betrayed Wang Jiayin and even managed to secure an official position." He then explained the circumstances of Wang Jiayin's death.

Flat Rabbit's eyes widened. "What? Wang Jiayin wasn't exactly a saint, but betraying someone like that..." He stopped abruptly.

He had nearly let something slip.

Wang Er's presence in Gao Family Village was an absolute secret, known only to a handful.

Flat Rabbit snorted. "Hmph. This Flat Rabbit will act on behalf of Heaven and personally execute a petty villain like Wang Guozhong."

Chapter 513 Yongji Bullet Factory

Zhao Sheng made a round trip back to Gao Family Village.

When he returned by boat, the scene at Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock immediately felt different.

More people.

More baggage.

More crates.

More serious-looking faces.

Among the arrivals was one person who surprised almost everyone—

Xu Dafu, head of the Gao Family Village Ordnance Bureau, personally present.

When Zhao Sheng had first proposed building a front-line bullet factory at Yongji—specifically to supply the expeditionary forces pushing into Shanxi—Xu Dafu had nearly jumped out of his chair.

"A bullet factory?!" he'd shouted back then. "Do you have any idea what that means? Gunpowder moving around constantly! One careless spark and the whole place goes up! You think I'd dare hand something like this to an apprentice?"

He had slapped the table so hard his teacup rattled.

"No. Absolutely not. If this is being built, I will oversee it."

And so he did.

Under Xu Dafu's management, the Ordnance Bureau had become an almost obsessive institution. Safety regulations were engraved into bone. Even in his absence, his apprentices could handle gunpowder strictly by protocol, blindfolded if necessary.

Still, he didn't trust distance.

Before leaving Gao Family Village, he gave instructions so long and detailed that three apprentices nearly cried. Only then did he gather a group of senior technicians and follow Zhao Sheng to Yongji.

As for construction?

That part was easy.

Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock had already gone through extensive development. Cement buildings were no longer a novelty. The Blue Hats who arrived earlier had trained a whole wave of Yellow Hat apprentices, all capable of mixing, pouring, curing, and reinforcing concrete structures.

With Zhao Sheng's order, a large cement factory rose almost effortlessly.

Walls. Roof. Ventilation shafts. Storage rooms.

Solid.

The real problem wasn't the building.

It was people.

Xu Dafu stood at the site, hands clasped behind his back, brows knitted.

"Anyone allowed to handle gunpowder must undergo long-term observation. Their character must be spotless. And ideally—women."

Zhao Sheng looked at him.

Xu Dafu explained patiently, as if lecturing an apprentice.

"Women are meticulous. They can sit indoors all day doing repetitive work without losing focus. Men?" He snorted. "Full of wild thoughts. Always wanting to run outside, conquer the world, fight bandits, or prove they're heroes."

He gestured toward the empty rooms.

"I need people who can sit here, all day, wrapping cartridges without distraction. Do you have such people at Yongji?"

Zhao Sheng didn't answer immediately.

He thought.

Then nodded.

"Yes. We do."

Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock had been growing for over a year.

Back in the third year of Chongzhen, when Xing Honglang first arrived by boat, Shaanxi rebels were surging into Shanxi. Even then, more than a thousand commoners had already gathered at the dock seeking work.

As months passed, villagers from surrounding counties flowed in. Even residents from Puzhou City came.

Now, the civilian quarter housed two to three thousand people.

Men typically worked construction, transport, or militia logistics. Women cooked, stoked fires, cleaned, hauled water, and handled chores across the worksites.

One of them even made fried dough twists that Lao Nanfeng loved so much he'd once threatened to promote her on the spot.

Their wages?

Low.

Sometimes nonexistent—just meals.

And yet, none complained.

After all, this was how women had lived for thousands of years.

Zhao Sheng said slowly, "We can recruit the earliest group of women who came here to cook for us. They've worked steadily for over a year. Their character is proven."

Xu Dafu listened closely.

"We move them into the bullet factory," Zhao Sheng continued. "Then recruit new women from outer counties to take over cooking."

Xu Dafu nodded firmly.

"That will do."

And so—

The recruitment assembly began.

At the crossroads in the center of the residential area, a large notice was posted:

RECRUITING WORKERS

Men and Women Accepted

Highly Confidential Work

Wages and Treatment Equal to Skilled Workers

Zhao Sheng even stationed a literate subordinate beside it to read aloud for those who couldn't read.

The effect was immediate.

Men gathered, squinting at the notice, scratching heads.

"Women too?"

"Same pay as skilled workers?"

"Is this a joke?"

They'd heard from the illustrated booklet Gao Piao that Gao Family Village used women in industry—but seeing it happen here felt unreal.

Meanwhile—

The women exploded with excitement.

"Sisters, look!"

"Same pay as skilled workers!"

"Our cooking barely earns anything!"

"If we get this job, we earn the same as the men!"

Applicants surged forward.

Out of just over two thousand residents, more than eight hundred showed up.

Half men. Half women.

At the registration platform, Xu Dafu sat stern-faced, gripping a tin megaphone.

"Listen carefully," he said. "This job is not pleasant."

The crowd quieted.

"You will spend all day indoors. No sunlight. Small, dry rooms. Repeating the same motions from morning to night."

Some men's expressions immediately cooled.

A real man's ambition stretched in all directions—who wanted to rot indoors?

The women, however, showed no reaction.

Indoors all day?

Protected from wind and rain?

What blessing is this?

Xu Dafu raised a paper cartridge.

"This tiny thing. You must wrap three materials inside. All day. Every day. Harder than wrapping zongzi."

Another wave of men backed away.

The women remained unmoved.

Harder than embroidery? Than sewing?

Please.

"One last requirement," Xu Dafu said. "Strict secrecy. No discussing work methods. No leaks. No gossip."

The men perked up.

The women gasped.

"No gossip?!"

Xu Dafu waved dismissively.

"Only about work. You may still gossip about whether a coworker gave birth to a son or daughter, or whether someone talked in her sleep about loving Zheng Daniu from the next village—"

"What?!" Zheng Daniu shouted from the crowd. "I protest!"

Zao Ying, beside him, pointed angrily.

"I protest too! Why make him sound popular?!"

Xu Dafu didn't even look at them.

The women immediately smiled again.

"That's fine!"

"We're signing up!"

Registration went fast.

In the end—

Four hundred women.

Two hundred men.

The Yongji Bullet Factory stood ready.

Silent.

Sealed.

Waiting to feed the war.

And somewhere far away, two sticks of incense continued to burn.

Chapter 514 Wang Guozhong Has Truly Arrived

With the Yongji Bullet Factory officially established, the Ancient Ferry Dock underwent an immediate and visible shift.

Porters vanished.

Cooks disappeared.

One by one, familiar faces who had once hauled sacks or stirred cauldrons stepped through guarded doors and became arsenal workers.

The result was instant.

The number of general laborers outside the core operations plummeted.

Construction slowed. Transport queues lengthened. Even the kitchens felt a little emptier.

Naturally, everyone's gaze turned outward.

If Yongji lacked hands—

Then hands would have to be pulled in from elsewhere.

Puzhou City

Thirty li from Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock.

This was the place that would one day become Yongji City, but for now, it was already thriving. Commerce was lively. Workshops bustled. Markets overflowed.

And salt smugglers?

They were everywhere.

In Puzhou, nine out of ten households had brushed against illicit salt at some point. The entire city lived on a razor's edge between legality and crime, yet no one felt particularly guilty about it.

After all—

When everyone was dirty, who dared call whom unclean?

Tie Niaofei, the infamous salt kingpin, strolled down the street with hands clasped behind his back, expression relaxed, as if this city belonged to him.

Every few steps, someone greeted him.

"Boss Tie! What brings you to Puzhou today?"

"Another big deal?"

"Planning something large, huh?"

Tie Niaofei turned his head lazily.

If the speaker was a fellow salt trafficker, he would casually pull out a salt permit—one he'd seized from Huang Yunfa—and flash it with a grin.

"Official permit. Ten thousand jin."

He'd lower his voice. "Why scrape by on scraps? Come work for me."

Eyes went red on the spot.

Some scoffed.

Some hesitated.

Some, deep down, started calculating.

But if the person greeting him was an ordinary Puzhou resident, Tie Niaofei's smile became... mysterious.

"I'm recruiting," he'd say. "Know anyone clever? Hardworking? Men or women, doesn't matter. Follow me—I'll show them the road to prosperity."

On the opposite side of the city—

A monk walked through the shantytowns.

Zhan Seng, staff in hand, robes patched, sandals worn thin.

This was where Puzhou's poorest lived.

The droughts of recent years had nearly crushed them. Hunger, sickness, despair—it had all piled up like debt.

But over the past year, things had quietly changed.

Grain flowed.

Not trickles—floods.

Gao Family Village had shipped enormous quantities from Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock straight into Puzhou. Prices fell steadily. Still higher than in normal years, yes—but no longer fatal.

Seeing the "enlightened monk" from Pujiu Temple, people bowed eagerly.

There was an eternal truth in the world:

The poorer people were, the more sincerely they worshipped gods.

When humans couldn't change fate with their own hands, they borrowed divine ones.

Burn one copper coin's worth of incense.

Wish for ten thousand taels of silver.

"Master, my family is destitute. Please guide me."

"Master, I went to Pujiu Temple twice but didn't see you. Where have you been?"

Zhan Seng pressed his palms together.

"Amitabha."

"This humble monk has come precisely to guide you."

He pointed west.

"Thirty li from here, at the Ancient Ferry Dock, they are recruiting porters and female cooks. Honest work. Full meals. If you seek a livelihood, go there."

One worked the shadows.

One worked the light.

Tie Niaofei and Zhan Seng—each in their own way—spread the word.

People began to move.

Small groups packed belongings and set out toward Yongji.

Everything was proceeding smoothly—

Until—

A sudden uproar exploded near the east city gate.

"Soldiers!"

"Soldiers are coming!"

Cries echoed through streets and alleys.

Puzhou was a small prefecture capital. There was no permanent garrison. Soldiers arriving was a rarity.

Excited townsfolk rushed toward the gate.

Tie Niaofei and Zhan Seng approached from opposite directions, swallowed by the same crowd. When they spotted each other, they didn't greet.

Just one glance.

Then strangers again.

At the gate stood Prefect Qiu Qianfan, robes neat, posture stiff.

Outside the walls, a massive banner approached.

One character fluttered in the wind:

Wang.

Three thousand soldiers marched beneath it, their presence heavy, oppressive, like a storm cloud pressing down on the land.

Soon, Wang Guozhong left his main force outside the city and entered with a hundred personal guards.

He rode forward, armor gleaming, smile wide.

"Prefect!"

We'll skip the ceremonial pleasantries. Heaven knows neither side enjoyed them.

Wang Guozhong got straight to it.

"This general once lost his way," he said cheerfully. "Fortunately, I turned back before the cliff's edge. Thanks to the court's grace, I am now appointed Deputy Commander of Puzhou."

He cupped his fists.

"From today onward, I will be permanently stationed here. Prefect Qiu, I look forward to your guidance."

Qiu Qianfan returned the salute.

His smile was thin.

Very thin.

He had already received reports.

Wang Guozhong's troops had plundered villages on the way in. Burned homes. Stripped fields bare.

Bandit behavior, through and through.

But now the man wore an official seal.

If he were just a bandit, Qiu Qianfan could raise militia and resist.

As an imperial officer?

All he could do was write memorials—and pray someone in the capital still cared.

"With the General here," Qiu Qianfan said coolly, "this official need no longer worry about bandits harming the common people. Truly... a cause for celebration."

Wang Guozhong laughed loudly.

"Bandits?" he asked eagerly. "Are there bandits here?"

Turncoats were always like this.

Eager to prove loyalty by killing others like themselves.

Inside, Qiu Qianfan cursed:

You are the bandit.

Outwardly, he said, "Several months ago, a minor bandit named Zhang Fei caused trouble. Since then—peace."

"No more?" Wang Guozhong scoffed.

"Every word is true."

Wang Guozhong's smile faded.

"I am stationed here permanently," he said coldly. "Do you think such lies can be hidden forever?"

Qiu Qianfan's face darkened.

Wang Guozhong sneered.

"Even when I served under Wang Jiayin, I knew of Xing Honglang of Yongji, the bandit who controlled the Ancient Ferry Dock. Yet you didn't mention her."

His voice sharpened.

"Tell me—are you conspiring with her? Or did you take her silver and become her protector?"

Qiu Qianfan's patience snapped.

"Xing Honglang controls the ferry," he said flatly. "But she has never massacred villages. She smuggles salt, yes—but she does not burn the land."

His eyes locked onto Wang Guozhong.

"You arrive, General, and villages are already turned to ash. And now you seek to make an example of her? Are you so eager to ruin Puzhou's peace?"

Wang Guozhong laughed coldly.

"So that's why salt smugglers run wild here."

He turned sharply.

"I will report this to the court. Let us see whether your official hat stays on your head."

"Hmph. Withdraw!"

He left.

Back to his camp.

Qiu Qianfan stood alone at the gate.

The crowd dispersed.

The dust settled.

He stared at the sky and sighed.

You fool.

Salt smuggling in Puzhou is a historical disease.

Eight or nine out of ten households are tainted.

So long as no blood is spilled, officials turn a blind eye.

And you—

You are a hundred times worse than any smuggler.

"Alas..."

His sigh drifted into the empty street.

Wang Guozhong had arrived.

And Puzhou's quiet days were over.

Chapter 515 When Told to Strike the Face, He Struck the Hat

Tie Niaofei and Zhan Seng stood in the crowd near the city gate, watching Wang Guozhong's entrance like two men watching a stage play they'd already read the script for.

The banners.

The armor.

The carefully curated menace.

Tie Niaofei let out a silent snort.

Here it comes, he thought. What's bound to come always comes.

Zhan Seng's expression was calm, palms tucked into his sleeves, eyes half-lidded. If you didn't know him, you'd think he was contemplating the impermanence of all things.

In reality, he was thinking the same thing.

Good thing we moved early.

The envoys sent to seek pacification from Yang He should have reached him days ago by now.

And once Yang He got the letter—

Well.

Yang He was already on the road.

As the Supreme Commander of the three border regions of Shaanxi, Yang He wasn't the type to rush anywhere. Even when marching to put out fires, he did it slowly, deliberately, like a man savoring every step toward someone else's headache.

He'd take his time coming to Yongji.

And during that time?

Wang Guozhong's account book would be thoroughly reviewed.

Line by line.

Village by village.

Fire by fire.

Tie Niaofei smiled faintly.

"Let's go," he muttered.

Zhan Seng nodded.

The two slipped away from Puzhou City without lingering a second longer.

Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock

If Puzhou City was tense, the dock was the opposite.

It was alive.

The clatter of tools echoed across the hills. Shouts overlapped. Sweat-darkened backs bent and straightened in rhythm. Everywhere you looked, people were building.

On a barren slope far outside the stronghold, an entire complex was taking shape.

The bullet factory.

Solid. Squat. Made of cement.

Far enough from the residential area that if something went wrong, it would only blow up rocks and dirt instead of families.

Technically speaking, this entire operation was illegal.

Unauthorized land reclamation.

Unauthorized construction.

No local permits.

Any one of those could earn fifty strokes of the cane.

All three together?

Enough to put someone in prison.

And yet—

The Puzhou Prefect didn't say a word.

So Xing Honglang built as if she had imperial backing.

While the outer structures went up, the inside was already busy.

In a commandeered room nearby, specialists brought by Xu Dafu from Gao Family Village were teaching newly recruited workers the sacred rites of controlled destruction.

Separate.

Grind.

Measure.

Re-proportion.

Hands learned to respect gunpowder the way peasants respected tigers—never casually, never twice the same way.

Rolling cartridges.

Packing charges.

Storing them properly.

Every step drilled into muscle memory.

Under normal circumstances, Xu Dafu would never allow these people near real materials for at least ten days. Half a month if he had his way.

Safety rules memorized until they could be shouted in their sleep.

But circumstances were... flexible.

Tie Niaofei and Zhan Seng returned to the stronghold and went straight to the meeting hall.

"Wang Guozhong has arrived in Puzhou," Tie Niaofei said.

That was it.

No embellishment.

No drama.

The room absorbed the words in silence.

No one looked surprised.

Someone poured tea.

Someone else adjusted their seat.

Xing Honglang nodded once.

"If he's here," she said calmly, "then he's here."

That evening—

A horse came at full gallop.

Dust flew. Hooves thundered.

A rider stopped before the stronghold gates, chest puffed out like a rooster that had just discovered it could crow.

This man was Wang Guozhong's envoy.

Three days ago, he'd been nothing more than a smooth-tongued, barely literate minor bandit chief.

Today?

An envoy of the imperial court.

Small men who suddenly gain power tend to swell like frogs.

This one nearly burst.

He swept his gaze across the stronghold with thinly veiled disdain.

Wooden palisades.

Sparse watchtowers.

Common folk walking around openly.

No disciplined formations.

No rows of armored soldiers.

Just a few thousand people living their lives.

He sneered inwardly.

That's it?

Half of them are old people, women, and children. The fighters can't number more than two thousand.

In Wang Jiayin's army, this Xing Honglang wouldn't even qualify as a major chieftain.

Still—

He wasn't completely stupid.

Old Zhang Fei had died here.

That alone meant Xing Honglang wasn't harmless.

So he stood at the gate, lifted his chin, and shouted like a man who believed volume equaled authority.

"People of the stronghold! Come out and speak!"

Moments later, Xing Honglang appeared atop the palisade.

The wall had changed.

Once, it had been nothing but a thin fence of stakes. Now planks reinforced it, wide enough for people to stand, walk, and fight.

She leaned casually against the railing and looked down at him.

Her expression was... strange.

Almost amused.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The envoy straightened.

"I am an envoy of Deputy General Wang Guozhong of Puzhou!" he declared loudly.

"I have come today to advise you—disband your followers, lay down your weapons, and personally come to General Wang's tent to beg forgiveness! If you're lucky, he may spare your life!"

Xing Honglang laughed quietly to herself.

Logically, she could end this now.

We've already sought pacification from Supreme Commander Yang He. He's on his way.

One sentence.

Done.

But she didn't say it.

Because no one here wanted Wang Guozhong in Puzhou.

He was poison.

A traitor.

A butcher of villagers.

A man who burned first and reported later.

Even if he crawled to Gao Family Village on his knees—

They wouldn't take him.

So—

This had to be settled the hard way.

Xing Honglang glanced sideways.

Perched on Gao Chuwu's shoulder, the Dao Xuan Tianzun—a small puppet with carved wooden features—raised one tiny hand.

Thumbs up.

Click.

Xing Honglang smiled.

She turned back.

"You're very arrogant," she said lightly.

The envoy sneered. "I am an official. You're a bandit. How else should I speak? You want me to kneel and kowtow?"

Xing Honglang nodded thoughtfully.

"You said it yourself."

Something in her tone made his spine prickle.

He tugged his reins back half a step, already calculating escape routes.

Still, his mouth ran faster than his courage.

"Do you dare touch me?!" he shouted.

"General Wang's garrison is less than thirty li away! Touch a hair on my head and you're dead!"

Bang!

The crack of an arquebus split the air.

White smoke bloomed atop the palisade.

The envoy felt a sudden lightness on his head.

His hat—

Was gone.

It flew clean off, tumbling through the air before landing several zhang away.

He froze.

Slowly turned.

There was a hole in it.

A clean one.

His legs went weak.

They shot... my hat?

Hitting a man at this distance wasn't hard.

Hitting only the hat?

That was a skill bordering on the absurd.

Like splitting a dart blindfolded.

Like breaking a stone with your chest.

Like riding a unicycle on a tightrope.

This wasn't luck.

This was a warning.

The envoy swallowed.

Still, habit made him bark one last threat.

"F-fine! Just you wait! General Wang will come! You're all dead!"

He whipped his horse around and fled toward Puzhou City.

Only after he disappeared did the curses explode from the wall.

"DAMN IT!" Lao Nanfeng roared.

"I TOLD YOU TO SHOOT HIS FACE! HIS FACE! You hit the hat?!"

The arquebus soldier clutched his head.

"I—I aimed for his face! I swear!"

Lao Nanfeng stomped. "Train more!"

The Dao Xuan Tianzun let out a delighted click-clack laugh.

"Enough, enough," the puppet said cheerfully.

"Even warring states don't kill envoys. He wasn't meant to die anyway."

Xing Honglang looked toward the road the envoy had taken.

Let him run.

Sometimes—

Missing the face hurt more than hitting it.

Chapter 516 Sometimes You Must Walk a Crooked Path

Once the envoy rode away, there was no longer any doubt.

War was coming.

The stronghold immediately shifted gears.

Weapons were checked.

Walls inspected.

Firearms counted and redistributed.

Everyone knew what that envoy's departure meant.

Lao Nanfeng, however, did not join the bustle.

Instead, he wandered over to Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang, hands clasped behind his back, a sly grin slowly creeping across his face.

"General Gao," he said cheerfully, "it's time we sent out an envoy of our own."

Gao Chuwu raised an eyebrow.

"Another one? To run over to Wang Guozhong's camp and curse at him?"

He thought for a moment, then added earnestly,

"If that's the plan, I recommend Flat Rabbit. He's very good at provoking people."

Lao Nanfeng shook his head.

"No. Not to Wang Guozhong."

He leaned in slightly.

"To Yang He."

Gao Chuwu froze.

Xing Honglang blinked once.

Both of them looked completely lost.

Seeing their expressions, Lao Nanfeng laughed softly.

"Yang He is already on his way to pacify us," he explained. "Wang Guozhong doesn't know this. And earlier, you deliberately didn't tell him either."

Xing Honglang nodded slowly.

Lao Nanfeng continued,

"If we had simply told Wang Guozhong, 'We've already accepted pacification and Yang He is coming,' then he wouldn't dare attack us."

"But," he said, spreading his hands,

"we chose not to say anything."

"If fighting breaks out later, on the surface, we'll be in the wrong."

At that moment, Tie Niaoifei poked his head out from nearby.

"So what if we're in the wrong?" he scoffed.

"Why do we care whether the officials think we're right or wrong?"

Lao Nanfeng smiled.

"This isn't only about the officials," he said calmly.

"It's about Boss Xing's reputation."

The room quieted.

"Outlaws live by reputation," Lao Nanfeng continued.

"If we act without justification, who will respect us? Who will dare to join us in the future?"

He snorted.

"We'd become another Wang Guozhong—

a man infamous across the land for betraying his sworn brother."

"Even if we're enemies of Wang Jiayin," Lao Nanfeng said coldly,

"we still despise Wang Guozhong."

His words landed heavily.

Xing Honglang was an old-school outlaw leader.

For people like her, blood could be spilled—but honor could not be discarded.

If you acted without reason, other outlaws would abandon you without hesitation.

She frowned slightly.

"Sending an envoy..." she asked,

"can that really fix this?"

Lao Nanfeng nodded.

"We send an envoy to Yang He," he said.

"And we tell him this:

'Wang Guozhong came to attack us.

We desperately tried to inform him that we had already accepted pacification and that Supreme Commander Yang He was on his way.

But Wang Guozhong refused to listen.

He insisted on attacking because he wanted to eliminate us, fearing we'd join the court and threaten his position.'"

Xing Honglang's eyes lit up.

"So afterward," she said slowly, "all the blame falls on Wang Guozhong."

"Yes," Lao Nanfeng replied.

"Because we contacted Yang He first, showing sincerity.

Yang He will never believe that we wanted to fight."

"It will clearly look like Wang Guozhong provoked the conflict on purpose."

Lao Nanfeng chuckled.

"And imperial officials?"

"They're creatures of habit. They'll believe us instantly."

"After all," he added lightly,

"this is the same Wang Guozhong who betrayed Wang Jiayin.

Who in the world would believe him?"

Xing Honglang laughed.

"Hehehe... truly a vicious plan."

Gao Chuwu, however, looked horrified.

"Isn't this..." he said slowly,

"just... lying to people?"

Lao Nanfeng shrugged.

"Not only lying," he said cheerfully.

"It's also the wicked filing the first complaint."

"Utterly devious."

Gao Chuwu's eyes widened.

"Such a wicked thing..."

"Are we really going to do it?"

Lao Nanfeng spread his hands.

"We're dealing with villains," he said.

"Is it really wrong to use slightly villainous methods?"

Gao Chuwu hesitated.

"But... but..."

His brain refused to cooperate.

He turned to Zhan Seng, who stood nearby.

"Master," Gao Chuwu asked earnestly,

"is deceiving people like this right or wrong?"

Zhan Seng sighed deeply and pressed his palms together.

"Amitabha," he said.

"The Buddha does not judge good and evil solely by immediate suffering or joy."

"He judges whether an action benefits the continuation of the future."

"If deceiving people here benefits the world,"

"then it is the correct action."

"And if refusing to deceive leads to catastrophe,"

"then that cannot be called compassion."

Gao Chuwu stared blankly.

If he could understand that,

he wouldn't be Gao Chuwu.

He turned helplessly to the small figure on his shoulder.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he asked earnestly,

"should we deceive people?"

The Dao Xuan Tianzun let out a long, wooden sigh.

"Sometimes," the Dao Xuan Tianzun said slowly,

"one must walk a crooked path to reach a righteous destination."

Gao Chuwu's eyes lit up.

"Oh! I understood that!" he exclaimed.

"Daoist teachings really are easier than Buddhist ones!"

Zhan Seng smiled bitterly.

"Amitabha... this has nothing to do with Daoism or Buddhism.

It's merely that this humble monk's cultivation is shallow."

"I cannot see as deeply as the Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Lao Nanfeng cut in,

"First get your 'Amitabha' right before talking about cultivation."

Zhan Seng beamed.

"Excellent! Excellent!"

Lao Nanfeng leapt back in alarm.

"Don't say that to me!" he shouted.

"It gives me chills!"

Zhan Seng froze, confused.

That very night, their envoy departed—

riding against Yang He's expected route,

intent on intercepting him halfway and filing their complaint first.

Meanwhile...

Wang Guozhong's envoy returned to camp and reported everything.

Wang Guozhong had never truly expected Xing Honglang to surrender.

The envoy had merely been a formality.

Now that it was over, he grinned savagely.

"She refused the toast and chose the forfeit," he snarled.

"Then don't blame me for being impolite!"

"Muster the troops. Prepare to march!"

The envoy hesitated, then added,

"Her firearms are dangerous. From dozens of feet away, she shot my hat off with one shot. Old Zhang Fei was also defeated by her firearms."

Wang Guozhong laughed.

"Firearms? Muskets, that's all."

"When I fought government troops," he said smugly,

"I learned how to deal with them."

"Shielded carts."

"Hehehe... now we are the government."

"Have the Puzhou Magistrate conscript laborers immediately.

Build shielded carts overnight."

"They're simple. With soldiers helping, fifteen will be ready in three days."

Late at night, the Yongji Water Fortress slept.

Then—

A man in coarse linen ran desperately to the outer wall.

The sentry spotted him instantly, bow drawn.

"Who goes there?!"

"Don't shoot!" the man cried.

"I'm a carpenter from Puzhou City!"

"I ran thirty li after dusk!"

The sentry narrowed his eyes.

The man gasped,

"I've received kindness from Boss Xing and Boss Tie Niaofei."

"Wang Guozhong has conscripted artisans to build shielded carts and trebuchets overnight."

"They're meant to attack this fortress!"

The sentry's face hardened.

"My message is delivered," the man said urgently.

"I must return now."

"Please... you must win."

"My livelihood depends on you."

He turned to leave.

"Wait," the sentry called.

A silver ingot flew down from the wall.

"Take this," the sentry said.

"When the battle is over, come back."

"There will be greater rewards."

Sometimes—

Walking a crooked path

is the only way to keep the road ahead straight.

Chapter 517 Help Me Get a Boost

Something rather interesting happened.

It turned out that the carpenter who had fled Puzhou City to warn the river stronghold was not alone.

After he left, more people arrived one after another throughout the night.

Some came in pairs, some in small groups.

All had traveled thirty li in the darkness, slipping past city gates and patrols, just to deliver a single message:

The imperial troops are preparing to attack.

These people were commoners—ordinary folk from Puzhou and nearby counties.

Some had benefited from Gao Family Village's cheap grain.

Some had helped transport salt from Xiao Lake.

Some had worked at the river stronghold themselves.

Others had relatives or friends who did.

Xing Honglang, the great salt smuggler stationed at Gudu Ferry, had never oppressed the people of Puzhou.

On the contrary—

she had fed them, employed them, and given them hope.

For the first—and perhaps only—time in their lives, the common people sincerely hoped that the "rebels" would defeat the imperial army.

Inside Gao Family Village's meeting hall, the core leadership gathered once more.

Xing Honglang spoke first.

"Wang Guozhong has suddenly turned himself into an imperial officer," she said calmly,

"and now he's even imitating the court by building shielded carts."

She swept her gaze across the room.

"Gentlemen—how do we deal with this?"

Old Nanfeng laughed.

"Cannons," he said breezily.

"Blast them to pieces. The moment our gunboats open fire, those shielded carts won't be worth a fart."

Xing Honglang shook her head.

"Gunboats are too conspicuous," she replied.

"The river offers no cover. Before we even fire, enemy scouts will spot us."

"And once Wang Guozhong sees our cannons," she continued,

"he won't dare advance. He'll retreat straight back into Puzhou City."

She paused.

"We can't lay siege to a city. And if we're telling Yang He we're willing to accept pacification while simultaneously attacking a prefectural capital—"

"That would be idiotic."

Old Nanfeng scratched his head, then snapped his fingers.

"Then move the cannons into the stronghold. Place them behind the wooden stockades and dig firing ports along the walls."

This proposal was immediately met with nods.

A solid, practical solution.

Just then, a voice that had been silent until now spoke up.

"Has everyone forgotten something?"

All eyes turned.

Flat Rabbit cleared his throat.

"Defeating Wang Guozhong is easy," he said seriously.

"There's no need to argue about that."

"The real problem," he continued,

"is how to prevent him from escaping."

"...Huh?"

Flat Rabbit leaned forward.

"Wang Guozhong used to serve under Wang Jiayin. What was he best at?"

"Not fighting," he answered himself.

"Running."

"The court launched countless encirclement campaigns against them," Flat Rabbit said.

"They lost battle after battle—but they never got wiped out."

"That tells you everything."

"The moment our cannons overturn his shielded carts," Flat Rabbit continued,

"and our rifles and grenades follow up—"

"He'll vanish."

Zao Ying immediately stood up.

"I'll lead the Cavalry Battalion in pursuit!"

Flat Rabbit chuckled.

"Then why couldn't the Guanning Iron Cavalry catch them?"

Zao Ying froze.

The Guanning Iron Cavalry's riders were far superior to hers.

If they couldn't do it, neither could she.

Silence fell.

Someone muttered in awe,

"Sir Rabbit... your intelligence suddenly spiked again."

Flat Rabbit snorted.

"This rabbit has always been smart. You people just misunderstand me."

Despite the humor, a headache began to spread through the room.

Yes—

winning was easy.

Killing Wang Guozhong was not.

If he escaped back to Puzhou City, they couldn't pursue him.

And once Yang He arrived and pacification was accepted, killing him would become politically impossible.

Serving alongside Wang Guozhong afterward—

armies stationed thirty li apart, constantly glaring at each other—

Just thinking about it made people sick.

"We must eliminate him," Old Nanfeng said decisively.

He was the most familiar with officialdom.

"If Wang Guozhong lives," he explained,

"after pacification, we'll likely be appointed Yongji Garrison Commanders."

"And he'll remain Puzhou Deputy Commander."

"That puts him above us."

Old Nanfeng's face darkened.

"But if Wang Guozhong dies—"

"Chief Xing will most likely take his position."

"At that point," he said slowly,

"there will be no military official above us anywhere near Puzhou."

"That city will effectively be ours."

The room stirred.

Only now did everyone realize how critical this was.

Whether for Jianghu honor

or Gao Family Village's future—

Wang Guozhong had to die.

"Hahahaha!" Flat Rabbit laughed smugly.

"As expected, this rabbit is still the cleverest."

"I identified the key problem immediately."

"Listen carefully to my brilliant plan—"

"We secretly deploy an army behind Wang Guozhong, encircle him, and annihilate him."

The room collectively sighed.

"As expected," Old Nanfeng said dryly,

"Sir Rabbit's brilliance lasts exactly one sentence."

Flat Rabbit blinked.

"?"

Old Nanfeng continued,

"You think his scouts are blind?"

"The distance between Gudu Ferry and Puzhou City is only thirty li."

"Before his main force even leaves the city, their scout perimeter is already on our doorstep."

"You think we can secretly move a large force to encircle them?"

Flat Rabbit protested,

"History is full of successful encirclements!"

Old Nanfeng snorted.

"Those were grand strategic maneuvers, not sneaking a few thousand men past enemy scouts."

Flat Rabbit gritted his teeth.

"Then we snipe him!"

"Use riflemen to assassinate him directly!"

Heads shook again.

"A man so good at running," someone said,

"would never stand at the front."

"He'll hide far behind the lines."

"Our rifles don't have that range."

The headache worsened.

At this moment, Li Daoxuan finally decided to intervene.

He had been watching quietly.

These tactics—

humanity had learned them through oceans of blood and corpses.

He had no intention of letting his little people pay that price.

With a crisp "krak", the small wooden figure dropped from Gao Chuwu's shoulder and landed on the table.

Everyone jolted and immediately bowed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"It's already late at night—have you not rested?"

Li Daoxuan laughed inwardly.

Late night? Modern people are still scrolling their phones right now.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun paced across the table with soft krak-krak sounds.

Then, he spoke a single word:

"Foxholes."

The entire room froze.

Chapter 518: Skirmish Pits

The moment the words "skirmish pits" left his mouth, a visible ripple of confusion passed through the assembled crowd. Faces turned toward one another, brows furrowed, quiet murmurs spreading like wind across grass. No one present truly understood what he meant.

Li Daoxuan understood their bewilderment all too well. In this era of the Ming Dynasty, the very idea of a "skirmish pit" was something no one could reasonably be expected to grasp. It simply did not exist within the shared vocabulary of war.

Historically, skirmish pits were a product of rifled firearms, born alongside skirmishers themselves as warfare slowly shed its reliance on dense formations and rigid lines. Skirmishers were not like conventional troops. They did not require vast, flat terrain, nor did they depend on tight ranks or grand displays of order. Instead, they operated in small, nimble groups, digging shallow depressions into the earth and using those modest hollows as cover, shielding themselves from enemy fire while calmly returning volleys of their own.

These unassuming hollows, carved quietly into the ground, were what Li Daoxuan referred to as skirmish pits.

Gao Family Village already possessed skirmishers in name, but their actual combat experience remained thin, and their tactical understanding had grown only slowly through cautious trial and error. Had they been left to develop such ideas on their own, it might have taken dozens of real battles, and countless lives paid along the way, before the concept of skirmish pits emerged naturally.

Li Daoxuan had no intention of allowing his people to purchase enlightenment with blood.

So he chose the shorter road.

"Outside the water stronghold," Dao Xuan Tianzun said calmly, his gaze sweeping across the terrain, "on both flanks of the open ground, first mark out the likely boundaries of the main battlefield. Then, extending one to two hundred paces beyond those edges, dig many small earthen pits. Each pit should be large enough to conceal five or six soldiers. Before the battle begins, our men will lie hidden within them."

No sooner had he finished speaking than Lao Nanfeng's eyes widened, understanding dawning with startling clarity. "Digging pits on the flanks, hiding our musketeers there to ambush the enemy and strike at their general... this is brilliant."

Zao Ying, however, frowned slightly and voiced the concern that had already begun forming in several minds. "Won't this be discovered? Enemy scouts will surely survey the battlefield ahead of time. If they find pits filled with our soldiers on both flanks, they'll immediately be on guard."

Xing Honglang waved a hand dismissively, her tone light but confident. "That's easily handled. We cover the pits with wooden planks, then layer grass and earth on top. From two hundred paces away, enemy scouts won't conduct a painstaking search. They'll ride through at speed, never noticing those subtly concealed patches of ground."

A thoughtful silence followed, broken by Gao Chuwu's straightforward voice. "After they fire from those pits," he asked, a crease forming between his brows, "won't the soldiers hiding there be in terrible danger?"

It was a fair question.

Everyone immediately grasped the implication. Even if those five or six musketeers succeeded in killing Wang Guozhong, they would almost certainly be surrounded and cut down by his furious subordinates moments later.

Low murmurs spread through the group. This plan seemed uncharacteristically ruthless. Dao Xuan Tianzun had always valued the lives of his people, and sending a small group on what appeared to be a suicide mission did not align with his usual way of doing things.

As doubt lingered in the air, Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke again, his voice steady and unhurried. "I never told you to dig only one pit," he said. "Dig many. Dig them across a broad stretch of land. A vast network."

"Ah!" Lao Nanfeng inhaled sharply, the full picture snapping into place. "So that's it. Not merely a small ambush to assassinate the enemy general, but concealing an entire force, ready to erupt from the flanks. A true encirclement from the shadows."

Around him, heads nodded as understanding slowly spread from one person to the next.

Only Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu still looked uncertain. Zheng Daniu scratched his head and asked honestly, "So... will this actually make fighting easier?"

Lao Nanfeng chuckled softly. "I may not have grasped every detail of Dao Xuan Tianzun's intent, but let me try to explain. Traditional armies rely on formations of spearmen, shield-bearers, and archers. Without formation, they lose their strength entirely. Our smoothbore musketeers still depend on orderly ranks, but our rifled musketeers do not. We can station the smoothbore musketeers in defensive lines at the front of the water stronghold. Meanwhile, the rifled musketeers will hide in these pits, scattered loosely, without any formal arrangement at all."

He continued, growing more animated as the idea took shape. "Once the pits are dug, covered with planks, and disguised with grass, enemy scouts will never notice them. When our cannons fire and the smoothbore musketeers engage head-on, the rifled musketeers will rise from both flanks. First, they will kill Wang Guozhong from hundreds of paces away. Then, they will pour fire into the battlefield from the sides. The remaining bandits will be completely annihilated."

This time, even Zheng Daniu's eyes shone with excitement. "Popping up from the sides and firing all at once? That'll throw them into total chaos!"

The seasoned commanders present were visibly pleased.

To think that skirmishers could be used in such a way.

More importantly, this tactic was something the enemy could never imitate. Their armies depended entirely on formations to function. Without ranks and order, they were nothing more than a mob. They could not abandon formation, dig pits, and fight a scattered, pit-to-pit battle.

Lao Nanfeng's spirits soared. He quickly fetched paper and ink and sketched out a rough map of the water stronghold and its surroundings. After calculating the area typically occupied by a three-thousand-man force, he drew two long lines flanking that space, one to two hundred paces out.

"Along these edges," he said, tapping the page, "we dig the skirmish pits. Once our men are hidden beneath planks and grass, Wang Guozhong will never imagine what awaits him."

After all, people only guard against what they understand. What lies beyond their comprehension simply never enters their calculations.

Even if Wang Guozhong were ten thousand times more cunning, he would never conceive of an enemy abandoning formation entirely to hide soldiers in countless small holes in the earth.

"We dig tonight," Xing Honglang declared, rising decisively. "Doing this in daylight would alert scouts from far away. We work under cover of darkness. By the time Wang Guozhong arrives, he'll be walking straight into a trap."

The moment they heard the words "digging pits," Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu practically lit up. "Other things, maybe we're clumsy," Gao Chuwu said with a loud laugh, "but hard labor? You can't leave us out of that. Give us two teams. We'll handle it."

"Wait."

Flat Rabbit suddenly stood, chest thrust forward. "Digging pits? You lot clearly don't know what you're doing. This Rabbit Master must personally oversee it."

Amused glances were exchanged. "Since when is this your specialty too?"

Flat Rabbit snorted proudly. "Do you think the 'Rabbit' in Rabbit Master is just for show?"

Eyes rolled in unison. "Stop boasting about something so ordinary."

And so, beneath a moonless sky swept by cold wind, Flat Rabbit made good on his words.

He personally led a large detachment of soldiers, each carrying a small shovel, slipping quietly out of the water stronghold toward the flanks of the battlefield, one to two hundred paces beyond Lao Nanfeng's marked boundaries. There, they began digging furiously, earth piling up silently beside them.

Within the designated area, pit after pit took shape. Each was carefully measured, then covered with wooden planks and layered with grass and soil, disguised so carefully that they looked like nothing more than untouched ground, as if someone had gently planted flowers atop them.

As dawn neared, the teams finished covering the pits and withdrew swiftly back into the water stronghold to rest. The following night, fresh groups were sent out to continue the work, methodical and unseen.

At the same time, over at the Qichuan Ferry, cargo ships arrived one after another, delivering several heavy cannons to the water stronghold.

These were not hastily removed from ship decks, only to be dismantled again. They were newly cast artillery pieces from Qichuan's own cannon workshops.

Unlike the sleek steel cannons Li Daoxuan sometimes provided, these were forged entirely by the villagers themselves, following blueprints and techniques passed down by Song Yingxing. Their surfaces were dark and rough, lacking polish or beauty, but the weight of them spoke clearly enough.

They were crude, yes.

But their power was real.

Chapter 519 The Shield Carts Arrive

Three days passed in the blink of an eye.

Outside Puzhou City, Wang Guozhong stood with his hands clasped behind his back, gazing at the neat row of war machines arrayed before him. Fifteen shield carts stood side by side, their thick wooden panels freshly reinforced, wheels newly greased. Behind them sat four catapults, their frames solid and imposing, and four battering rams bound with iron hoops, their polished heads gleaming faintly in the daylight. The sight filled his chest with a swelling, almost intoxicating satisfaction.

"See this?" Wang Guozhong said loudly, sweeping an arm toward the siege engines as his lips curled into a smug grin. "This is the advantage of becoming an official army man. Back when I followed Wang Jiayin, we were always the ones being smashed by these damned things. Now that I've accepted pacification and joined the court, I can conscript civilians, build these great machines, and go smash someone else instead. Hah! It's truly exhilarating!"

A subordinate hurried forward, laughing along with him. "Following General Wang really brings honor to us all. With these siege engines, dealing with Xing Honglang, that petty salt smuggler, holed up in her little water stockade, will be no effort at all."

"Hahahaha!" Wang Guozhong slapped the man on the shoulder, delighted. "Well said. Give the order. The entire army moves out!"

The command rang out, and Wang Guozhong's forces began to advance. Three thousand fierce bandits, now wearing the skin of an official army, pushed and hauled their cumbersome siege engines forward, marching toward the Gudu Ferry water stockade in Yongji.

High atop the walls of Puzhou City, Prefect Qiu Qianfan watched the departing army with a deeply troubled expression. He could not help but let out a long sigh. There was no real need to provoke Xing Honglang. If she were truly angered, she might wipe out Wang Guozhong first and then turn around and strike Puzhou itself, leaving him to clean up the disaster. He pressed his lips together, uneasy, hoping silently that matters would not spiral out of control.

"They're coming! Wang Guozhong's army has set out!"

The scout's report flew back at full speed.

At once, the entire Gudu Ferry water stockade erupted into motion. Zao Ying personally led a large contingent of cavalry, charging out from the gates and fanning across the outer perimeter to hunt down Wang Guozhong's scouts.

The first clash of the campaign was a scout skirmish.

The scouts on both sides met briefly, exchanging volleys of crude insults, each loudly promising to desecrate the other's ancestors, before drawing bows and sabers and plunging into a desperate chase.

Wang Guozhong's scouts were no match at all for Zao Ying's full cavalry detachment. Three hundred riders swept through the outskirts like a storm, chasing and cutting them down, driving the survivors more than ten li away in short order.

With the surrounding area confirmed clear of enemy scouts, two hundred Chassepot riflemen and one hundred additional riflemen quietly exited the water stockade. Each man carried dry rations and a waterskin slung at his side. They split into small groups of five or six and moved swiftly toward the pre-dug pits lining both flanks of the battlefield.

Reaching their assigned locations, they carefully lifted the turf and wooden planks concealing the pits, dropped inside one by one, then meticulously replaced the planks and grass above them.

Five or six soldiers huddled together in each pit, weapons held close, breath slowed, waiting.

They waited like this until dusk.

By the time the sky darkened, Wang Guozhong's army had finally lumbered to within ten li of the water stockade. Burdened by their heavy siege engines, they had advanced no more than twenty li in an entire day.

Once night fell, assaulting the stockade was no longer feasible. Wang Guozhong had no choice but to set up camp where he stood. Having risen from the ranks of wandering bandits, he knew nothing of proper encampment. The camp he ordered thrown together was chaotic and loose, vulnerable in every direction. Had a night raid been launched, the casualties would have been severe.

Yet a night attack also risked allowing Wang Guozhong himself to slip away under cover of darkness. Gao Family Village had no intention of alerting the enemy prematurely, and so the opportunity was deliberately passed over.

This decision, however, made for a miserable night for the soldiers already concealed in the pits. They remained buried in the earth, tearing open dry rations with stiff fingers, taking small sips from their waterskins, and sleeping in snatches, leaning against the cold walls of the pits beneath the open sky.

Early the next morning, the mournful sound of bugles echoed across the plains.

Wang Guozhong's army was preparing to attack.

The same messenger once again ran to the gates of the water stockade, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Xing Honglang, this is your final chance to accept pacification!"

Xing Honglang let out a cold snort. "Go back and tell Wang Guozhong this. Who would ever trust a man who betrays his own leader? Surrender to him? Never."

At the same time, Yang He, Supreme Commander of the Three Border Regions, was rushing toward the Gudu Ferry to preside over what he intended to be a grand pacification feast. Halfway along the road, he was intercepted by a mounted messenger. The man burst into tears the moment he dismounted.

"Lord Yang! Lord Yang!" he cried. "I am one of Xing Honglang's subordinates from Yongji. We are being bullied!"

Yang He raised a hand, his expression grave. "Calm yourself. Tell me what has happened."

The messenger sobbed as he spoke. "We were stationed at the Gudu Ferry dock, awaiting Lord Yang's amnesty. But as soon as Wang Guozhong took office as Puzhou's deputy commander, he began persecuting us. We explained again and again that we were already preparing to surrender and accept pacification under you, but he refused to listen. He insists on attacking us!"

Yang He's face darkened with fury. "Why would he do this? If you were preparing to accept pacification, you would soon serve alongside him. What reason could he have to attack you?"

"I don't know," the messenger said shakily. "Perhaps... perhaps he still bears a grudge because we did not follow Wang Jiayin's orders back then."

Yang He frowned deeply. After a moment's thought, understanding dawned. These two bandit leaders must have had old grievances between them. Wang Guozhong, having secured an official position, was using the opportunity to eliminate a former rival while earning merit from the court. A neat solution, from his perspective.

Such things were far too common in officialdom.

"Quickly," Yang He ordered sharply, turning to his attendants. "Urge the carriages and horses forward. We must reach the Gudu Ferry at once."

Meanwhile, on the battlefield, Wang Guozhong raised his arm with dramatic flair. "Shield carts forward. Advance slowly."

For the first time in his life, he was commanding siege engines reserved for official armies, and the sense of power thrilled him to the core. With another wave of his hand, he added, "Catapults, follow!"

His soldiers, still lacking true discipline and steeped in bandit habits, immediately heaved the massive shield carts forward. Fifteen carts rolled side by side, their thick wooden faces forming a moving wall as they advanced toward the water stockade.

It was, without question, a proven tactic against firearm troops.

From east to west, across different lands and eras, humanity had independently devised such shield carts to counter gunfire. The similarity of solutions spoke volumes about the shared instincts of warfare.

Yet the firearm soldiers of Gao Family Village watched calmly from the stockade, not a hint of panic on their faces. Many even turned their heads toward the artillery teams hidden behind the walls.

The artillerymen grinned and waved back with easy confidence, signaling that everything was under control.

"Do not rush!" Lao Nanfeng shouted. "Artillery, restrain yourselves. Your range is too long. If you fire too early, the firearm soldiers won't be able to follow up. Wait for my signal. When the enemy enters their range, then you fire."

"Understood!" the artillerymen replied in unison.

They forced themselves to wait, hands itching, eyes fixed on the approaching shield carts.

From Wang Guozhong's perspective, however, the water stockade remained eerily quiet. No shots rang out. No movement broke the stillness. It seemed as though Xing Honglang's forces could only stare helplessly at his advancing wall of shields.

Wang Guozhong's spirits soared. He laughed loudly, utterly convinced of victory. "Hahahaha! Xing Honglang is stunned by my shield carts. She's completely at a loss. Right now, she must be desperately thinking about how to run for her life."

Chapter 520 Less Than Ten Minutes

Wang Guozhong's army pressed forward in steady formation.

For former bandits, this moment was intoxicating.

They had robbed caravans.

Burned villages.

Fought barefoot in the mud with rusted blades.

But siege weapons?

This was another level entirely.

Fifteen massive shield carts rolled forward in a single line, iron-reinforced wood creaking as they crushed stones beneath their wheels. The men pushing them felt their chests swell until they nearly burst.

Someone actually laughed out loud.

Another man began humming a marching tune, off-key and shameless.

"So what if they've got muskets?" one of them shouted, slapping the side of a shield cart. "Come! Shoot us! Let's see if you can chew through this!"

Cheers erupted.

They felt invincible.

And that—

was the problem.

If anyone from Old Zhang Fei's faction had bothered to warn them that Xing Honglang also possessed cannons, this confidence would've evaporated on the spot.

But Old Zhang Fei's remnants reported only to Bu Zhan Ni.

And Bu Zhan Ni, still bitter over Wang Jiayin's unilateral "recruitment" of Xing Honglang back in the day, had chosen silence.

Let Wang Guozhong eat the consequences himself.

The Waiting Game

The shield carts rolled closer.

Closer.

The riflemen hidden in the foxholes began to stir.

Fingers tightened around triggers.

Breaths grew shallow.

Several men glanced instinctively toward Lao Nanfeng.

He didn't even turn his head.

"Hold," he roared. "They're not in smoothbore range yet."

The word yet stretched painfully.

The enemy was right there. You could see their faces now. Hear their laughter.

For ordinary troops, discipline would have snapped.

But Gao Family Village's militia had been drilled into obedience the hard way. Orders weren't suggestions—they were iron law.

So they waited.

Every second felt like it dragged a knife across their nerves.

Catapults

Then the enemy catapults rolled to a stop.

Four of them.

Several hundred paces out.

Bandit soldiers swarmed around them, hauling ox-hide ropes, tightening torsion arms, heaving fist-sized stones into the scoops.

The moment Lao Nanfeng saw that—

He knew.

If those stones flew, people would die.

And Dao Xuan Tianzun hated casualties.

"Artillery," he said flatly, voice like iron.

"Fire."

Thunder

The artillery crews had been waiting for this sentence their entire lives.

Firing ports slammed open.

Black cannon muzzles slid forward.

Matches touched powder.

The world exploded.

BOOM—!

BOOM—!

BOOM—!

Wang Guozhong was grinning at his catapults—

When the sound punched the breath out of his chest.

"Cannons?!"

Before the word even finished leaving his mouth—

CRACK!

The foremost shield cart disintegrated.

Not cracked.

Not split.

It ceased to exist.

A solid iron ball tore straight through it, shredding wood and iron alike, then continued onward, smashing into the soldiers behind like a god's fist.

Men flew.

Blood sprayed.

Another cannon roared.

Then another.

In the space of a breath—

Five shield carts were gone.

The proud wooden wall that had advanced moments ago now looked like a rotten fence kicked apart by a drunk ox.

The soldiers behind it screamed.

Firearms Answer

"Musketeers!" the militia commanders roared in unison.

"Fire!"

Hundreds of gunports snapped open.

Barrels emerged like the fangs of some colossal beast.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

White smoke erupted.

Lead tore into the exposed gaps.

Men dropped in rows. Some didn't even have time to scream.

Those still alive threw themselves behind the remaining shield carts, clawing at the ground like terrified animals.

Wang Guozhong Breaks

Wang Guozhong felt his scalp crawl.

Cannons?

Five of them?

Five.

When he followed Wang Jiayin—the so-called supreme bandit king commanding hundreds of thousands—

they'd had two.

And those were stolen from the Shanxi Grand Commander.

Xing Honglang was just a salt smuggler.

So how?

The answer didn't matter.

One word surfaced, clear and cold:

Run.

Wang Guozhong trusted his instincts.

They had kept him alive through countless disasters.

If a fight felt unwinnable—

You left.

Immediately.

He yanked his reins hard, turning his horse—

The Earth Opens

The ground on both flanks exploded.

Trapdoors burst upward.

Dirt flew.

Dozens of foxholes revealed themselves as soldiers surged out in perfect synchronization, muskets already leveled.

Time slowed.

Wang Guozhong's vision went white.

If thoughts could scream, his did.

Before he could even curse—

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Two hundred Chassepot riflemen.

One hundred line infantry riflemen.

Every barrel pointed at him.

Horse and rider vanished beneath a storm of lead.

Wang Guozhong never even hit the ground whole.

Collapse

"The boss is dead!"

"He's a general, idiot!"

"What difference does it make now?! He's dead!"

Panic detonated through the formation.

Some men threw down their weapons immediately, sobbing, kneeling, begging.

Others—true desperadoes—howled and charged toward the foxholes, blades raised, faces twisted with madness.

A head popped out of one of the pits.

It was flat rabbit.

He cupped his hands and shouted cheerfully:

"Free fire!"

Whack-a-Mole

The battlefield became absurd.

Musketeers popped up.

BANG!

Down again.

Another popped up five paces away.

BANG!

Smoke swirled.

Shots overlapped.

Heads rose and fell in chaotic rhythm, like a grotesque game played with real bullets and real death.

Reload times varied.

Fast hands fired twice before slower men finished once.

But it didn't matter.

Anyone who charged died.

Anyone who hesitated died.

Within moments, resistance ceased to exist.

Surrender

The remaining enemy soldiers didn't dare flee.

Three sides were sealed.

The east was a killing corridor.

They dropped flat, pressed their faces into the dirt, weapons flung away.

"We surrender!"

"We were blind!"

"We were misled!"

"We're all rebels anyway!"

"Chief Xing—spare us! For old times' sake!"

Silence

"Cease fire," Xing Honglang ordered.

The guns fell quiet.

Smoke drifted.

Bodies lay scattered.

Outside the diorama, Li Daoxuan stopped his stopwatch.

He looked down.

From the first cannon blast to total surrender—

Less than ten minutes.

He exhaled slowly.

"So," he murmured, half-amused, half-awed,

"this is what modern warfare looks like in the Great Ming."

Preparation for days.

Slaughter for minutes.

He smiled faintly.

The era had arrived.