

Great Ming 561

Chapter 561: Luncheon Meat Cannot Be Dinner

Lao Nanfeng's roar vanished into the rain.

On a battlefield like this, sound had a short lifespan. Flintlocks cracked like splitting bamboo, men screamed like they'd suddenly remembered unfinished business in life, and the rain hammered down with the enthusiasm of an accomplice.

Words didn't travel far.

Ma Xianglin, unfortunately, didn't hear a single syllable.

He continued charging through the rebel ranks alone, white horse plunging forward like it had personally offended the concept of fear. His silver armor flashed amid smoke and rain, every movement sharp, clean, and frankly—annoyingly elegant.

The nickname "Splendid Ma Chao of Xiliang" had never been poetic exaggeration. Ma Chao had been handsome enough to cause resentment across three provinces.

And Ma Xianglin, as Little Ma Chao, had inherited the full offense.

Even the missing eye couldn't ruin it.

If anything, it added character.

"Tch," Lao Nanfeng clicked his tongue, lifting his flintlock again. "Damn pretty boy."

He even lined up the barrel.

Cheng Xu immediately pressed it down.

"Hold your fire," Cheng Xu said calmly. "This is a good chance to observe the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers in real combat."

Lao Nanfeng paused.

"...Observe?" he repeated.

"Yes." Cheng Xu's gaze stayed on the battlefield. "Know yourself, know your enemy."

The word enemy snagged somewhere in Lao Nanfeng's thoughts.

Enemy.

Right.

They were wearing court uniforms today—but tomorrow? Gao Family Village would carve out its own land. The imperial court and them were never truly on the same side.

By that logic—

A grin crept across Lao Nanfeng's face. "Then... since it's chaos anyway, how about we just put a bullet in Ma Xianglin?"

He sounded almost helpful.

"One great general gone. Thick of battle. Rain. Smoke. No one could prove intent."

Cheng Xu shook his head immediately. "No."

"He hasn't committed villainy. The Dao Xuan Tianzun would not permit killing a man like that."

Lao Nanfeng smacked his lips, disappointed. "...Fair enough."

He let the matter drop without another word.

Cheng Xu raised his voice. "All units—cease fire!"

The muskets fell silent.

"Cavalry battalion," Cheng Xu continued, "prepare to kick them while they're down."

Zao Ying, mounting her horse, sighed deeply. "In the old days, cavalry were always the vanguard."

She shook her head. "Only in Gao Family Village do we use cavalry for bullying."

By then, the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers had already crashed into the rebel army.

Ma Xianglin himself was doing what Ma Xianglin did best—charging too far ahead, leaving his back exposed, moving like he was personally offended by the concept of formations.

Behind him, however, order reigned.

Zhang Fengyi.

Plain-looking.

Sun-darkened skin.

Armor scuffed by real use.

Under her command, the White Pole Soldiers moved with terrifying precision.

The front ranks lowered their white poles—forming a bristling forest. Spears stabbed forward, then hooked back, dragging rebels off balance, yanking them into the mud.

Before those men could even scream properly, the rear ranks thrust through the gaps.

One breath.

One heartbeat.

Dead.

The rebels had already lost their nerve to gunfire. Now, caught in this disciplined, merciless formation, their courage finally gave up entirely.

They screamed.

They wailed.

They scattered.

And scattering only made things worse.

Zao Ying's cavalry surged forward like wolves smelling blood. Sabers flashed. Horses trampled. Men ran crying for parents who weren't anywhere nearby.

By the time the rain eased slightly, the rebel army was gone.

Not retreated.

Gone.

The Gao Family Village militia and the White Pole Soldiers finally linked up.

Ma Xianglin rode forward, reins loose, scanning the unfamiliar troops. His gaze settled on a tall banner fluttering in the damp air.

One large character:

Xing

Smaller characters beside it:

Puzhou Deputy Commander

He cupped his fists. "Is this General Xing's contingent?"

A woman rode out.

Xing Honglang.

She sat straight-backed in the saddle, expression cool, eyes sharp.

"That would be me."

Ma Xianglin froze.

...A woman?

The court had female generals—his mother, Qin Liangyu, and his wife. But beyond them?

He stared a little too long.

Xing Honglang snorted. "What? That look—are you looking down on a salt smuggler?"

Ma Xianglin blinked. "Salt smuggler?"

He genuinely had no idea.

Xing Honglang sighed and gave a quick, casual introduction. Only then did Ma Xianglin realize—

This woman had once been a Shanxi salt smuggler.

Had even followed Wang Jiayin.

Had only recently submitted to the court under Yang He.

Cold sweat slid down his spine.

Good thing she's on our side now.

If not—

This battle would've ended very differently.

"General Xing's strength is astonishing," Ma Xianglin said sincerely, cupping his fists again.

Xing Honglang waved it off. "Flattery aside—no wonder Puxian held so long. So these are the legendary Sichuan White Pole Soldiers."

Business done.

They entered Puxian together.

Only then did the Gao Family Village militia truly see the city.

No walls.

Where walls should have stood—piles of rubble, broken carts, smashed timbers, stacked into a desperate ring.

Zheng Daniu stared. "Why are the city walls like this?"

Zao Ying answered quietly. "They were torn down last year. Rebels breached the city."

Zheng Daniu went silent.

Ma Xianglin spoke, voice heavy. "Half the population was dragged away. The rest were stripped clean. They'd barely recovered when the rebels returned."

No one replied.

Then—

The puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun on Gao Chuwu's shoulder shifted slightly and whispered.

"Distribute rations."

Gao Chuwu nodded solemnly. "As you command."

Ma Xianglin frowned. "Who are you speaking to?"

Gao Chuwu grinned. "The Heavens."

Ma Xianglin decided not to pursue the topic.

Inside the city, the truth was undeniable.

Empty homes.

Sunken faces.

Children whose bodies seemed made of angles.

Ma Xianglin sighed. "Even our Shizhu Tujia people aren't wealthy. We raised our own provisions when marching. I fear I can't help much..."

Before he finished—

Gao Chuwu knelt beside a skeletal child and pulled out a small wooden box.

"Here," he said cheerfully. "Eat this."

The child opened it.

Inside sat a perfectly rectangular block of meat.

The child hesitated. "...What part of the pig is this?"

Gao Chuwu beamed. "Luncheon meat! Very tasty. Just heat it."

The child looked up seriously. "But it's evening. Dinner time. Should I save this luncheon meat for tomorrow?"

Gao Chuwu's eyes lit up. "Wow! You're a genius!"

He slapped his thigh. "That's exactly what I thought the first time too!"

Everyone covered their faces.

This wasn't genius.

This was contagious stupidity.

And somehow—on a battlefield soaked in blood and rain—it was the most human thing they'd seen all day.

Chapter 562: Just Get to the Yellow River

Under Gao Chuwu's careful guidance, a child cautiously dropped a cube of luncheon meat into a large pot of boiling water beside him.

All around the city, similar pots had already been set up. They were part of the preparations made in advance of a rebel assault. Once the common people sensed that a battle was imminent, they would immediately start boiling water, keeping it ready at all times. If the rebel army dared to attack the temporary city walls, this scalding water would be poured down from above, assisting the White Pole Soldiers in defending the city.

The luncheon meat sank into the roiling water, bubbles surging around it. After a short while, Gao Chuwu laughed and waved his hand. "Alright, alright. You can take it out now."

The child grabbed a pair of bamboo chopsticks and tried to pick the meat up, but after fumbling for a while, he still could not manage it. Gao Chuwu shook his head, snatched the chopsticks, pierced the cube cleanly, and lifted it out of the pot.

The child stared at it, eyes wide. "Eh? This meat... it looks so soft."

He brought it closer to his mouth, blew on it lightly, then took a cautious bite.

In that instant, the look on his face was something words could hardly capture.

It was delicious. Incredibly, overwhelmingly delicious.

In all his short life, the child had never tasted anything like this. He forgot everything else, chewing with abandon, stuffing mouthful after mouthful in, making loud, enthusiastic sounds as he ate. He did not say a single word, yet the bliss written across his face made it obvious to everyone present exactly how good it was.

Nearby, other common people watched with eyes full of envy and longing. Many unconsciously pressed a hand to their stomachs, imagining that they, too, were tasting that soft, savory meat.

Zheng Daniu, standing off to the side, also clutched his belly and groaned. "Ah... just looking at that makes me hungry."

Gao Chuwu glanced at him. "That's military rations, Daniu. You should have some too."

Zheng Daniu scratched his head sheepishly. "I already finished mine as soon as we left the barracks."

For a moment, everyone fell silent.

Zao Ying quietly reached out, tugged at Zheng Daniu's sleeve, and slipped a piece of luncheon meat into his hand without a word.

Ma Xianglin did not notice the small exchange between them. His gaze remained fixed on the common people clustered around the pot. He let out a soft sigh, a thought forming in his heart. When someone wealthy is in a good mood, tossing out a bit of meat is enough to move the poor to tears. But in the end, what does it really change?

Just as that thought crossed his mind, he saw Gao Chuwu pat the child's head, straighten up, and lean close to whisper something into Xing Honglang's ear.

Moments later, Xing Honglang stepped forward and spoke loudly, her voice carrying across the area.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun has given an order. Half of our military rations will be distributed to the common people."

The moment those words left her mouth, Ma Xianglin was startled.

He turned his head and watched as more than four thousand soldiers behind Xing Honglang opened their packs one after another and began taking out their rations.

When soldiers from Gao Family Village went on campaign, they always carried provisions for several days. Each soldier's rations were varied: two small tins of luncheon meat, a large bag of thoroughly dried rice grains, a piece of hardtack, and several strange-looking biscuits, compressed and dense.

The dried rice and hardtack were made using Gao Family Village's own methods, similar in nature to the provisions carried by soldiers in traditional campaigns.

But the luncheon meat and those peculiar compressed biscuits were different.

Those were items bestowed by Li Daoxuan himself.

More than four thousand soldiers divided their rations in half, keeping one portion for themselves and handing over the other without hesitation.

Xing Honglang passed the collected rations to Gao Chuwu. "Chuwu," she said calmly, "the Dao Xuan Tianzun gave this order through you. You should be the one to distribute these provisions to the city's common people."

Gao Chuwu grinned broadly. "Heh heh, distributing things is my specialty. Back in Gao Family Village, whenever we handed out food, the Village Chief always put me in charge."

The others laughed. "That's because you're honest," they teased. "Honest people don't dare skim or embezzle."

Gao Chuwu tilted his head, genuinely puzzled. "Huh? What's the point of embezzling? Just to get struck down by the Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

Laughter broke out all around.

Ma Xianglin stood to the side, watching in silence. These people were truly handing out food to the common people, giving away that astonishingly delicious luncheon meat and those strange biscuits as if it were the most natural thing in the world, without the slightest hesitation.

The common people who received the rations cheered in delight, and the entire city seemed to come alive, buzzing with excitement and gratitude.

Ma Xianglin could not help but lean closer and whisper, "Isn't this a mistake? Your soldiers only carry a few days' worth of rations, don't they? If you give half of it away, how will you sustain yourselves? And no one knows how long we'll be fighting these rebels."

Xing Honglang laughed softly. "General Ma, you worry too much. I've already studied the map. Fifty li west of Puxian lies Danang County, and another fifty li beyond that is the bank of the Yellow River. In other words, it's only a hundred li from here to the Yellow River."

Ma Xianglin frowned. "Yes... and what of the Yellow River?"

"Our remaining rations will be enough," Xing Honglang replied easily, "as long as we reach the Yellow River."

Ma Xianglin stared at her, completely bewildered.

He truly did not understand.

But his wife, Zhang Fengyi, grasped it at once. "They have ships," she said quietly. "They can resupply along the Yellow River."

Ma Xianglin's eyes widened in realization, then almost immediately, confusion returned. "But the imperial court's shipping capacity on the upper Yellow River is extremely weak," he said. "It's nearly nonexistent, relying almost entirely on civilian boats. How could that meager capacity possibly support the logistics of several thousand soldiers?"

Zhang Fengyi lowered her voice further. "She introduced herself as a salt smuggler. Salt smugglers operate in illicit trade. It's possible they truly control a large number of civilian ships."

At last, Ma Xianglin understood. So that's how it is. A salt smuggler.

He had long heard that the salt smugglers of Shanxi were only slightly less powerful than the great Jin merchants, all of them ruthless and capable figures. Now, seeing her command thousands of men armed with firearms, he could not help but feel a chill. It was more than enough to terrify anyone.

As this thought settled, another question suddenly occurred to him.

"By the way, General Xing," he asked, "how is it that your firearms can still be used in the rain?"

Xing Honglang hesitated. She had no intention of answering and revealing such information.

But the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun perched on Gao Chuwu's shoulder leaned close and whispered, "You can tell him."

Xing Honglang was quietly surprised. So the Dao Xuan Tianzun doesn't regard the White Pole Soldiers as enemies.

She was slowly beginning to understand. As long as military and civil officials were truly loyal to the state and did not engage in underhanded schemes, the Dao Xuan Tianzun did not treat them as foes. In fact, they were potential allies, people Gao Family Village could win over in the future.

If that was the case, there was no harm in explaining.

Xing Honglang waved over a rifled musket soldier.

From the outside, the musket looked no different from an ordinary bird musket. The rifling inside the barrel was not visible, and such weapons were not particularly rare. Ma Xianglin's own army possessed a few, though certainly not in large numbers.

The soldier first used the brim of his wide bamboo hat to shield the weapon as he loaded it. Then he took out a small wooden box and, with a soft click, attached it to the firing mechanism. Only after that did he raise the musket and aim.

Ma Xianglin understood immediately. "Oh? So the wooden box blocks the rain," he exclaimed. "That's quite ingenious."

Then another thought struck him. "The Liaodong border army dislikes using muskets because the wind there is fierce and often blows away the priming powder," he said slowly. "If they added a wooden box like this, wouldn't it block the wind as well?"

His expression changed instantly, excitement flashing across his face. "This tiny modification has enormous value," he said emphatically. "General Xing, why not report this invention to the imperial court? If the Liaodong border army could produce and use it on a large scale, dealing with the Manchu invaders would become far easier."

Xing Honglang smiled and glanced toward the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun. Seeing him give a slight nod, she turned back and said with a light laugh, "If it truly helps the border army fight the Manchu invaders, then I'll submit it and see what happens."

Chapter 563: Wang Er of the Underworld, Cheng Xu of the Establishment

In Puxian, cooking fires bloomed one after another like stubborn little rebellions against misery.

Rain still poured from the sky—thick, relentless, the kind that soaked through bones and made even curses feel soggy—but the fear that once clung to the city had finally loosened its grip.

Because government troops had arrived.

Not the kind that kicked down doors, seized grain, and called it "logistics."

These soldiers did something far more unsettling.

They handed out food.

They even shared military rations.

This was enough to confuse the common folk so badly that several elderly men stared at the soldiers for a long time, as if waiting for the punchline.

None came.

Only steaming pots.

Who wouldn't rejoice at such a sight?

Soon, smoke rose everywhere, threading together above the rooftops like a patchwork banner of survival.

The aroma of lunch meat drifted through the rain.

That small, square tin—meant to be consumed in one sitting by soldiers who didn't know if they'd see tomorrow—was treated by the people of Puxian as if it were an ancestral relic.

No one dared eat it outright.

They sliced it thin—so thin it bordered on philosophy—then mashed the precious meat into paste, stirring it into watery gruel until each bowl became what they proudly called "meat-mince porridge."

To this, they added wild greens:

purslane, shepherd's purse, houttuynia—whatever hadn't been starved out of the land yet.

For ordinary people, this was just a meal.

For one particular being, it was an unforgivable insult to cosmic hierarchy.

Perched on Gao Chuwu's shoulder, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun began rattling violently, wooden joints clacking like a furious abacus.

"Are you serious?" it screeched. "They're eating better than I am!"

Gao Chuwu blinked, rainwater dripping off his hat.

"Ah? How could such crude, earthly fare compare to the divine banquets enjoyed by Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

The puppet threw both stick-like arms skyward, fingers splayed, posture tragic enough to summon thunder.

"These dishes—these vegetables—do you know how hard they are to find up there?!"

Its voice cracked with exaggerated grief.

Gao Chuwu fell into deep contemplation.

I see, he thought solemnly. The Immortal Realm must only grow divine fruits. No wild vegetables at all. Dao Xuan Tianzun must be sick of immortality and occasionally crave poverty.

Satisfied with his reasoning, he nodded respectfully.

While divine beings argued over vegetables, the world continued turning without consulting anyone.

Outside the city, the rebel forces had already begun retreating, pulling back northwest through the rain like a dark tide that had decided the shore wasn't worth drowning for.

Zijing Liang wasn't stupid.

The newly arrived government army was terrifying.

Thousands of flintlock rifles—still firing accurately in heavy rain.

This wasn't bravery.

This was witchcraft with logistics.

His men weren't sworn to die here. Their doctrine was simple:

If you can't win, leave before you embarrass yourself.

So they left.

On the city wall, Ma Xianglin stood at a high vantage point, rain soaking his armor, eyes fixed on the withdrawing enemy until their banners blurred into the gray distance.

Only then did he let out a long breath.

Not a heroic sigh.

A human one.

Puxian had been besieged for days—cut off, isolated, every night a debate between hunger and despair. Now, with the bandits retreating, it felt as though someone had loosened a rope around his chest.

He climbed down and found Xing Honglang.

"General Xing," he said, cupping his fists. "The bandits are retreating west toward Daning County. What should be our next move?"

Xing Honglang raised an eyebrow.

"What do you think, General Ma?"

Ma Xianglin considered carefully.

"Our provisions are critically low. Had you not arrived, I would've withdrawn to Pinelyang Prefecture to resupply, then resumed pursuit." He paused, then continued frankly, "But you mentioned earlier that supplies could be secured near the Yellow River. If so... I propose we pursue westward immediately—relieve Daning County first, then advance to the river, and then—"

Xing Honglang laughed.

"And then eat my family's grain?"

Ma Xianglin flushed, just slightly.

"I know it's shameless," he admitted, straight-backed even as he begged, "but returning to Pinelyang would cost too much time. Daning County has already fallen for a day and a night. Every delay is more suffering. So... I must ask to borrow provisions from you. Shamelessly."

Xing Honglang thought: So that's it.

She studied him anew.

No wonder Dao Xuan Tianzun said this one could be taught the bamboo-cover method for keeping flintlocks dry in the rain.

With Gao Family Village's philosophy, lending grain was hardly worth mentioning.

She nodded.

"Very well."

Ma Xianglin was stunned.

Then overjoyed.

In this year of drought and famine, borrowing grain was harder than borrowing someone's life. Even elite troops entering the capital were expected to bring their own food.

He had prepared himself for lengthy negotiations.

Instead, he got an answer faster than a sword draw.

"What a truly good person..." he muttered.

Then confusion crept in.

"General Xing," he said hesitantly, "you are clearly upright and care deeply for the common people. Why... would someone like you rebel?"

Xing Honglang burst out laughing.

"Can't good people rebel?"

Ma Xianglin blinked.

"I... thought they couldn't."

She pointed at Lao Nanfeng.

"You. Tell him. Why did you rebel?"

Lao Nanfeng grinned.

"I was a border soldier in Guyuan. The court didn't pay us for three years. Our centurion said we'd march to Xi'an and collect what was owed."

Ma Xianglin inhaled sharply.

Xing Honglang then pointed to Cheng Xu.

"And you?"

Cheng Xu's masked face twitched.

"I'd rather not," he said stiffly. "My story isn't pleasant."

She waved dismissively.

"Everyone already knows you've got a filthy past. You've accepted pacification. Amnesty washes everything clean."

Cheng Xu froze.

"...Huh?"

The realization hit him like lightning.

He could remove the mask.

Reveal his identity.

The Jinyiwei couldn't touch him anymore.

He threw his head back and laughed, loud and wild.

He ripped off the mask.

"I was once a military inspector!" he shouted. "I suppressed bandits, kept order, ran myself ragged! Then because I once curried favor with the Eunuch Party, I was branded and sentenced to death! The court sent the Jinyiwei to kill me—but with Dao Xuan Tianzun's blessing, I crawled back from hell itself! How could I not rebel?!"

Ma Xianglin staggered back.

"Cheng Xu... the War God of Chengcheng County?!"

Cheng Xu jumped.

"Holy crap! How does everyone know me?!"

Ma Xianglin swallowed.

"During the chaos, who hasn't heard the saying? 'Wang Er of the Underworld, Cheng Xu of the Establishment.'"

Cheng Xu cursed softly and slapped the mask back on.

"My reputation is too dangerous," he muttered. "The Emperor might remember me. Best to stay invisible."

Silence fell.

Then Cheng Xu glanced around nervously.

"Not many people heard that, right?"

The nearby soldiers smiled.

"Sure. Want to kill us all to be safe?"

Cheng Xu snorted.

"We're allies! Only Little Ma Chao here is an outsider. Xing Honglang, Lao Nanfeng—help me!"

Ma Xianglin nearly drew his sword.

Xing Honglang and Lao Nanfeng laughed.

"Enough nonsense! He's also called Zhao Zilong. Even the three of us together might lose."

Ma Xianglin finally relaxed, exhaling.

Yet his heart felt heavy.

So many good people, he thought, forced into rebellion by injustice.

Rain continued to fall.

But somewhere beneath it, something had already shifted—quietly, stubbornly, like a fire refusing to go out.

Chapter 564: Sir Bai Extends His Regards

Xing Honglang's forces and Ma Xianglin's forces began preparing to march west, their banners heavy with rain and ambition, continuing the pursuit of the retreating rebels toward Daning County.

From the outside, everything looked orderly.

From the inside, Ma Xianglin's mind was noisier than a market at dawn.

Since learning Cheng Xu's true identity, Ma Xianglin had quietly started watching.

Not staring—he was a general, after all—but observing with the refined paranoia of a man who had survived court politics.

And the more he watched, the clearer it became.

Xing Honglang was the banner.

Cheng Xu was the hand holding the pole.

Orders flowed from Cheng Xu first. Decisions bent around him. Even Xing Honglang, decisive and sharp as she was, deferred to his judgment without hesitation.

So that's how it is, Ma Xianglin thought.

On the surface, Xing Honglang accepted the amnesty.

In reality, Cheng Xu slipped back into the imperial fold wearing someone else's shadow.

Brilliant.

Absolutely brilliant.

If Cheng Xu revealed himself openly as the War God of Chengcheng County, the imperial court might hesitate to grant him amnesty at all. After all, the current Emperor Zhu Youjian had one outstanding virtue: he was never wrong.

If someone suffered, it was because they deserved it.

If someone rebelled, it was because they were ungrateful.

And if Cheng Xu had once been marked for death by the Jinyiwei, then clearly the correct course of action was to finish the job—consistency was important.

But by placing Xing Honglang at the front and returning as her subordinate, Cheng Xu sidestepped the Emperor's pride with surgical precision.

He didn't challenge imperial authority.

He simply walked around it.

Ma Xianglin exhaled softly.

No wonder they call him a god of war, he thought. On the battlefield and off it.

After sufficient rest, both armies finalized their preparations and readied themselves to move west.

That was when the townspeople gathered.

They came hesitantly at first, then in greater numbers, faces lined with worry deeper than the rain-soaked streets.

"General," one elderly man said, voice trembling, "if you leave... what will we do if the bandits return?"

Another added anxiously, "Puxian has no city walls. Our militia couldn't stop even a small raiding party."

"That's right," voices echoed. "You saved us once—please don't abandon us now. Leave some troops behind. Just a few!"

The words weren't loud.

But they were heavy.

Everyone present fell silent.

The problem was painfully clear.

They had to pursue the rebels. Letting them regroup would only create a larger disaster later. But rebel armies weren't neat little bands; they often numbered in the tens or hundreds of thousands.

If they left garrisons everywhere they passed, the main force would wither before ever catching the enemy.

And yet—

Leave Puxian undefended, and even a handful of bandits could turn it back into hell.

As hesitation thickened the air, a scout came sprinting in, rain splashing around his boots.

"Report!" he shouted. "Imperial reinforcements have arrived!"

Everyone perked up.

"Which general?" someone asked.

The scout swallowed.

"General Li Huai."

There was a pause.

Then—snickers.

"Oh," someone muttered, "that one."

Li Huai's reputation preceded him like a bad smell.

Back when he garrisoned Pinelyang Prefecture, he'd been beaten so thoroughly by the West Camp Eight Great Kings that legend claimed he couldn't recognize his own mother afterward.

If not for Shi Jian arriving with two hundred arquebusiers and using disciplined two-stage firing, Pinelyang would've fallen, and Li Huai would've gone down in history as a footnote titled 'How Not to Defend a City.'

They hadn't heard his name in a long time.

No one expected him to resurface now.

Still...

Though Li Huai lacked combat brilliance, he also lacked villainy. He didn't massacre civilians for merit, nor did he extort the populace for personal gain.

In times like these, not actively making things worse was already a valuable trait.

Xing Honglang considered briefly, then said, "Very well. Let General Li Huai remain here to garrison Puxian. Our forces will continue west."

Ma Xianglin nodded immediately.

"Agreed."

They waited for Li Huai to arrive and explained the situation to him carefully.

When Li Huai heard that he was to stay behind—

His eyes nearly sparkled.

"Garrison duty?" he repeated, just to be sure.

"Yes," Xing Honglang confirmed.

Li Huai clasped his hands fervently.

"Good! Excellent! Wonderful!" he declared. "Garrison duty is the foundation of stability. The cornerstone of peace. Truly the noblest of military responsibilities!"

No one pointed out that he just didn't want to fight.

Li Huai agreed so fast it was almost suspicious and immediately led his eight hundred mismatched soldiers into Puxian, setting up camp with the enthusiasm of a man who'd just dodged a falling boulder.

Only then did Xing Honglang's and Ma Xianglin's forces finally feel at ease enough to march westward.

Jiangzhou.

Several days earlier, Prefect Qin Changqing had been torn apart by the townspeople, guided—quite literally—by the God of Agriculture.

He and his accomplices were crushed beneath the fury of the masses, leaving behind a city abruptly freed of corrupt officials.

For a brief moment, Jiangzhou entered a state best described as "officially leaderless."

In later ages, this would've been the perfect recipe for chaos: looting, arson, and the mysterious phenomenon of people "finding" items they'd never owned before.

But ancient society had its own emergency system.

Local gentry and powerful clans—acting as Baojia leaders—stepped in.

Where officials vanished, they became the authorities by default.

Order was maintained. Patrols continued. Jiangzhou somehow kept functioning, wobbling but upright, like a table missing one leg but propped up with bricks.

Mo Xiaopin, a local squire responsible for patrols, stood atop the south city wall, gazing at the Fen River below.

The waters had settled somewhat, but they were still murky, thick with stirred silt. He wondered how many more days it would take for the river to run clear again.

The fishermen had suffered badly.

After Dao Xuan Tianzun widened the river, the fish—apparently lacking either courage or a sense of historical responsibility—vanished entirely.

No matter how many nets were cast, they came up empty.

Fortunately, after the intervention of the Jiwang Deity, the wealthy families of Jiangzhou suddenly discovered their long-lost consciences and released grain to the populace.

No one starved.

But Mo Xiaopin knew charity wasn't a livelihood.

Fishermen needed fish.

As he pondered this, a servant shouted excitedly, "Master! Look—down the river!"

Mo Xiaopin turned.

Through the rain and mist, a massive ship was approaching upstream.

Not just large.

Absurdly large.

A flat-bottomed cargo vessel, broader and longer than any ship Mo Xiaopin had seen in his entire life.

Had the Fen River not been dredged, such a vessel would've grounded instantly.

His heart skipped.

He remembered Dao Xuan Tianzun's words:

"Wait a few days. A large ship will arrive from downstream."

Others remembered too.

Cheers erupted along the riverbank.

"The ship is here!"

"The big ship the Heavenly Lord promised!"

"We're saved!"

As it drew closer, they saw a man in white standing at the bow, two servants behind him holding enormous umbrellas.

Rain fell.

He remained dry.

White robes fluttered in the river wind, dramatic enough to make poets consider changing careers.

The ship docked.

The man stepped ashore, snapped open a folding fan—pa!—revealing the word "Junzi".

He flipped it.

On the reverse was the image of Dao Xuan Tianzun, reaching down from the heavens.

The crowd surged forward.

Mo Xiaopin led the gentry in a deep bow.

The man returned the salute gracefully.

"I am Bai Yuan," he announced calmly. "By the divine decree of Dao Xuan Tianzun, I have come to Jiangzhou to help its people prosper and grow wealthy together."

The image on the fan spoke:

"You may trust him."

That settled it.

Mo Xiaopin and the others bowed deeply once more.

"Sir Bai," they said in unison, "we welcome you with the utmost respect."

Rain continued to fall.

But Jiangzhou had just received something rarer than clear skies—

A plan.

Chapter 565: Pumped Up

Bai Yuan found that he rather enjoyed his new identity as a "divine envoy."

After all, who wouldn't enjoy stepping off a boat and immediately being treated like Heaven's customer service representative?

No paperwork.

No questions.

Just faith, gratitude, and a suspicious amount of bowing.

With a light flick of his folding fan, Bai Yuan slipped seamlessly into the role.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun has spoken," he announced, voice calm and righteous, as if delivering a weather report personally approved by Heaven. "The widening of the Fen River benefits transportation, irrigation, and the future of Jiangzhou. However—"

He paused, perfectly timed.

"—it has temporarily affected the livelihoods of the fishermen."

A ripple of unease passed through the crowd.

"So," Bai Yuan continued smoothly, "the Dao Xuan Tianzun has bestowed grain as compensation, to help everyone endure this difficult period."

The moment the word grain landed, the atmosphere changed completely.

The fishermen near the docks erupted in cheers so loud they nearly drowned out the rain.

Before anyone could even bow again, the sailors aboard the massive ship sprang into action. They disappeared into the hold and reemerged hauling enormous sacks—each one heavy enough to crush optimism out of a grown man.

One sailor heaved a sack onto the dock with a solid THUD, then pointed at a fisherman standing frozen on his boat.

"You," the sailor barked. "Come here."

The fisherman approached cautiously, wondering if Heaven had finally decided to single him out for something terrible.

Instead—

BAM.

A sack weighing well over a hundred jin slammed onto his shoulder.

"Hold steady," the sailor said casually. "This is compensation for the fish you won't be catching."

The fisherman's brain went blank.

For years, deep down, the fishermen had harbored a tiny grievance.

They'd never dare blame King Ji—he was practically family—but this new Dao Xuan Tianzun had shown up out of nowhere, widened the river, scared off the fish, and left them staring at empty nets.

No one said it out loud.

But now?

With a mountain of grain pressing into his bones, a voice roared in the fisherman's heart:

With this much food, who dares complain?! Anyone who speaks ill of Dao Xuan Tianzun again—I'll personally throw them into the river.

"Fishermen, line up!" the sailors shouted. "One sack per household!"

The dock instantly turned into a disciplined queue—well, mostly disciplined.

Some people shuffled forward a little too eagerly.

That was when the painted image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Bai Yuan's fan suddenly grinned.

"If you are not a fisherman," the image said pleasantly, "do not attempt to claim grain under false pretenses."

The grin widened.

"I can tell with one glance who truly fishes... and who merely fishes for benefits."

The fan's eyes narrowed.

"Step away now, honestly, and you will be forgiven. But if I must personally identify you..."

The voice trailed off into a soft, amused heh heh heh.

The line instantly shrank by nearly a third.

Those who slipped away did so with expressions of pure shame, like children caught stealing offerings from a shrine.

Mo Xiaopin watched the scene from nearby and shook his head inwardly.

Trying to skim profit under a god's nose, he thought. Bold. Stupid. Educational.

Before long, more than a hundred sacks of grain were distributed. The genuine fishermen returned to their boats glowing with satisfaction, their grievances evaporated faster than river mist.

Bai Yuan waited for the excitement to settle before continuing.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun's work on the river is not yet complete," he said calmly. "The upstream section will also be widened. Until that work is finished, the water will remain turbid. Fishing will be difficult... for quite some time."

The fishermen froze.

"...Huh?"

Bai Yuan smiled. "Therefore, I offer another opportunity."

He gestured to the great ship behind him.

"I am recruiting crewmen and sailors. Steering, cleaning, maintenance, light cargo handling. Anyone familiar with boats is welcome."

The fishermen exchanged looks.

After a long pause, one man stepped forward carefully.

"And the wages?"

Bai Yuan answered without hesitation.

"Three taels of silver per month."

The riverbank exploded.

Hands shot up like arrows loosed from a hundred bows.

"Me!"

"I can steer!"

"I can scrub decks!"

"I can scrub souls if needed!"

Bai Yuan laughed.

"No need to compete. Anyone who knows boats may join."

Gao Family Village's maritime manpower was laughably thin—just a handful of sailors from Horsehoof Lake and Qichuan Port stretched across absurd distances. Recruiting over a hundred experienced river folk in one stroke was a logistical miracle.

And the fishermen?

They'd just upgraded from starving to employed by Heaven.

Next, Bai Yuan turned to Mo Xiaopin and the gathered gentry.

"This region," he said, "has long been agricultural, has it not?"

Mo Xiaopin nodded. "Indeed. Locally, we call it Jishan County. Since ancient times, farming has sustained us."

He hesitated, then coughed awkwardly.

"But... these past few years..."

Bai Yuan reached from beneath his umbrella, catching raindrops in his palm.

"Heaven has granted rain," he said gently. "And the Fen River now runs wide. Water will not be the problem."

Mo Xiaopin sighed. "My only fear is that the rain will stop."

Bai Yuan smiled.

"It won't."

He produced a blueprint.

A massive wooden waterwheel, cleverly designed, scooping river water into irrigation channels without human effort.

"This wheel," Bai Yuan explained, "draws water continuously. With proper ditches, even if Heaven forgets to rain, your fields will not."

The gentry stared as if gazing upon divine scripture.

"At least dozens will be built," Bai Yuan continued. "We will need many carpenters."

Mo Xiaopin's eyes lit up. "After Magistrate Qin Changqing's death, the official workshops shut down. The artisans are idle and anxious."

Bai Yuan raised a brow.

"Well," he said, "that's convenient."

Even Dao Xuan Tianzun hadn't anticipated this side benefit of chaos.

Soon, a single cry echoed through the city workshops:

"Work available!"

The artisans came running without even asking the pay.

When they saw the blueprint, the carpenters thumped their chests.

"We can build this!"

"Excellent," Bai Yuan said. "Wages are three taels of silver a month."

The carpenters erupted like they'd just won the imperial lottery.

"Awoooooo!"

The other artisans grew restless.

What about us? their eyes said.

Bai Yuan smiled knowingly.

"Everyone will have work," he declared. "Anyone with a skill—follow me. Wages start at three taels. Skill determines how much more."

Joy spread through the crowd like fire through dry grass.

And somewhere far above—

Dao Xuan Tianzun watched silently, nodding.

Faith, grain, silver, and water.

All flowing exactly where they needed to go.

Chapter 566: New Business Ventures

Even as Bai Yuan was busy extending Gao Family Village's reach into Jiangzhou—quietly, methodically, like a man laying fishing nets while smiling at the water—

Back in Gao Family Village, life had just returned to its default setting: calm on the surface, restless underneath.

Gao Yiye and her personal guard detachment had arrived back at the village not long ago.

After formalities were dealt with, Gao Yiye and Dong Xue withdrew to the main keep to rest. Qiu Ju, meanwhile, had stayed behind in Puzhou City, overseeing the rapidly expanding textile workshop—so busy that even her shadow probably needed to work overtime.

That evening, the observation tower balcony was unusually quiet.

Too quiet.

The kind of quiet that only shows up when someone who's always been there... suddenly isn't.

Gao Yiye leaned against the railing, gazing at the lantern-lit village below. After a long moment, she spoke, half to Dong Xue, half to herself.

"...It's just the two of us now."

Dong Xue sat beside her, hands folded neatly in her lap. She let out a soft sigh.

"Yes. Just the two of us."

The words hung there, heavier than they should've been.

Gao Yiye tilted her head slightly and glanced at her.

"Qiu Ju isn't here either," she said gently. "You must feel it more than I do."

Dong Xue didn't answer.

But she didn't need to.

Gao Yiye already knew.

Among the four secretaries, Dong Xue and Qiu Ju shared the deepest bond. They'd been sold into the same brothel as children, learned music, chess, calligraphy, and painting side by side, survived the same nights, the same disappointments, the same whispered dreams. Sisters in all but blood.

Gao Yiye smiled faintly.

"Looks like we'll have to visit Puzhou more often from now on."

Dong Xue's head snapped up.

"Really?"

Gao Yiye laughed softly. "Your eyes just gave you away. Yes. We absolutely must."

Dong Xue's composure cracked instantly. She rose and bowed, her voice bright.

"Thank you, Saintess."

At that exact moment—

The golden embroidery on Gao Yiye's robes shimmered.

Then laughed.

"Heh."

The sudden voice made both women stiffen before instinct kicked in. They stood and bowed at once.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice carried amusement, the kind that suggested he'd been listening for a while.

"...This is a business opportunity."

The two exchanged confused looks.

Dong Xue ventured carefully, "Business... opportunity?"

"Yes," Dao Xuan Tianzun said, clearly pleased with himself. "Dong Xue, you've dealt with wealthy people before. You know how they like to spend their time, don't you?"

Dong Xue nodded immediately.

"Yes. Spring outings, autumn excursions, countryside strolls, snow-viewing... They'll travel halfway across the province just to write a poem they don't understand, then pay someone else to explain why it's good."

"Exactly!" Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed. "Feigning elegance aside, leisure travel is a real demand. People don't live just to grind their teeth against reality. They also want scenery, novelty, and the illusion of depth."

Dong Xue nodded solemnly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun speaks with remarkable insight—far more sincere than those who merely pretend to be refined."

There was a pause.

"...Was that a compliment," Dao Xuan Tianzun said slowly, "or did I just get roasted?"

Dong Xue froze.

"I—this servant—"

"I'm kidding," Dao Xuan Tianzun said cheerfully. "Mostly."

Then he continued briskly, "Since you'll be visiting Puzhou frequently anyway, why not develop a travel route? Gao Family Village to Puzhou."

The idea hit both women at once.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice grew animated.

"Reading ten thousand books isn't as good as traveling ten thousand li. Gao Family Village is too small. If people never leave it, their thinking will shrink to match. Take them out. Let them see Heyang County. Let them cross the Linyi Yellow River Bridge. Let them stand in Puzhou's cotton fields and realize the world doesn't end at the village gate."

The two didn't quite understand what a "worldview" was.

But they understood this.

Dong Xue curtsied. "How should we begin?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun didn't bother with explanations.

With a flick, a printed document slid out of thin air and landed before her.

"Try it," he said lightly. "If it makes money, great. If not, at least it'll be fun."

Money, frankly, wasn't the point.

Gao Yiye flipped through the pages, eyes lighting up.

"...This actually looks interesting."

She had been bored out of her mind lately. Governance was important, yes—but even saints needed hobbies.

Dong Xue leaned closer, reading intently.

"Route planning... scenic points... inns... local specialties... historical introductions..." She smiled. "We visit Qiu Ju, earn money, and broaden the villagers' horizons. Several goals achieved at once."

Gao Yiye laughed. "Then what are we waiting for? How much should we charge?"

She thought for a moment.

"...Should we ask a middle-school graduate to calculate it?"

Dong Xue waved her hand dismissively. "No need. People who travel like this are wealthy. They won't haggle."

She paused, then smiled sweetly.

"Let's start high."

Thus, the plan was born.

Early the next morning, Dong Xue departed alone.

Gao Yiye did not accompany her—because when the Saintess moved, so did her guards. Over a hundred people scouting a tourist route would've been less 'leisure travel' and more 'military inspection.'

Dong Xue traveled as an ordinary woman.

Train to Heyang County.

Transfer to Qichuan Ferry.

Safe. Efficient. Familiar.

At Qichuan Ferry, she paused.

Boat to Yongji Ancient Ferry?

Or carriage north along the newly built cement road to the Linyi Yellow River Bridge?

After a moment's thought, she chose land.

She hired a carriage, negotiated the price like a seasoned veteran, and traveled more than ten li before the bridge came into view.

Dong Xue stood there for a long time.

She wrote extensively about it.

Then crossed into Sunji Town.

Inns. Restaurants. Evening rest stops.

Tourists would stay the night here—enjoy the river breeze, admire the bridge under lantern light, eat roast lamb until they forgot their own names.

At dawn, they would continue to Puzhou.

Satisfied, Dong Xue returned.

That night, she and Gao Yiye whispered in the observation tower until dawn.

The next morning—

Villagers woke to find a massive notice plastered at the entrance of the main keep:

"Gao Family Village Travel Group" Gao Family Village Travel Group

Departure to Puzhou in three days Departure to Puzhou in three days

Ten taels of silver Ten taels of silver

Yellow River scenery · New Puzhou · Limited spots Yellow River scenery · New Puzhou · Limited spots

Now accepting registrations"

Zhang Laowu, head of the Disciplinary Committee, spotted it during patrol.

His face darkened instantly.

"Who dares paste advertisements on the main keep's gate?! That's a celestial fortress bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun! Gao Sanwa once got beaten half to death just for scribbling here—arrest them and—"

He squinted.

Saw the signature.

"...Ah."

His expression flipped.

"The Saintess's handwriting," he said reverently, "is truly beautiful."

Everyone around him: "..."

Thus began Gao Family Village's tourism industry.

And not a single person involved yet realized just how far it would spiral.

Chapter 567: The People of Gao Family Village

The news of the Gao Family Village tour group spread through the village like sparks carried by a sudden wind, leaping from doorstep to doorstep, from workshop to teahouse, until almost no one was left unaware of it.

In recent years, the villagers of Gao Family Village had truly grown wealthy. Ordinary craftsmen who once struggled to make ends meet could now earn a steady three taels of silver each month, an income generous enough that many households had quietly accumulated savings they would never have dared to imagine in the past. Life was comfortable, bellies were full, and worries about tomorrow had faded into the background.

Yet even so, when word spread that the travel fee for this journey was ten taels of silver per person, many people instinctively tightened their grip on their purses. Three months of income, spent all at once

on a single trip, was no small decision. For most, the thought alone was enough to make their hearts ache.

Even with the Saintess personally advocating the tour, encouraging everyone to broaden their horizons and see the world beyond the village, the majority still hesitated, standing on the sidelines and watching.

That said, in any crowd, there were always a few who possessed both money and a certain reckless enthusiasm, people who believed that life was meant to be enjoyed while one still could. The Old Village Chief of Gao Family Village was precisely such a person.

He arrived wearing bamboo sandals and a faded, sleeveless vest, his appearance so plain that he could have been mistaken for any other poor old man wandering the streets. Yet when he reached Dong Xue's registration table, he did not hesitate in the slightest. With a firm slap, he placed ten taels of silver on the tabletop, the dull clink of metal ringing clearly in the air.

"I'm signing up," he said, his tone decisive.

Dong Xue stared at him in alarm. "Venerable elder, perhaps you should reconsider. The journey will be long, and the road may be rough. If something were to happen to you along the way..."

The Old Village Chief snorted, his white beard bristling. "What's this now? You think I'm too old? It's exactly because I'm old that I must go out and see more of the world. When I was young, I was poor. The farthest I ever traveled was the county town. Now that I finally have a bit of money, should I just sit at home and wait for death? Am I meant to die as nothing more than a mountain rat?"

Dong Xue hesitated, still uneasy. "But your health..."

Without another word, the Old Village Chief pulled out the bamboo staff he carried at his side. With a sharp crack, he snapped it cleanly in two using his bare hands, the broken ends splintering outward.

"What about my health now?" he demanded, glaring proudly.

Dong Xue immediately bowed. "In that case, venerable elder, please do as you wish."

The Old Village Chief's bold action seemed to ignite something in the crowd. One by one, the wealthier villagers of Gao Family Village stepped forward, no longer content to simply watch from afar.

Gao Laba soon appeared as well. Over the years, his rice noodle shop had brought him a tidy fortune, and when he heard there was an opportunity to travel and experience the wider world, he saw no reason to hold back. Not only did he register himself, he brought his wife and children along as well, placing thirty taels of silver on the table in one heavy stack, the sound drawing more than a few envious glances.

Then came an unexpected figure. Liu You, the owner of the Shuixian Heluo noodle shop, arrived with his entire family in tow. Without blinking, he handed over another thirty taels of silver and declared loudly, his chest puffed out with pride, "From today onward, you may call me Filthy Rich!"

Soon after, Master Zhang, the head of the Daoqing Troupe, made his appearance. To everyone's surprise, he did not come alone. Instead, he brought along several core members of his troupe, singers, dancers, and musicians alike, turning the registration area into something resembling a small-scale recruitment drive.

Nearby, Gao Sanwa tugged eagerly at Gao Sanniang's sleeve, his eyes bright. "Mother, let's go too!"

Gao Sanniang shifted uneasily, lowering her voice. "Son, let's not join in the excitement. It's ten taels of silver per person. For the two of us, that's twenty taels. Your mother isn't as wealthy as your Uncle Laba."

Gao Sanwa burst into laughter, brimming with confidence. "I've got plenty of money, Mother. My comic book, Tapo Tianqiong, is selling incredibly well. I earn silver even while sitting at home. And my second book, Quan Dong Xuankun, is about to be released. That will bring in another big sum. Twenty taels of silver is nothing at all. I'll take you out to have fun, eat good food, and see the magnificent Yellow River Bridge with your own eyes."

Gao Sanniang's face softened, her eyes shining with pride. "My son truly has ability. Very well, then we shall go."

Elsewhere, Madam Bai clutched Young Master Bai's arm, her voice full of hope. "Son, come and enjoy the trip with me."

Young Master Bai struggled to pull free, shaking his head vigorously. "No, no, I can't. I'm too busy. The refined design of the steam locomotive is at a critical stage. I can't afford to waste time wandering about. This invention concerns the future of Gao Family Village."

Hearing this, Madam Bai slowly loosened her grip. She sighed softly. "You're right. Work comes first. You're an important person now, and your time is precious."

Young Master Bai took a step away, relieved, but then paused. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his mother discreetly wiping at her eyes.

He froze, then silently cursed himself. Turning back, he took her arm and smiled gently. "Your son will take a short break, Mother. The research can wait. I'll accompany you to see the Qichuan Ferry and the new city of Puzhou."

Madam Bai's face lit up instantly. "My son is truly filial."

Even San Shier arrived at the registration desk, holding his daughter's hand. They made no fuss at all, calmly paying for three spots, clearly including Mrs. San as well. When they left, it was as if they had simply completed an ordinary errand.

As they walked away, San Shier muttered quietly, "Tomorrow, bring your mother along and prepare for the trip. And, my dear daughter, does your chemical factory have any medicine that could restore a man's... ahem... certain abilities? Surely chemistry has advanced enough for that."

San Xiaojie replied calmly, "There are medicines that can poison someone to death instantly, if that helps."

San Shier sighed deeply. "Then perhaps we'll forget about it."

San Xiaojie rolled her eyes. "Father, at your age, you should be more philosophical. Don't always behave as though you're ignoring propriety just because you're old."

San Shier snorted. "Don't imitate your father's way of speaking. It's not appropriate for a young lady."

San Xiaojie laughed. "They say, near vermilion one is stained red."

San Shier immediately countered, "Then near ink, one is stained black."

The father and daughter exchanged a knowing smile, their argument unresolved but warm, as they continued on their way.

Three days later, the Gao Family Village tour group officially set out.

As expected, Gao Yiye did not join, unwilling to trouble the guard team with his presence. Dong Xue took on the role of tour leader, and the group, made up almost entirely of Gao Family Village's newly wealthy residents, embarked on their journey.

Their first stop was Heyang County, where they indulged themselves in local delicacies until their bellies were full. From there, they rushed onward to Qichuan, eager to see the so called Gao Family Village navy anchored at Qichuan Port. The sight of the massive, imposing gunboats left everyone filled with pride at the village's growing strength.

Next came the long anticipated Linyi Yellow River Bridge.

They had heard countless stories about it, but standing on the bridge themselves, feeling the cool river wind against their faces and gazing at the vast waters below, they all agreed that the ten taels of silver had been worth every single coin.

The following day, they boarded carriages and continued toward Puzhou City.

Before they even reached the prefectural city itself, they began to see clusters of small towns along the road, each centered around a factory. Every factory looked like a small city in its own right, bustling with workers and humming with activity. The tour group even purchased meal tickets, sampling the factory canteens' boxed meals and marveling at the cooks' swift, powerful movements as they wielded their ladles.

At last, after a full day of travel, they arrived in Puzhou City.

Night had already fallen. Most of the group was exhausted and retired to their inns at once, eager for rest. The elderly, however, needed far less sleep.

The Old Village Chief of Gao Family Village found himself wide awake with nothing to do. Quietly, he slipped out of the inn and wandered the streets. Before long, he overheard people whispering excitedly about a concert being held in the city.

Naturally, the Old Village Chief saw no reason to miss such a lively affair.

The next morning, rumors spread rapidly through the tea houses of Puzhou City. It was said that during Miss Cailin's concert, an unknown benefactor had appeared at the height of the excitement and casually tossed a massive silver ingot worth a hundred taels onto the stage. No one knew who he was, and no one stepped forward to claim credit.

This mysterious big brother vanished as suddenly as he had appeared, leaving behind only speculation and admiration. Even so, his legend lingered, becoming a topic of endless discussion within Puzhou's entertainment circles for a long time to come.

Chapter 568: It Might Be the Mechanism Battalion

Xing Honglang's army and Ma Xianglin's army continued pushing westward through the rain.

Ahead lay Daning County.

Ma Xianglin stared at the distant county town with his single eye for a long while before finally letting out a breath that sounded like it had been trapped in his chest for years.

"Daning County..." he muttered. "A truly miserable place."

He gestured faintly toward the blurred outline ahead.

"In the third year of Chongzhen, when the Shaanxi bandits crossed the Yellow River into Shanxi, this place was already trampled once. Half the people were forced to follow the bandits. The city walls were torn down like rotten fences."

His tone grew heavier.

"I wanted to come help back then. But my troops were too few. I could barely hold Puxian. And then Zijiang Liang sent three hundred elite bandits and took Daning in a single night."

Xing Honglang followed his gaze, her expression tightening.

"Then the people inside..." she began.

Ma Xianglin nodded once.

No elaboration was needed.

Rain poured down relentlessly, washing over the ruined county town like Heaven itself was trying—and failing—to scrub away the past.

With no city walls, the bandits had improvised. Stones. Logs. Broken carts. A chaotic pile of whatever could be dragged into place, forming a defensive ring that looked less like fortifications and more like the aftermath of a very angry market brawl.

Bandit soldiers squatted beneath the rain, cloaks pulled tight, weapons propped nearby. On the highest rooftops inside the town, several massive banners had been planted.

Even soaked and battered by wind, they fluttered stubbornly.

"So many flags," Ma Xianglin said grimly. "Looks like more than one chieftain crammed inside."

He squinted with his single eye, leaning forward unconsciously, as if sheer willpower could sharpen his vision.

It did not.

At that moment, Xing Honglang reached into her robes and pulled out a long, cylindrical object. She handed it over calmly.

"General Ma. Use this."

Ma Xianglin blinked. "Hm? What's this? Looks like one of those Western curiosities."

Xing Honglang smiled faintly. "Not Western. Made by our own glass artisans. It's called a telescope."

The name clicked immediately.

Ma Xianglin took it without needing instruction. He raised it to his eye—and frowned.

"...Why did they get farther away?"

"Backwards," Xing Honglang said. "You're holding it backwards."

"Oh."

He flipped it.

And froze.

"...They're right in front of me."

He inhaled sharply.

"I can see the characters clearly!" he exclaimed. "That banner—'Wang'! That's Zijing Liang, Wang Ziyong himself. Over there—'Chuǎng Wang'... 'Fan Shan Yao'... 'West Camp Eight Great Kings'... 'South Camp Eight Great Kings'..."

He lowered the telescope slowly, eyes burning with excitement.

"This thing..." he said reverently. "This thing is a battlefield treasure."

Rain splashed onto the metal tube.

Only now did Ma Xianglin notice.

Alarmed, he wiped it hurriedly against his clothes, then held it out with both hands.

"General Xing, this precious item mustn't be ruined by rain. Please, put it away safely."

Xing Honglang reached for it—

Before Gao Chuwu's voice cut in, cheerful and entirely too casual.

"Let's just give it to General Ma."

Ma Xianglin nearly dropped it.

"What?! For me?" he exclaimed. "Such a divine instrument—I wouldn't dare accept it!"

Gao Chuwu scratched his head, grinning.

"General Ma is a pillar of the nation. Someday you may fight in Liaodong against the Manchu. With this, spotting enemies will be much easier. You must accept it."

For once, Gao Chuwu sounded unusually articulate.

Xing Honglang, Lao Nanfeng, and the others all understood instantly.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun sat quietly on Gao Chuwu's shoulder, whispering each word into his ear like a very patient exam proctor.

Ma Xianglin hesitated.

If it were silver or silk, he would refuse even unto death.

But this...

This was something a general could not ignore.

He accepted it slowly, tucking it away with the care one reserved for ancestral tablets.

Then he clasped his fists deeply.

"Today, I, One-Eyed Ma, have received a gift I cannot repay. I will remember this kindness."

Gao Chuwu waved it off. "Small matter. Let's take back Daning."

Ma Xianglin's expression turned serious.

"General Xing," he said earnestly. "Attacking a city is not defending one. Difficulty multiplies. The enemy numbers over a hundred thousand. What is the strategy?"

Xing Honglang replied without hesitation.

"Strategy? None."

Ma Xianglin blinked. "None?"

"We charge straight in."

Ma Xianglin: "..."

Very well.

If it was frontal assault, then frontal assault it was.

After all, he was known as Zhao Zilong, Little Ma Chao, One-Eyed Ma.

When had he ever feared charging first?

He gripped his white pole spear tightly.

"Sichuan White Pole Soldiers!" he roared. "We go in hard—lead the charge!"

"Yes, sir!" the soldiers roared back.

Before he could take a step—

Lao Nanfeng popped his head out from behind a gun carriage.

"General Ma, please don't."

Ma Xianglin froze. "...What?"

"If you charge forward, our firearms will have to stop firing to avoid hitting you," Lao Nanfeng explained politely. "Your bravery would only help the enemy."

Ma Xianglin: "..."

Zhang Fengyi burst into laughter beside him.

Lao Nanfeng continued mercilessly, "And Sichuan White Pole Soldiers—don't charge either. Just protect our firearm troops and prevent enemy breakthroughs."

The White Pole Soldiers stood stiffly, dignity quietly cracking.

Ma Xianglin felt a surge of displeasure.

The White Pole Soldiers were famed for charging first and dying first. Since when did they become guards?

He wanted to argue.

He really did.

But then he remembered the telescope in his robes.

"...Fine," he sighed. "For the sake of that treasure, I'll listen."

He folded his arms.

"Very well. Let me see how General Xing fights this battle."

Xing Honglang waved her hand.

The Gao Family Village militia began to move.

Inside Daning County.

Wang Ziyong stood atop a tall rooftop, rain soaking his cloak. He had long since abandoned his alias.

With over two hundred thousand men, why hide behind false names?

If the court killed his nine clans?

So what.

He'd take another wife and make new ones.

Right now, however, his mood was foul.

Watching the approaching army, he felt pressure creeping up his spine.

"That army..." Wang Ziyong muttered. "Their firearms shoot far, hit hard, and work even in rain. What kind of monster unit is this?"

From behind him, Chuǎng Wang, Gao Yingxiang, stepped forward and whispered:

"It might be the Divine Mechanism Battalion from the capital."

The South Camp Eight Great Kings poked his head out.

"I heard that unit declined years ago. How could they still be this terrifying?"

Wang Ziyong stared into the rain.

"...If that really is the Divine Mechanism Battalion," he said slowly, "then Daning County... may not be ours for much longer."

Rain fell harder.

Somewhere between thunder and gunfire, the era quietly shifted its weight.

Chapter 569: Someone Always Gets Anxious

Wang Ziyong swept his gaze across the assembled bandit chieftains and spoke in a tone that suggested he was holding an emergency meeting for a sinking ship.

"Alright. Let's be clear. That army outside—whether they're the Divine Mechanism Battalion or some new monster cooked up by the court—they're knocking on our door. So tell me: fight, or run?"

The Southern Camp Eight Great Kings slammed the table first, nearly breaking it.

"Fight! What's there to be afraid of? We have two hundred thousand men and a city! If we retreat into the streets and alleys, their firearm troops won't even be able to line up properly. They'll choke on their own formations!"

Gao Jie, the Mountain Vulture, growled darkly.

"Fight. I'm still holding a grudge from Pingyang. I want my interest—and compound interest."

Zhang Xianzhong, West Camp Eight Great Kings, leaned back lazily.

"Run. Why fight government troops with weapons that look like they fell from Heaven's workshop? There are plenty of softer persimmons elsewhere. Why insist on biting the iron one?"

Li Zicheng, the Dashing General, sighed as though fate itself had personally offended him.

"I also vote retreat. Call it intuition. Call it cowardice if you want. But every time I ignore this feeling, people die and I end up with fewer men and more regrets."

Gao Yingxiang, the Chuǎng Wang, nodded calmly.

"I follow Brother Zijing Liang."

Old Huihui Ma Shouying whistled, clearly uninterested.

"Whatever you decide. My troops are cavalry. If you say fight, I'll be the first one there even if I start late. If you say run, I'll still be gone before any of you finish shouting."

Wang Ziyong pinched the bridge of his nose, glanced again at the approaching militia, then looked up at the gray, rain-soaked sky.

Finally, he slammed his hand down.

"Fight. We can't flee every time we meet real soldiers. We'll defend at least one wave. If we can't hold, then we run."

Zhang Xianzhong raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? You're really fighting?"

He immediately stood up.

"Then pardon me. I won't be participating in this exciting suicide exercise."

And with that, he turned around and walked out—so casually it was almost insulting.

Weapons half-drew across the room. Zhang Xianzhong's men also reached for their hilts.

The air froze.

Then Wang Ziyong waved a hand impatiently.

"Let him go. Anyone else who wants to leave—door's open."

Zhang Xianzhong didn't look back. His men followed. A clean, professional exit—like people who had rehearsed this exact moment in their heads.

Li Zicheng sighed again.

"This battle has 'disaster' written all over it. Brothers, we'll meet again somewhere with fewer bullets."

He left as well.

Wang Ziyong clenched his fists, then barked orders.

"Those remaining will fight properly! My troops, the Chuǎng Wang's, Southern Camp Eight Great Kings, and Mountain Vulture's forces hold the front! Old Huihui, prepare cavalry—flank their firearm troops if they expose themselves!"

The remaining chieftains roared assent, though several of them were clearly doing so to convince themselves.

Outside the city, the Gao Family Village Militia advanced.

And immediately confused everyone.

They didn't form dense firearm ranks.

They didn't march in tight blocks.

They didn't look like a "proper" army at all.

Instead, four thousand men spread out into loose ten-man squads, drifting forward like an unhurried tide.

Inside the city, bandits stared.

"...Are they lost?"

"...Is this a trap?"

"...Did their commander die on the way here?"

Ma Xianglin frowned deeply.

Before the battle, Lao Nanfeng had told him: "Protect the firearm troops."

Now Ma Xianglin looked at the formation.

Protect what exactly?

Protect where?

They were scattered so wide even Heaven would need a map.

"Damn it," Ma Xianglin muttered. "This isn't protection, this is babysitting cats."

Left with no choice, he split his Sichuan White Pole Soldiers into two groups—one with him on the left, one with his wife Zhang Fengyi on the right.

At least they could look intimidating.

The two forces crept forward.

No artillery.

No fancy tricks.

Just rain, mud, and steadily advancing death.

At 500 meters—

"Don't fire yet," Cheng Xu said calmly. "Rain affects range. Walk closer."

The militia obeyed.

Gao Jie, watching from behind cover, felt his scalp tighten.

This distance...

This exact cursed distance...

Last time at Pingyang, this was when people started dying.

He didn't warn anyone.

He simply ducked lower.

Four hundred meters.

Three hundred meters.

Cheng Xu raised his flag.

"Halt. Free fire."

Bang.

One single shot cut through the rain.

An archer standing proudly atop the barricade toppled backward like a sack of wet grain.

The message was clear: Stop showing off.

Then—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Gunfire exploded across the line.

The rebel soldiers who had been crowding the "city wall" vanished instantly—either dead or smart enough to hide.

Moments ago, the wall had looked packed.

Now it looked abandoned.

Only the bravest—or stupidest—faces peeked out.

"Advance. Maintain free fire."

The militia walked forward as if on a casual stroll.

No shouting.

No rushing.

Ma Xianglin was losing his mind.

Why are you so slow?!

Charge already!

Let me charge!

He gripped his spear until his knuckles whitened.

Hold back. Hold back. For the sake of the telescope.

Inside the city, anxiety spread like rot.

Finally, one rebel archer snapped.

He leaned out, drew his bow—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Nobody knew how many rifles fired.

The archer dropped without even understanding why.

The others shrank deeper into cover.

But the militia kept coming.

Half an arrow's distance now.

The makeshift wall—barely waist-high in places—suddenly felt like a joke told by a cruel god.

If the enemy reached it, they could step over it.

Wang Ziyong roared:

"Charge!"

Yes.

The defenders had to charge.

Bandits vaulted the wall.

And immediately—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Leaping out was suicide.

Men fell in droves.

"We can't charge!"

"Retreat!"

"Abandon the wall!"

Discipline collapsed.

Those who ran too slowly were shot in the back.

Wang Ziyong screamed hoarsely:

"Damn it! Fall back into the streets! Use the buildings! Fight them up close!"

Because when guns rule the battlefield—

Someone always gets anxious first.

Chapter 570: The Tactics Are Incomprehensible

Up to this very moment, Ma Xianglin's forces had done almost nothing at all. Not a single arrow had been loosed, not a blade crossed in close combat. They advanced at an almost leisurely pace, maintaining their formations with calm discipline, spreading out to protect the flanks on both the left and right. And yet, despite this restrained advance, the enemy's front line had already crumbled. The marauders defending the so called city wall were in full retreat, their courage collapsing faster than their ranks.

Some scrambled over the wall in panic, managed only a few stumbling steps, and were cut down before they could catch their breath. Others hunched low and sprinted forward, only to be struck down by gunfire after a handful of steps. Still others cowered behind the wall itself, bodies shaking, daring to lift their heads just enough to peek out, only for half their faces to be shattered by a shot that sent them tumbling lifelessly to the ground.

Faced with such a scene, the marauders simply no longer knew how to fight. This was something entirely beyond their understanding.

Even Ma Xianglin himself felt dazed. As he watched the enemy fall apart before him, he could not help but mutter inwardly, Who am I? Where am I? What exactly am I doing here? I am a White Pole Soldier of Sichuan, famed for ferocity and courage. I have not even exchanged a single blow with the enemy, and yet it looks as though we are about to win.

A subordinate ran up and shouted, "General, we are almost at the city wall. Should we continue advancing slowly?"

Ma Xianglin froze on the spot.

For a brief moment, his mind went blank, and he genuinely did not know what order he should give next.

At that moment, Cheng Xu's loud, steady voice rang out from behind him. "General Ma, please take the wall."

Ma Xianglin did not hesitate any longer. He simply passed the order along. "White Pole Soldiers, charge. Take the wall."

At once, the spirits of the White Pole Soldiers from Sichuan surged upward like a rising tide. At last, there was something for them to do.

With a thunderous battle cry, they rushed forward. The temporary wall stood before them, barely reaching waist height. What use was such a wall? The White Pole Soldiers vaulted over it in a single leap. Behind it, the marauders who had been stunned and suppressed by gunfire were still crouching and trembling, desperately trying to dodge bullets. They never imagined that the enemy's White Pole Soldiers would actually leap the wall and fall upon them.

In an instant, the fight turned into a bloody clash at close quarters. And in such fighting, who had the White Pole Soldiers of Sichuan ever feared?

White waxwood spears thrust forward in a furious storm, stabbing into the huddled mass of marauders behind the wall. Those who had barely survived the gunfire found that there was no escape this time. After only a brief struggle, the wall was completely taken.

Ma Xianglin let out a booming laugh. "I have never taken a city so easily in my entire life."

Still laughing, he was about to order his troops to push deeper into the city when he noticed something strange. Cheng Xu's firearm troops were not advancing at all. Instead, they had rapidly dropped to one knee, all crouching behind the low wall.

The wall that had just been seized now served as their cover. The firearm soldiers rested their barrels on the wall, aiming steadily into the streets of the city.

Ma Xianglin turned and asked, puzzled, "You are not advancing?"

Cheng Xu swept his gaze ahead. Before them lay a dense sprawl of houses, tangled streets, twisting alleys, cramped courtyards, and intersections at every turn. How could firearm troops simply march into such a place? If they rushed forward carelessly, it would take no more than seventeen or eighteen old women popping out from side alleys to surround them and cut them down from all directions.

He waved his hand and said, "General Ma, our firearm troops are strongest at long range. These winding alleyways are not favorable terrain for us."

Ma Xianglin nodded. "Then what is the plan?"

Cheng Xu chuckled, though a dull headache was already forming.

At that moment, Gao Chuwu spoke up again. "Do not try to take everything in a single rush. Advance slowly, layer by layer. First, secure all the houses along the first street. Once it is firmly held, set up the firearms there, then move on to the second layer."

Gao Chuwu himself was not issuing orders, of course. Everyone present understood that these words came from Dao Xuan Tianzun. In modern warfare, especially after the appearance of trench fighting, battles were never resolved in a single charge. Progress was slow and methodical, advancing layer by layer, street by street, line by line. Advancing only tens of meters over the course of several hours was entirely normal. There was no need for reckless charges deep into the city like in ancient battles. Such methods were simply unnecessary.

Cheng Xu immediately understood. "Nibbling tactics. General Ma, your men in front, mine behind. We will take the first layer of streets."

Ma Xianglin nodded and waved his hand. The White Pole Soldiers moved out again. Advancing in tight formation, they were far beyond what the marauders could hope to resist. Even in alley fighting, they feared no one.

Whenever marauders dared poke their heads out from rooftops, hoping to loose arrows or hurl stones, sharp gunshots rang out at once, and the marauders were knocked from the rooftops like broken dolls. Before long, not a single enemy dared show themselves above.

With no threats raining down from above, what did the White Pole Soldiers have to fear? With a roaring shout, they surged into the street. After a short and brutal exchange, the first street was firmly in their hands.

The firearm troops followed immediately. They burst into houses, extending their gun barrels out through windows. Some climbed onto rooftops, setting up firing positions at higher vantage points and aiming toward the second layer of streets.

From the rooftops, the firearm soldiers enjoyed wide lines of sight and commanding fields of fire, bringing large stretches of the surrounding streets under their control. The marauders operating in the second street were instantly turned into living targets.

After a flurry of gunfire, the marauders visible to the naked eye were scattered and broken. The White Pole Soldiers advanced once more, pouring into the second street.

At this point, the marauders' defeat was complete, like a mountain collapsing inward. Their carefully planned alley warfare proved utterly useless. They could not even get close to the firearm troops.

Seeing this, Lao Huihui made a swift decision. "Enough. Preserve the strength of the cavalry. We will not take part in this battle." With a single order, his iron cavalry withdrew rapidly to the north. Zijing Liang Wang Ziyong, Chuang Wang, the Eight Great Kings of the South Camp, Fan Shan Yao, and others soon saw their own forces collapse as well, unable to continue fighting.

Marauders were, after all, marauders. When defeat became obvious, they always chose flight. Once they realized there was no hope of victory, they scattered faster than startled rabbits, fleeing Daning County and disappearing into the northern wilderness. Daning County was finally retaken.

Ma Xianglin walked slowly through the streets, occasionally nudging a bandit's corpse with his foot to make sure it was not feigning death. As he walked, he let out a quiet sigh. "Is there truly no one left alive in Daning County?"

His subordinate's expression was grim. "The houses are filled with civilian corpses."

Ma Xianglin's heart grew heavy. He changed the subject. "I truly cannot understand General Xing's way of fighting."

Zhang Fengyi, walking beside him, murmured softly, "Yes. I cannot understand it either. If we were to face such an army, husband, what do you think our chances of victory would be?"

"Chances of victory?" Ma Xianglin did not know whether to laugh or cry. "What chances would there be at all?"

Zhang Fengyi fell silent.

Ma Xianglin continued, "All I can say is that it is fortunate they are not bandits, but government soldiers who accepted amnesty. If they had joined Wang Jiayin's rebellion instead, we would never have been able to stop them."

Zhang Fengyi nodded slowly. "In Puxian, I saw them share half their rations with the common people. They are truly good people, not marauders. That is a great relief."

As they spoke, a White Pole Soldier ran up from ahead and reported, "General, there are still residents alive in the houses ahead."

Ma Xianglin's spirits lifted at once. "There are survivors? Excellent. Let us go and see."

He and Zhang Fengyi hurried toward that street. At the same time, several leaders of the Gao Family Village militia also received the news and rushed toward the same place.