

Great Ming 591

Chapter 591 Ambush

A few days later, the Celestial Fertilizer at Xi'an's official fertilizer store was almost completely sold out.

This outcome delighted farmers, reassured clerks, and caused sleepless nights for certain people who had never once planted a single stalk of grain in their lives.

With the warehouse nearly emptied, Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi mobilized at once. Dozens of empty carts were assembled, creaking as they rolled forward, accompanied by several dozen Gao Family Village militiamen. The convoy moved out through the city gates in broad daylight, long, loose, and conspicuously unguarded. From front to rear, the carts stretched so far that the head of the line could no longer see the tail.

To anyone with malicious intent, it was an invitation written in large, careless characters:

Please ambush me.

Among the crowds leaving the city, a man in ordinary clothes lowered his head and quickened his pace. The instant he passed through the gates, his eyes sharpened, and a cold smile crept onto his lips.

A death-sworn warrior from the Prince of Qin's Residence.

He slipped into a nearby copse, where a horse had already been prepared. Mounting in one smooth motion, he kicked hard and shot forward like an arrow released from a bowstring.

For a galloping horse, fifty li was nothing. In no time, he reached a forest in Gaoling District. There, more than a hundred death-sworn warriors waited impatiently, weapons already in hand, their patience worn thin by days of idling.

"Boss," the scout said, barely bothering to catch his breath. "The fertilizer convoy has left the city."

The leader's eyes lit up with savage delight. "Excellent. We've been waiting so long my bones are itching. Finally, something worth killing has arrived."

One of the subordinates hesitated. "Shouldn't we wait until they go to Chengcheng County and load the Celestial Fertilizer? That way, we can seize more."

The leader turned, his expression darkening instantly.

"Idiot," he snapped. "Do you want to haul fertilizer back to the Prince's Residence? Are you afraid the civil officials won't have enough evidence to skin us alive?"

He spat to the side.

"We're not here to steal. We're here to kill and vent our anger. Strike fast, then disappear."

Only then did the others understand. Murmurs of cruel excitement spread through the group.

"Hmph. If they want to die, then fine. But it won't be painless."

The death-sworn warriors fanned out through the forest, hiding among trees and underbrush, arranging themselves into a classic pocket ambush. The woods fell silent as they waited.

From the road ahead came the slow creak of wheels.

The convoy approached.

Long. Loose. Careless.

The leader squinted, watching intently. "Those fertilizer clerks... not bad with their hands," he muttered. "Must be enforcers Wu Shen and Zheng Gouzi hired from the jianghu."

His lips curled.

"Enough to scare household guards. Enough to bluff peasants."

He gestured toward the absurdly stretched formation. "But look at them. No formation. No alertness. People who truly have defenses don't dare to look this relaxed."

His voice dropped, heavy with contempt. "Against us, they're already dead."

Just then—

A sudden roar shattered the forest.

"My Heaven-Splitting Rabbit-Rending Overlord Sword!"

The leader's expression froze.

"What—?"

Before anyone could react, a death-sworn warrior surged out from the trees, driven by bloodlust and the thrill of imminent slaughter, charging straight at the convoy.

The leader spun around, furious. "Who told you to—"

He never finished the sentence.

Eight shadows dropped on him at the same instant.

Hands clamped down on his arms from both sides. A sharp strike snapped his jaw sideways. Before he could scream, his legs were swept out from under him, and he was dragged to the ground.

All around the clearing, death-sworn warriors began to fall.

No cries. No dramatic struggles.

Just sudden silence, broken only by the dull thuds of bodies hitting dirt.

When the Jinyiwei chose not to appear, not even a single hair of theirs could be found.

But when they appeared, it was always like this—an inescapable net snapping shut without warning.

Horse hooves thundered.

Several riders burst into the clearing, forming a tight ring around Zheng Gouzi.

"Centurion Shi," one reported calmly, "we're in position."

A large contingent of Jinyiwei had arrived.

The leader's eyes widened in horror.

"...A trap."

On the road, Shi Kefa suddenly shrieked in an exaggerated voice, clutching at his waist. "Bandits! Road bandits!"

He fumbled awkwardly with his saber, tugging at it again and again. The blade stubbornly refused to come out.

Flat Rabbit, standing beside a cart, laughed cheerfully. "Indeed. Indeed."

The death-sworn warriors burst into laughter.

Seeing Shi Kefa struggle so clumsily, one warrior snorted. "Is that all?"

He charged forward, leapt onto a cart, raised his saber high, and brought it crashing down toward Shi Kefa's face.

At that exact moment, Shi Kefa's saber slid free—smooth, effortless, and deadly.

The blade flashed.

Thud.

It punched cleanly through the man's chest.

The laughter stopped.

"Damn it—trap!"

Elsewhere, a death-sworn warrior lunged straight at Flat Rabbit. Flat Rabbit yelped, flailed theatrically, and tumbled backward behind a fertilizer cart.

The saber sliced through empty air.

Flat Rabbit poked half his head out from behind the cart, shook it regretfully, and sighed. "Sigh... looks like there's no chance for this Rabbit Lord to perform today."

Zheng Gouzi's voice rang out, cold and authoritative.

"Since you insist on resisting to the bitter end, don't blame this official for showing no mercy."

In the eyes of the attackers, Zheng Gouzi, Flat Rabbit, Shi Kefa, and the others were already dead men.

They were wrong.

A single hand gesture.

From all directions, the Jinyiwei surged forward.

"Jinyiwei on official business!"

Shi Kefa straightened, all traces of his earlier clumsiness gone. His eyes were sharp, his posture upright, his voice carrying unquestionable authority.

"Lay down your weapons and surrender. Those who resist may still be spared. Those who do not—die."

From the road, the convoy still looked like easy prey—dozens of carts stretched impossibly long, front and rear completely out of sight.

That illusion lasted exactly one breath.

Tarps were thrown aside.

From beneath each cart, Jinyiwei soldiers sprang out like steel ghosts.

A broad, slender saber shot up from under one tarp—

Thud.

Another death-sworn warrior collapsed.

Zheng Gouzi glanced around and said calmly, "They arrived just in time."

A dying warrior stared at the blade buried in his chest, lips trembling. "Em... Embroidered Spring Blade..."

Only now did the leader, pinned to the ground, finally see clearly.

Zheng Gouzi, mounted on a tall black horse, sat among them—expression indifferent, gaze steady.

"What are you afraid of?!" the leader roared hoarsely. "Out here, we're just bandits! Even if we kill him, there's no evidence!"

A subordinate shouted back in panic, "Boss! He's the Judicial Commissioner of Xi'an!"

Another cried, "If we touch him—!"

Too late.

Shi Kefa leaned slightly forward, chuckling under his breath. "It's a good thing we saved our strength."

He glanced at the surroundings.

"No firearms. No full armor. Our equipment isn't complete. If we fought head-on, we'd lose people."

He shrugged lightly.

"Better to let the Jinyiwei take those casualties."

"Understood!"

"Kill Shi Kefa!"

"Ao—!"

Steel answered.

The ambush ended the moment it began.

Chapter 592 Zhu Youjian's Decision
The capital.

Imperial Study.

The Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, sat beneath the hanging lamps, a stack of memorials spread before him like a battlefield after defeat.

His face was dark. Not the theatrical darkness of anger, but the exhausted, sinking darkness of a man who had lost the habit of hope.

The rebels in Shanxi were no longer merely rebelling.

They were devouring the land.

Aside from the narrow corridor linking Puzhou, Hejin County, and Pingyang Prefecture—desperately held together by the pacified bandit Xing Honglang—the rest of Shanxi had already been torn apart. Villages burned, granaries emptied, roads severed. Fires of war bloomed everywhere, red as open wounds.

The Governor of Shanxi, Song Tongyin, had long since retreated into Taiyuan, clinging to the city walls like a man hugging a plank in floodwaters. Beyond Taiyuan, nearly half the province lay at the mercy of rebels.

Zhu Youjian slammed a memorial onto the table.

"Where is Cao Wenzhao?" he demanded sharply. "What is Cao Wenzhao doing?"

Chief Eunuch Cao Huachun stepped forward at once, head lowered. "Cao Wenzhao is currently suppressing bandits in northern Shaanxi. The rebel Bu Zhan Ni led tens of thousands from seven different bands, crossed the river, and returned to Shaanxi. Cao Wenzhao is locked in a prolonged stalemate with them."

Zhu Youjian's brows knit tighter. "The White Pole Soldiers from Sichuan?"

Cao Huachun replied cautiously, "Their numbers are too small, and provisions are insufficient. At present, they can only maneuver along the line between Daling County, Puxian, and Pingyang Prefecture—constant fighting, constant retreat. The troops are utterly exhausted."

Zhu Youjian pressed on, voice growing colder. "And the Grand Commander of Shanxi, Wang Guoliang?"

"He is defending Taiyuan with all his strength."

Silence fell.

The emperor stared at the memorials, then at nothing at all.

For a long moment, Zhu Youjian said nothing. His thoughts seemed to stall, like a cart stuck in mud. Finally, he exhaled sharply.

"So," he said, voice hollow, "are you telling Me that not one of My mighty Ming generals can fight— every last one of them inferior to a pacified bandit?"

Cao Huachun hesitated, then cleared his throat. "Well... Xing Honglang simply has more troops."

Zhu Youjian's eyes flicked up.

Cao Huachun continued carefully, "Back when she was still a bandit, she accumulated considerable wealth and manpower. At present, she commands five thousand elite soldiers. By comparison... Cao Wenzhao has only three thousand. The White Pole Soldiers number three thousand. Wang Guoliang has merely two thousand five hundred."

"Five thousand..." Zhu Youjian repeated.

His expression twisted into something almost grotesque.

As emperor, he could not curse aloud.

But the thought was written plainly on his face.

After a long pause, he muttered bitterly, "Indeed. Rebels always seem to have troops appear out of thin air. As if the heavens themselves are issuing them soldiers."

Seeing his mood darken further, Cao Huachun hurried to console him. "Your Majesty, not all is bleak. There are capable officers among the imperial forces. Under Wang Cheng'en, the Grand Commander of Shaanxi, there are two thousand-household commanders of exceptional valor."

"Oh?" Zhu Youjian glanced up. "Who?"

"One is named Shi Jian, the other Wang Xiaohua. At present, one defends Pingyang Prefecture, the other guards the bridgehead at the Dragon Gate Yellow River Bridge. They have repelled repeated rebel attacks and rendered notable service."

"The Dragon Gate... Yellow River Bridge?" Zhu Youjian frowned. The words sounded strange to his ears. "Since when does the Yellow River have a bridge?"

Cao Huachun replied, "According to reports from below, an immortal constructed a colossal bridge spanning the Yellow River. Vast, magnificent, awe-inspiring—"

"Absurd!" Zhu Youjian scoffed. "What nonsense are these memorials feeding Me now?"

Cao Huachun coughed lightly. "Your Majesty knows how officials exaggerate. Take Shi Jian's memorial—he claims he charged into the enemy ranks alone, fought in and out three times, and had over two jin of arrows removed from his body afterward. He also happens to be the one stationed at the so-called Dragon Gate Bridge."

Zhu Youjian snorted. "I understand now. This 'Dragon Gate Bridge' is nothing more than a chain or rope stretched between banks, anchoring a pontoon bridge or raft. As for Shi Jian's achievements—half of them are surely inflated."

"Most likely," Cao Huachun agreed at once.

Zhu Youjian rubbed his temples.

He was angry. He was weary. But in the end, even exaggerated merit was still merit.

Better to have someone boasting of victories than no victories to boast of at all.

If officers who could fight were rewarded, those who could not would be forced to reflect—or be replaced.

At last, Zhu Youjian straightened. "Draft an edict."

Cao Huachun immediately dipped his brush.

"Xing Honglang, Shi Jian, and Wang Xiaohua have rendered meritorious service and deserve reward. Order the Ministry of War to examine their records and propose appropriate promotions."

He paused, then continued coldly, "As for the Governor of Shanxi, Song Tongyin—he has failed to suppress the bandits and ease Our worries. Dismiss him from office and send him home."

His voice hardened.

"Those with merit shall be rewarded. Those without ability shall be punished. Let this distinction be clear, so all civil and military officials take heed."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Cao Huachun began writing rapidly.

Just then, a young eunuch rushed in, nearly stumbling as he knelt. "Your Majesty! An urgent secret dispatch from the Jinyiwei!"

Zhu Youjian's heart skipped.

An urgent Jinyiwei dispatch could only mean blood.

He took the letter at once and read it carefully. As he did, his expression changed—shock first, then anger, then something colder and heavier.

The report was from Shi Kefa.

Though only a hereditary Jinyiwei centurion, Shi Kefa's lineage was impeccable. His family had served the Jinyiwei for generations, loyal to the imperial house without blemish. His rank might be low, but his credibility was absolute.

The report stated clearly:

The Prince of Qin's estate had dispatched death-sworn agents to attack government transport convoys.

One had been captured alive.

And he had confessed.

Zhu Youjian felt as though the floor had dropped out beneath him.

Cao Huachun, having finished drafting the edict, could not help but glance at the letter. Sweat slid slowly down his back.

"Your Majesty..." he whispered. "This... what is to be done?"

Zhu Youjian let out a low, heavy grunt. "The Prince of Qin's estate has become utterly lawless."

Cao Huachun swallowed. "Shall we... move against them?"

Zhu Youjian shook his head—slowly, firmly.

"We cannot touch them."

The words hung in the air.

For generations, the Ming emperors had carried a quiet guilt toward the Prince of Qin's estate.

First, to consolidate imperial authority, the emperors had stripped the Prince of Qin of military power, reducing his tens of thousands of troops to a mere five hundred personal guards. Compensation had followed—land, stipends, indulgence.

Second, the matter of succession.

The Ministry of Rites had delayed the confirmation of the Prince of Qin's heir for decades—since the Wanli era. Civil officials feared land accumulation, so they stalled endlessly. Emperors repeatedly issued edicts to rebuke them, yet the issue remained unresolved even into Chongzhen's reign.

The imperial family had wronged the Prince of Qin.

Zhu Youjian spoke slowly, each word weighed down by history. "If We make an example of the Prince of Qin over this matter, the other princes will grow fearful and resentful. How shall We face Our ancestors in the afterlife?"

Cao Huachun hesitated. "But... this time, there is a living captive. The civil officials will not let this pass."

Zhu Youjian frowned deeply. Time passed. Then, with a weary sigh, he said, "Draft another edict."

Cao Huachun stiffened.

"Instruct Shi Kefa to escort the captive to the capital... and arrange for him to be silenced along the way."

Cao Huachun's breath caught.

"I will personally write an edict," Zhu Youjian continued, voice flat, "severely admonishing the Prince of Qin's estate. I will scold Zhu Cunji harshly, command him to restrain himself, and let this matter be buried."

Cao Huachun whispered, "Your Majesty... the civil officials will accuse you once again of tyranny."

Zhu Youjian waved his hand dismissively. "Let them curse."

His eyes were cold.

"Beyond scolding, those civil officials are useless. Do you think We fear their words?"

And thus, the decision was made.

That very night, Zhu Youjian personally penned an imperial edict—its language fierce, its rebuke merciless—commanding Zhu Cunji to behave properly, cease his provocations, and stop stirring trouble.

Otherwise...

Even the emperor himself would no longer be able to protect him.

Chapter 593 The Overwhelming Power of the Crown

The line outside the fertilizer shop had grown so long it looked like a migrating snake—slow, patient, and full of hope. People clutched silver, copper coins, even IOUs written on scraps of paper, all waiting their turn to buy the miracle powder that made crops grow like they were afraid of being left behind by history.

Next door, a brand-new signboard hung crookedly in the wind:

"Agricultural Technology Training School."

Inside, several villagers from Gaojia Village—men who, just months ago, had considered "farming experience" to mean not starving to death—were now officially titled Agricultural Technology Experts. They lectured enthusiastically, chalk flying, about "scientific planting methods," "soil improvement," and "rational fertilization," phrases they themselves had only learned recently and now wielded like sacred mantras.

Classes were free.

The instructors were paid.

The money came from Wu Shen.

Wu Shen's original hundred thousand taels had long since evaporated like morning dew. But fate—or perhaps political guilt—had refilled his purse in recent days.

The source of this fresh silver was unmistakable.

The Prince of Qin's Residence.

Without being asked twice, the princely estate had solemnly announced its willingness to donate fifty thousand taels toward "disaster relief." No speeches. No explanations. Just carts of silver delivered efficiently, quietly, and with the unmistakable air of please take this and let us all pretend nothing happened.

At this moment, Wu Shen and Shi Kefa were seated in the fertilizer shop's back courtyard, sharing tea with Li Daoxuan.

The tea was good.

The mood was not.

Shi Kefa sighed deeply, the kind of sigh that carried an entire bureaucracy's worth of frustration.

"The agents my men dispatched to the capital..." he said slowly, "...all fell ill on the road. A strange illness. They died before reaching their destination. Not one survivor."

He paused, jaw tight.

"The Prince of Qin's Residence denied everything. The Emperor expressed great concern, but in the end... there was nothing he could do. Only an edict. A stern reprimand."

He laughed bitterly. "That's all."

Wu Shen took a sip of tea, his expression strange—half amused, half resigned.

"The Prince of Qin's Residence got scolded," he said, "and then handed me fifty thousand taels of silver."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly, as if admiring a painting whose outcome he'd predicted long ago.

"A good result," he said. "More or less exactly as I expected."

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa spoke at the same time.

"You call this good?"

Li Daoxuan spread his hands.

"Gentlemen, do you truly believe a matter this small could shake the strongest princely fief in the realm?" he asked mildly.

"Disband the fief? Impossible. Strip their military power? Also impossible. Their guard detachment was reduced to five hundred men a century ago—how much more can you cut? Execute the Prince of Qin's heir outside the Meridian Gate?"

He smiled. "Over fertilizer?"

He leaned forward slightly.

"Put yourselves in His Majesty's shoes. What, exactly, could you have done?"

The two officials fell silent.

After thinking it through, they had to admit it: there really was nothing more that could be done. A harsh reprimand and fifty thousand taels was, by imperial standards, already considered heavy punishment.

All the righteous indignation they had built up leaked away with a soft, embarrassing puff.

Li Daoxuan added casually, like tossing salt on a wound:

"As for those agents who died of a 'strange illness'—that was the Embroidered Uniform Guard, without a doubt."

Shi Kefa's back stiffened. "Impossible. Those men were selected by me personally. Loyal to the Emperor to the bone. They could never have been bought by the Prince of Qin's Residence."

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow. "Who said the Prince of Qin ordered it?"

Shi Kefa froze.

"What if," Li Daoxuan continued calmly, "the Emperor himself ordered their deaths? If they lived, this affair would never end. The civil officials would stir trouble endlessly. Better to silence the witnesses and close the case."

Shi Kefa went completely rigid.

Then Li Daoxuan laughed.

A light, unbothered laugh.

Shi Kefa's voice dropped. "How... how could it be like this? We worked so hard. Investigated so carefully..."

Li Daoxuan suddenly said, in a tone sharp enough to cut porcelain:

"This is the flaw of supreme imperial authority."

The courtyard went deathly still.

That sentence alone qualified as treason.

Wu Shen's first instinct was pure terror: If the Embroidered Uniform Guard hears this, we're dead.

His second instinct was worse.

Shi Kefa is the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

Wu Shen braced himself for an explosion.

None came.

Shi Kefa's expression twisted—like someone wanting to flip a table while forcing himself to stay seated.

"Mister Li," he said stiffly, "I cannot pretend I didn't hear that."

Li Daoxuan laughed again and immediately shifted gears.

"The civil officials have too little power," he said smoothly. "The Emperor's power is too great. This imbalance is unhealthy. The Grand Secretariat should be given more authority."

That single sentence struck its mark.

Wu Shen brightened instantly. "I find that extremely reasonable!"

The words had barely left his mouth before he clapped a hand over it in horror.

Shi Kefa was now in agony.

He was a civil official—but also part of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. Li Daoxuan's words resonated deeply... yet his identity screamed rebellion.

If he agreed, how could he explode?

If he exploded, how could he deny agreeing?

Li Daoxuan watched his struggle with quiet amusement.

In truth, by the late Ming, capitalism had already begun to sprout, and even the faint outline of constitutional monarchy could be seen. The Grand Secretariat and the Six Ministries openly resisted the Emperor on multiple occasions. The Ministry of Rites once delayed approval of the Prince of Qin's succession indefinitely—and the Emperor could do nothing but issue angry edicts.

The civil officials weren't visionaries. They were simply grabbing power for themselves.

It just so happened that their selfishness aligned perfectly with the inevitable direction of history.

No wonder Li Daoxuan's words resonated.

He continued gently, pressing the blade deeper.

"Minister Shi, my wife once told you that advanced productivity requires an advanced political system. If governance lags behind, productivity is strangled. You remember that, don't you?"

Shi Kefa hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. "I remember."

"Then you understand," Li Daoxuan said. "An autocratic system where one man decides everything is inefficient. It would be better for the Grand Secretariat and Six Ministries to deliberate collectively—vote, advise, assist."

He smiled.

"As the saying goes: three cobblers together are smarter than Zhuge Liang. The Six Ministries are six cobblers. That's at least two Zhuge Liangs."

Both officials found this... disturbingly persuasive.

But the discussion had gone far enough. Neither dared voice support aloud.

Li Daoxuan didn't push. Seeds only needed planting.

He changed the subject effortlessly.

"Now that the Prince of Qin's Residence has backed off, they won't cause trouble for a while. This gives us a rare window where politics won't strangle productivity."

He looked at Wu Shen.

"Minister Wu—why not take advantage of it and move faster?"

Wu Shen snapped back to reality. "Please enlighten me."

"With interference gone," Li Daoxuan said, "I can establish fertilizer factories, experimental crop fields, chicken farms, pig farms—throughout Xi'an. With Heaven granting rain and the people barely stabilizing, these projects will boost grain output and save more refugees."

Wu Shen's eyes shone. "That makes perfect sense."

Politics was distant. Disaster relief was immediate.

And now, with another fifty thousand taels in hand, following Li Daoxuan's path seemed wiser than ever.

"Mister Li," Wu Shen said earnestly, "however you wish to proceed, simply instruct me. I will assist fully. And—I hope to learn from you as well."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Gladly. Minister Wu, you're welcome to learn from my factory-building experience."

Outside, the fertilizer shop buzzed with life.

Inside, the foundations of the Ming dynasty quietly shifted—one teacup, one dangerous idea at a time.

Chapter 594 Tie Niaoifei Goes Missing

San Shier's head started throbbing again.

The cause was simple—and terrifying.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had issued a new directive:

Gao Family Village was to begin extending its reach toward Xi'an.

The moment San Shier received the order, he felt his hair turn white from stress.

Xi'an was not some backwater county or forgettable prefecture town. It was a true monster of a city—a former capital, a colossal urban center. The population within the city walls alone numbered in the hundreds of thousands. If you counted the surrounding towns and villages?

The scale was enough to make any administrator reconsider farming instead.

How many people would Gao Family Village need to mobilize to reshape that kind of place?

Just thinking about it made San Shier's temples ache.

Thankfully, the initial construction in Puzhou City had already been completed. That meant a large number of skilled technicians—engineers, foremen, organizers—could now be transferred from Puzhou to Xi'an.

That realization was the only thing keeping San Shier upright.

He buried himself in paperwork, approving transfer orders at a frantic pace. Blue Hats rushed in and out like ants whose nest had been kicked over, carrying stamped documents in every direction.

Just as San Shier was drowning in work, Zhong Gaoliang squeezed through the doorway.

"Third Manager," Zhong said cheerfully, "I'm here to get a slip approved."

San Shier didn't even look up. He took the document and was just about to sign—

When a familiar, teasing voice echoed from his chest:

"Hey! Read it properly before you sign. Or you'll end up fooled by your subordinates, just like the officials of the old society."

San Shier jolted so hard he nearly flung the brush away.

It was the Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Panicking, San Shier hurriedly bowed his head toward the figure resting on his chest, mumbling an apology. Then—finally exercising caution—he reread the document Zhong Gaoliang had handed over.

It was a Special Pardon Request.

Specifically: a request for clemency for over six hundred former Guyuan rebels.

San Shier's expression shifted. He read more carefully.

The document stated that Chen Baihu and the others had undergone several years of Labor Reform, had fully atoned for their past crimes, and had completed ideological education. Their moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor development was now considered complete, and they were deemed capable of aligning with Gao Family Village's new social ethos.

San Shier nodded.

"I've read it. No problem."

Only then did he lift his brush and write two decisive characters:

Approved.

He signed his name, then pulled out the official seal of the Gao Family Village Disciplinary Committee and stamped it firmly onto the document.

Thunk.

Zhong Gaoliang laughed. "When I show this to them, they'll be overjoyed."

The Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun, who had been quietly chuckling, suddenly zipped across and landed atop the Silver Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on Zhong Gaoliang's chest.

Grinning broadly, he said, "I want to watch the fun too."

Zhong Gaoliang boarded a train, carrying the Tianzun along, and quickly returned to Labor Reform Valley.

By now, Labor Reform Valley had become astonishingly lively.

With the exception of military industries—which remained strictly forbidden to reform prisoners—nearly every sector of Gao Family Village relied heavily on them: textiles, mining, printing, farming, animal husbandry, road construction, cement production...

Any piece of flat land within Huanglong Mountain was immediately turned into factory space. Houses dotted the slopes and valleys, scattered wherever construction was possible.

At the very heart of the valley stood something even more unexpected:

A market.

Shops lined the streets. During designated rest periods, Labor Reform prisoners could browse and purchase daily necessities.

Of course, they had no money.

Instead, they used Labor Reform Points.

Those who worked diligently, demonstrated genuine reform, and showed good conduct earned points. These points could then be exchanged for goods at the market.

The system was brutally effective.

Motivation skyrocketed.

Now, every factory had its own "Labor Models", individuals praised for exceptional reform and productivity.

One hundred and twenty thousand Labor Reform prisoners lived here—not as chained criminals, but as participants in a strange, disciplined, half-utopian experiment.

The moment Zhong Gaoliang returned, he summoned the six hundred-plus former Guyuan rebels.

They were the longest-serving reform group—and it showed.

Neat. Orderly. Calm.

Led by Chen Baihu, they stood in formation, listening quietly as Zhong Gaoliang raised the document in his hand.

"Look carefully," he announced. "This is your special pardon. From today onward—you are free."

The formation exploded with cheers.

Zhong Gaoliang raised a hand. "You may choose to leave freely. Or..."

Chen Baihu spoke without hesitation. "We choose 'or'."

Zhong Gaoliang laughed. "Not afraid that my 'or' means jumping into a pit?"

Chen Baihu grinned. "After all these years, we know Warden Zhong. You wouldn't dig a pit for us."

Zhong Gaoliang nodded approvingly.

"Good. Then here's the 'or': Join the Gao Family Village Militia and immediately head to the front lines—Puzhou City. Your former superior, Lao Nanfeng, is stationed there and needs manpower."

The six hundred erupted again—this time in pure excitement.

"Of course!"

"That's perfect!"

"We're ready!"

Watching this, Li Daoxuan felt deeply satisfied.

This group had truly become his people.

Once they reached Puzhou City, reunited with Lao Nanfeng, and received proper arms, they would instantly add another powerful core to the militia.

With that thought, Li Daoxuan casually shifted his focus.

His consciousness leapt across space toward Puzhou City, half-expecting to catch Lao Nanfeng listening to Cai Lin sing again.

Instead—

He found a meeting in progress.

A serious one.

Inside the Puzhou City barracks, Cheng Xu sat at the head of the table. Beside him were Xing Honglang, Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng, and others.

No one was smiling.

The atmosphere was heavy.

Li Daoxuan co-sensed through the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun perched on Gao Chuwu's shoulder, listening closely.

Xing Honglang spoke first. "When was the last time Tie Niaofei contacted us?"

Zheng Daniu scratched his head. "Before I ate my nineteenth meal."

Silence fell.

Lao Nanfeng's face darkened. "That would be nine days ago?"

Zheng Daniu corrected him. "No. I eat four meals a day."

Everyone stared at him.

Speechless.

Lao Nanfeng exhaled slowly. "Even so, that's almost five days. Tie Niaofei travels constantly between Puzhou City and Xie Lake. He should report at least once every two days. Four days without contact means something has gone very wrong."

Li Daoxuan frowned.

Since joining Gao Family Village, Tie Niaofei hadn't fought major battles. Instead, he handled the salt trade, shuttling between the Xie Lake salt excise office, Puzhou City, and the processing factories.

He was a critical link.

And the straight-line distance between Puzhou City and Xie Lake was less than a hundred li.

That was far too short a route to simply vanish.

Xing Honglang said decisively, "Instructor Zao, send cavalry to search immediately."

Zao Ying nodded. "Understood."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly spoke:

"No need."

Everyone froze—then lit up with relief.

"Greetings, Heavenly—Tianzun!"

"I will locate him," the Puppet Tianzun said calmly. "Allow me to conduct a divine search."

In the next instant, Li Daoxuan's consciousness surged outward, racing eastward beyond Puzhou City—

Toward the unseen stretch of land where Tie Niaofei had disappeared.

And whatever awaited him there.

Chapter 595 This Is the Final Offer

Just under thirty li east of Puzhou City, the land crossed a prefectural boundary.

Beyond that line lay the territory of the Hedong Circuit.

Li Daoxuan's co-sensing arrived there first—locking onto Xiao Lake.

The lake sprawled wide, surrounded by countless salt villages. This entire region was already firmly under Gao Family Village's control. Salt workers moved in orderly lines, digging and tending salt ponds, drying crystals under the pale winter sun before transporting them onward to Puzhou City.

These were not ordinary laborers.

They were skilled workers, officially registered, earning three liang of silver each month. They were considered insiders—their own people. Nearly every one of them wore a small cotton-thread image of Dao Xuan Tianzun stitched carefully over their heart.

Li Daoxuan swept his awareness across them.

One glance was enough.

Tie Niaofei was not here.

His co-sensing continued eastward.

The world suddenly darkened.

He found himself staring into a pitch-black ditch.

At the bottom lay a corpse.

On its chest—still visible despite mud and blood—was the cotton-thread image of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Li Daoxuan's fury ignited instantly.

"Who," he said coldly,

"dares to kill my people?"

He examined the body.

A clean knife wound to the neck. Death had been swift. The body had then been tossed aside like garbage.

His vision shifted—

And more bodies came into view.

One after another, piled together in the ditch. All bore the same insignia. All were dead.

Tie Niaofei's men.

They hadn't just been attacked.

They'd been slaughtered.

Li Daoxuan forcibly suppressed the surge of killing intent in his chest and pushed his co-sensing farther east.

Several thousand meters later—

Darkness again.

This time, the darkness was enclosed.

A faint, flickering oil lamp illuminated a small space, its light barely pushing back the shadows.

Li Daoxuan understood at once.

This was a dungeon.

His awareness had locked onto the cotton-thread amulet on Tie Niaofei's chest.

The stench of blood filled the air.

Tie Niaofei lay curled on a pile of dry straw in the corner, hands shackled in iron chains. His clothes were soaked red, and dried blood crusted along his side. He was barely conscious.

Bare earthen walls. No windows.

An underground cell.

Tie Niaofei's men were dead.

Tie Niaofei himself—captured.

Li Daoxuan was just about to gently rouse him when—

Footsteps echoed.

A door creaked open.

A group entered.

At the front was a man in official robes, unmistakably a court official. Li Daoxuan didn't recognize his face—but the aura was clear.

Behind him followed two merchants, richly dressed, their expressions sharp and cold. Several guards trailed after them.

They stopped in front of Tie Niaofei.

One guard stepped forward and hurled a basin of water over him.

It was winter.

The icy splash jolted Tie Niaofei awake with a violent gasp. Water soaked his amulet, darkened his clothes, and ran into the straw beneath him.

He blinked blearily, then gave a hoarse laugh.

"Heh... Master Salt Inspector..."

"You again?"

Li Daoxuan understood immediately.

The Salt Inspector.

Not just any inspector—this could only be the Salt Inspector of the Hedong Circuit.

So that was it.

The Salt Inspector spoke, voice low and sharp:

"Speak. Why did Huang Yunfa's salt certificates end up in your hands? And who killed Huang Yunfa?"

Tie Niaofei coughed, blood flecking his lips.

"I've said it a thousand times..."

"I killed Huang Yunfa."

"I took his salt certificates."

"If you want them, just name a price..."

"There was no need... to play these games..."

"Nonsense!"

One of the merchants scoffed loudly.

"You?" he sneered. "A petty salt smuggler with a few dozen lackeys? You wouldn't last half an incense stick against our guards. And you expect us to believe you killed Huang Yunfa?"

Tie Niaofei's eyes flashed.

"Zhai Tang," he spat.

"Don't underestimate me. If you hadn't ambushed us, my men would've wiped every last one of you out."

Li Daoxuan's expression turned cold.

Zhai Tang.

A Jin merchant.

One of the Eight Great Jin Merchants—a peer of Huang Yunfa.

At that point, the full picture became clear.

They had killed Huang Yunfa, a traitor to the Ming. Tie Niaofei had seized his salt certificates and used them to legally obtain government salt, funneling it into Gao Family Village.

They had blamed Huang Yunfa's death on roaming rebels.

The cover story had held—

But not completely.

The enemy had followed the trail of the salt certificates.

And now they'd found Tie Niaofei.

Zhai Tang leaned forward, eyes sharp.

"Tell me, Tie Niaofei. Someone is backing you, isn't there? Who is it that dares oppose us Jin merchants?"

Tie Niaofei laughed weakly.

"I have no backing—except God."

"The heavens watch over me."

"You Han traitors who sell supplies to the Manchus..."

"Your wicked deeds will end in ruin."

Zhai Tang sneered.

"When did a salt smuggler become a righteous hero? You break the law for profit—don't dress it up as virtue."

Tie Niaofei snapped back:

"I may not be a good man."

"But I am not a traitor."

His gaze shifted to the Salt Inspector.

"And you?"

"You're an imperial official—yet you conspire with these Jin merchants?"

"Bah!"

"I sell salt to the Great Ming."

"You sell the country to the Manchus."

The Salt Inspector's face darkened.

He stepped forward—

And kicked Tie Niaofei hard in the stomach.

Tie Niaofei doubled over, gasping in agony, but he bit down hard, refusing to scream.

The Salt Inspector said coldly,

"This man is useless. We might as well kill him."

Zhai Tang raised a hand.

"Not yet."

He smiled thinly.

"We still don't know why he killed Huang Yunfa. If someone is targeting our salt certificates—stealing them—then there will be more moves coming."

He straightened.

"Keep him alive."

"If no one comes, he rots here."

"If someone does come..."

"We'll finally see who dares cross the Jin merchants."

The Salt Inspector frowned.

"Just don't drag me into trouble."

With that, he turned and left.

Zhai Tang crouched before Tie Niaofei, smiling faintly.

"Our patience is limited."

"Reveal who is backing you."

"I'll spare your life."

He leaned closer.

"This is my final offer."

Tie Niaofei laughed weakly.

"Zhai Tang..."

"Why don't I make you an offer instead?"

Zhai Tang stiffened.

"How do you want to die—quickly or slowly?"

"If the price is fair..."

"I might even agree to ease your suffering."

Zhai Tang shot to his feet.

Another merchant, silent until now, finally spoke calmly:

"Brother Zhai. Let's go."

"No need to waste more time."

Zhai Tang nodded stiffly.

"Brother Tian is right."

The two turned—

And left the dungeon.

Above them, unseen—

Li Daoxuan's gaze burned cold.

Someone had crossed a line.

And the bill was about to come due.

Chapter 596 Chen Baihu's First Mission

Inside the council chamber, not a single person blinked.

Every gaze was locked onto the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The wooden figure sat motionless for a long moment—so long that several people began to wonder whether it had frozen mid-thought. Then, with a faint creak, it twitched, shook its limbs, and slowly stood upright.

Its wooden mouth-pieces clacked together.

"Prepare," it said calmly,

"for a siege."

The room went dead silent.

"A... siege?" someone repeated weakly.

Lao Nanfeng was the first to react, his expression tightening.

"A siege means imperial troops," he said. "Once we attack a prefectural city, there's no ambiguity left."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded.

"Correct."

It continued evenly,

"Tie Niaofei has been seized by the Hedong Circuit's Salt Administration Bureau and is currently imprisoned in their dungeon. If we wish to retrieve him, we must take the Hedong Circuit."

Li Daoxuan then relayed, without embellishment, everything he had seen through co-sensing—the massacre, the dungeon, the Salt Inspector, the Jin merchants, and Tie Niaofei's condition.

When he finished, a collective breath was sucked from the room.

This was no longer speculation.

This was confirmation.

Everyone's expressions turned grim.

The Hedong Circuit controlled Xie Lake, the lifeline of salt to the Central Plains. That was precisely why the imperial court had issued salt certificates to the Eight Great Jin Merchants, tasking them with provisioning the border armies.

Salt.

Military supply.

Imperial lifeblood.

Touching this was no different from grabbing the court by the throat.

Lao Nanfeng spoke slowly, carefully choosing his words.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said, "taking the Hedong Circuit is not difficult. The problem is what comes after."

He straightened.

"Once we attack an imperial city, there will be no room for reconciliation. This will be an open rebellion. I have no objection to rebelling—but I must know clearly whether that is the path we are choosing."

Cheng Xu nodded in agreement.

"If we rebel now," he added, "it's too early. Our manpower is still stretched thin, and bullet production cannot keep up with rifle consumption."

He tapped the table lightly.

"We will expand rapidly at first, yes. But once production fails to keep pace, our momentum will stall. The imperial court will stabilize, and we'll be locked into a prolonged stalemate."

Zao Ying frowned.

"And once that happens," he said, "bandits will exploit the chaos, and the Manchus will seize the opportunity to press the borders. The people will suffer the most."

Xing Honglang clenched his jaw.

"But Tie Niaofei is in their dungeon," he said flatly.

"There is no peaceful way to get him out."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly clapped its wooden mouth-pieces together.

Clack. Clack.

"Simple," it said cheerfully.

"Have one brother play the bandit. Attack the city, slaughter officials with enthusiasm."

The room blinked.

"Then," the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun continued,

"Honglang leads troops to suppress the scoundrels. Merits achieved. Promotions earned."

It paused, then added with emphasis:

"New territory.

Yes.

New territory."

A heartbeat passed.

Then—

Realization struck.

"Brilliant!" several voices exclaimed at once.

Xing Honglang, however, frowned again.

"The plan is sound," he said slowly. "But who plays the bandit?"

He glanced around the room.

"All our commanders have shown their faces during the Pingyang reinforcement. Even our soldiers have been seen. Assembling a convincing 'unknown bandit force' won't be easy."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun tilted its head, tapping its wooden fingers together as if counting.

"This brother..." it said thoughtfully,

"has just been released from prison."

At that very moment—

Chen Baihu was packing.

He gathered the meager belongings he had accumulated over years in the Labor Reform Valley—purchased painstakingly with labor points—and tied them into a single cloth bundle.

Around him, more than six hundred former Guyuan rebels were doing the same.

Before leaving, Chen Baihu clasped hands with Centurion Wu from Ningxia.

"Old Wu," he said with a grin, "after we're gone, you're the boss here."

Centurion Wu laughed.

"Don't worry. I'll keep the new batch in line. You, on the other hand—make sure you thrive out there."

He lowered his voice conspiratorially.

"I'll need your protection when I get released."

Chen Baihu burst out laughing.

"How could I not thrive?" he said confidently.

"My boss, Lao Nanfeng, is doing great out there. I heard he's invested in some kind of performing arts agency. One concert, and his girls rake in silver like rain."

Centurion Wu sighed wistfully.

"I'd really like to see that."

"Then hurry up and earn merit for sentence reduction," Chen Baihu laughed.

"Hahahaha!"

Just then—

The cotton-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun pendant on Chen Baihu's chest suddenly stretched its mouth open.

"Chen Baihu."

Both men nearly jumped out of their skins.

They immediately bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

The cotton-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke calmly.

"You plan to go to Puzhou City and rejoin Lao Nanfeng after your release, correct?"

Chen Baihu replied respectfully,

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun, that was my intention."

"Not yet," the Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled.

"First—go fight him."

"What?!" Chen Baihu froze.

His eyes widened.

"Has... has Brother Nanfeng betrayed us?"

"Could he have been deceived by women into turning against Gao Family Village?"

Li Daoxuan, listening in, silently pinched the bridge of his nose.

Is that really your first thought?

Just how unreliable do you think Lao Nanfeng is?

"Enough nonsense," the Dao Xuan Tianzun said.

"You will impersonate a band of wandering bandits and attack the Hedong Circuit."

It continued calmly,

"Lao Nanfeng will then lead troops to suppress you."

Understanding dawned instantly.

Chen Baihu's eyes lit up.

"I see!" he said excitedly.

"I've been in the Labor Reform Valley since joining Gao Family Village. No one knows my affiliation. Once released, I can act as a bandit chief."

He grinned broadly.

"We attack the city. Brother Nanfeng drives us off. The city falls naturally into our hands."

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but admire them.

These people, he thought.

When it comes to dirty tricks, every one of them is frighteningly sharp.

"As long as you understand," the Dao Xuan Tianzun said.

"Proceed as you see fit."

Chen Baihu wasted no time.

He gathered all six hundred men.

First—off came the neat cotton clothes.

On went tattered, mismatched garments worthy of wandering bandits. They donned the battered border-army armor they once wore as Guyuan rebels.

Weapons were distributed—simple, brutal melee arms.

No acting was required.

They looked exactly like a ferocious border band.

Chen Baihu laughed.

"Brothers! The moment we're released, we've been given a glorious mission."

He raised his arm.

"To attack the Hedong Circuit!"

The six hundred men roared with laughter.

"Arduous?" someone shouted.

"The Hedong Circuit's garrison is weak, and the city's defenses are soft!"

"We'll take it down with our eyes closed!"

"Hahaha!"

Chen Baihu waved his hand.

"Then let's go!"

"Let's make our name the moment we step out!"

The logic was simple.

Leaving penniless would be hard.

But seizing merit immediately?

That was the fast track to glory.

After leaving the Labor Reform Valley, they boarded a Gao Family Village train to the Linyi Yellow River Bridge.

They crossed it.

Passed Sunji Town.

And the moment they exited Gao Family Village's direct sphere of control—

Their expressions changed.

Postures shifted.

Voices roughened.

Six hundred men became bandits.

Chen Baihu carried a palm-sized Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun clay doll hidden in his pocket. Li Daoxuan could contact him at any time—no messengers needed.

Without delay, Chen Baihu led the men into the dangerous mountains of Shanxi.

They slipped through prefectures and counties like shadows.

Silent.

Patient.

Hungry.

And steadily—

They closed in on the Hedong Circuit.

Chapter 597 Tricking Open the City Gates

Several days later.

Deep into the night.

Just outside Hedong City, within the Hedong Circuit.

Across Xie Lake, there lay a desolate salt village.

Lao Nanfeng and Zao Ying led a small contingent of cavalry scouts and hid within this abandoned settlement. Once, it had been lively and prosperous. But after Gao Family Village extended its influence toward Puzhou and repeatedly siphoned away salt workers, every household here had relocated to work the salt fields at Xiao Lake.

Left behind was nothing but empty houses and silence.

A perfect hiding place.

From here, they had a clear vantage point over Hedong City on the opposite shore of Xie Lake.

Zao Ying lowered his voice.

"Lao Nanfeng, your force... it's only around six hundred men, right?"

He hesitated, then continued,

"With so few people, can you really take Hedong City?"

Lao Nanfeng chuckled softly.

"If this city were defended by elite troops and competent generals, then no—absolutely impossible."

He narrowed his eyes toward the dark outline of the city.

"But it's guarded by a bunch of useless salt-tax officials. With Chen Baihu handling this, it won't take much effort at all."

Zao Ying nodded.

"Alright. Then I'll be watching closely to see how he captures a city defended by a thousand garrison troops using just six hundred men."

He paused, then added,

"And don't forget—there are Jin merchants inside the city as well. They aren't easy opponents. They might even have Manchu soldiers with them."

At the mention of Manchu soldiers, Lao Nanfeng's expression grew slightly more serious.

"Manchu troops aren't much stronger than Mongolian cavalry," he said calmly.

"There's nothing to fear."

He gestured toward the city.

"This is the Central Plains. Even if the Jin merchants smuggled Manchu soldiers in, their numbers won't be large. We don't need to worry excessively."

Just then—

A voice sounded from Lao Nanfeng's chest.

"They're here."

It was the Dao Xuan Tianzun.

"Chen Baihu and his men have arrived," the Dao Xuan Tianzun continued.

"He's about to launch the attack."

Lao Nanfeng and Zao Ying's spirits lifted instantly.

They quickly raised their binoculars.

The distance across Xie Lake was considerable, and the night was dark, but the optics were clear enough. Soon, they spotted Chen Baihu and roughly two hundred men staggering toward the base of Hedong City's walls.

They looked miserable.

Armor was dented and smeared with mud. Formation was loose. Movements were sluggish, as though they had just stumbled out of a defeat.

Lao Nanfeng's eyes gleamed.

"I know what he's going to do."

Zao Ying smiled faintly.

"Trick open the city gates?"

Lao Nanfeng grinned.

"Exactly. They're already wearing official armor. Tricking the gates open will be effortless."

At that moment—

A sentry atop the city wall spotted them.

The sentry drew his heavy bow and shouted sharply,

"Who goes there?!"

Chen Baihu raised his head, waved one hand, and yelled back loudly,

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot! We're allies—allies!"

He straightened his posture and bellowed,

"This general serves under General Wang Guoliang of Shanxi! My surname is Wu—Commander Wu! We encountered bandits in Caochuan County to the east and fought a battle. We won and came here to rest and recuperate!"

"Won?" the sentry thought instantly.

Bullshit.

Anyone with eyes could see they had been routed.

Only two hundred men remained, armor battered, morale in shambles. Clearly, their force had been scattered by bandits.

But claiming victory after a defeat?

That was textbook official-army behavior.

Even bandits wouldn't lie with that much righteous confidence.

The sentry's grip on his bowstring loosened slightly.

"In the middle of the night," he called down, "I can't just let you in."

Chen Baihu immediately erupted.

"Damn it! You bastard! I only have two hundred men—what are you so afraid of?!"

He pointed at the wall, roaring,

"Go get someone who isn't a coward! This is Hedong City, right? Where's the salt-tax official? Tell him to come talk to me!"

The sentry hurriedly sent someone to fetch him.

Not long after, the salt-tax official arrived.

The two Jin merchants, however, did not come with him.

The official had clearly dressed in a hurry—his robes were crooked, and the buttons weren't even fastened properly. He leaned over the parapet, squinting down into the darkness.

What he saw confirmed his assumptions.

Chen Baihu wore standard government armor—worn, mud-caked, and ugly. The two hundred soldiers behind him looked even worse, their armor ragged, their expressions exhausted.

Low-tier garrison unit, the salt-tax official concluded instantly.

The absolute bottom of the barrel.

And judging by their condition—they had just suffered a crushing defeat.

Even so, he had no intention of letting them into the city.

Letting unknown troops into the city at night?

That's asking for disaster.

He wasn't stupid.

"Commander Wu, is it?" he called down.

"I can allow you to rest beneath the city walls. After resting, you may leave. I cannot let people into the city at this hour."

Chen Baihu glared up and roared,

"Damn it! Why are you so wary of me?!"

He spread his arms.

"Do I look like a bandit trying to trick open your city gates? I only have two hundred men! Do you really need to be this cautious?"

If he had been timid, the official might have suspected a trap.

But his blatant irritation, vulgar curses, and arrogant self-importance made him sound exactly like a real officer.

The salt-tax official tried to placate him.

"Commander Wu, please understand—"

Suddenly—

From the darkness far to the east, shouts of battle erupted.

Torches flared.

Hundreds—no, thousands—of flickering lights surged forward.

Standing atop the wall, the salt-tax official's heart nearly stopped. The torches stretched across a wide front, clearly numbering in the thousands.

Chen Baihu glanced back.

His face drained of color.

"Damn it!" he screamed.

"The bandit army is here!"

The salt-tax official nearly jumped off the wall.

"Oh no! They really are coming!"

Chen Baihu shrieked,

"Open the gates! Quickly! Hurry! Are you trying to get me killed?!"

The salt-tax official panicked.

Total panic.

He was nothing more than a minor salt official. He had never fought a real battle in his life. His garrison soldiers were no better—their entire careers consisted of guarding this broken city and occasionally arresting a few salt smugglers.

The last time bandits attacked, they had relied entirely on Huang Yunfa's Manchu cavalry to drive them off.

But this time—

Wait... there are Jin merchants in the city, he thought desperately.

Their guards should be strong... right?

The city wall descended into chaos.

Chen Baihu roared again,

"Let me in! I'll help you defend the city!"

The salt-tax official's mind went completely blank.

He waved his hand frantically.

"Open the gates! Quickly! Let Commander Wu and his men in!"

The capstan began to turn.

With a long, grinding creak, the massive city gates slowly opened outward.

Chen Baihu and his two hundred men surged inside.

The moment they crossed the threshold—

They broke formation and sprinted straight toward the city wall, charging for the capstan that controlled the gate.

The salt-tax official's heart skipped.

A terrible realization hit him.

"No—this is bad!" he screamed.

"They're seizing the gate! Stop them! Stop them!"

Too late.

Chen Baihu smoothly drew his saber.

A cold, savage smile spread across his face.

"Hahaha!"

"Hedong City—"

"—is mine!"

He lunged forward. His saber flashed once.

The soldier operating the capstan collapsed.

The mechanism was seized.

The two hundred men instantly formed a tight defensive ring around it, long spears leveled, shields interlocked.

The salt-tax official, jolted awake by sheer terror, shrieked hysterically,

"Kill them! Kill them all! Close the city gates—quickly—!"

Chapter 598 I Don't Submit

At the south gate windlass of Hedong City, the night exploded.

Not metaphorically. Literally.

Hundreds of garrison soldiers burst out of their barracks like startled chickens, snatching weapons as they ran. Some hadn't even bothered with cotton armor, rushing out in thin cloth robes. A few were outright bare-chested, clearly believing enthusiasm could substitute for protection.

History would soon disagree.

On the windlass platform above the city gate, Chen Baihu's two hundred men had already locked themselves into position. The platform itself was pitifully small—barely large enough for a tea stall, let alone a battlefield—so most of Chen Baihu's men were deployed at the staircases and narrow passages leading up to it.

A cramped space.

A perfect space.

Guyuan border troops formed spear phalanxes on the stairways, long spears angled downward like a forest of iron fangs. Dozens of spearheads gleamed coldly, politely but firmly informing anyone below: You shall not pass.

The garrison soldiers looked up, swallowed, and unanimously decided that today was not a good day to die.

Bravery, after all, was something they had outsourced years ago.

An archer scrambled up the nearby watchtower, clearly hoping to farm some easy kills from above. Chen Baihu raised his right hand.

Thunk.

The low hum of a hand crossbow sounded almost gentle.

The archer toppled backward off the tower like a sack of rotten grain.

"Quick! Take them down!" the Salt Inspector shrieked, his voice hoarse and cracking. "They're holding the windlass! If we can't close the gate, more people will come in!"

For once in his life, the man had said something intelligent.

Far outside the city, thousands of torches burned in the night like a crawling sea of fire—belonging to the remaining four hundred-plus Guyuan border troops under Chen Baihu's command, sprinting toward Hedong City as if payday were waiting inside.

As long as the windlass stayed in Chen Baihu's hands, the city gate remained wide open—and once those four hundred arrived, they would flood in like overdue taxes.

Nominally, Hedong Circuit garrisoned a thousand government soldiers.

Nominally.

In reality, everyone knew the truth: six hundred men. The remaining four hundred existed only on payroll records, where they lived happy, productive lives contributing generously to the Salt Inspector's personal fortune.

Most officials who skimmed pay for four hundred phantom soldiers would at least use part of the money to maintain two hundred private guards—real fighters, meant to cover the obvious gap.

But not this Salt Inspector.

Hedong Circuit mostly handled salt transport and smuggling cases. No real wars. No real danger. Why waste money raising household guards when paperwork and bribes solved everything?

Stingy to the bone, he had fewer than fifty real elites by his side.

Chen Baihu, meanwhile, commanded over six hundred hardened border troops.

The contrast was... educational.

The garrison soldiers—normally fearless when bullying salt artisans or extorting smugglers—now faced real soldiers who had lived with death on the frontier. Their legs went soft. Their courage evaporated. None of them could muster the will to rush that narrow staircase bristling with spears.

Archers should have climbed both watchtowers to provide cover.

A few tried.

They died.

The rest took one look, hugged their bows like comfort blankets, and decided ground-level air was perfectly fine.

The windlass platform became a stalemate seesaw—Chen Baihu's men immovable, the Salt Inspector's men unwilling.

Outside the city, the sounds of killing thundered closer.

The Salt Inspector glanced out and saw the approaching sea of torches. Half his soul left his body on the spot; the other half was busy writing a will.

He roared, veins bulging:

"Where are Tian Shenglan and Zhai Tang?! Their guards are strong—send them here immediately!"

There was no need.

The two Jin merchants had already been jolted awake by the battle cries. Each gathered his guard detachment and sprinted toward the south gate.

From a distance, under the city wall's firelight, they clearly saw the scene: Ming military uniforms holding the windlass, Salt Inspector's men swarming uselessly below, accomplishing nothing except making noise.

The fighting wasn't fierce—not because both sides were restrained, but because one side was absolutely terrified.

Zhai Tang sneered.

"Brother Tian... should we get involved?"

Tian Shenglan smiled, slow and calculating.

"Get involved? Are you blind?" He pointed casually. "Those men guarding the windlass—tight formations, calm movements, killing without hesitation. That's a hardened army."

He paused, then added pleasantly,

"If I'm not mistaken, they're border troops who've gone rogue. They're holding the gate. Once it stays open long enough, tens of thousands of bandits will pour in."

Zhai Tang sucked in a breath.

"So this city—"

"Already a dead end," Tian Shenglan finished cheerfully. "Why die for a Salt Inspector who counts soldiers the way he counts silver?"

Zhai Tang nodded vigorously.

"Wise words."

Without another glance, the two Jin merchants wheeled around and sprinted for the north gate.

By then, the north gate was tightly shut. Ordinarily, the guards wouldn't dare open it.

Ordinarily.

Several silver ingots later, the gate creaked open as if it had always wanted to help.

The two Jin merchants rode out at full speed, not even bothering with a backward glance.

At the south gate, the Salt Inspector waited desperately for reinforcements.

Instead, a subordinate ran up, face pale.

"My lord—bad news! Tian Shenglan and Zhai Tang... they fled."

"Those damned sons of bitches!" the Salt Inspector cursed.

He wanted to flee too.

But he couldn't.

If he fought, there was still a sliver of hope. If he ran, the imperial court would eventually investigate—and his head would leave his shoulders in one clean, professional stroke.

Grinding his teeth, he roared again:

"Who's the nearest official who can send troops?!"

"Puzhou City," a subordinate answered. "Garrison Commander Xing Honglang."

The Salt Inspector's eyes lit up, then darkened.

"She's a salt smuggler... Damn it, never mind! Anyone who saves this official is a good person! Go—bring her here!"

The subordinate bowed enthusiastically.

Puzhou City is over a hundred and fifty li round trip, he thought happily. Plenty of time to disappear.

He mounted a horse, opened the west gate, and rode off—straight into freedom.

The fighting continued.

Chen Baihu's two hundred men held the windlass like nails driven into stone. Then, at last, the other four hundred arrived.

With earth-shaking battle cries, they surged through the wide-open gate.

The Salt Inspector's hundred defenders tried to block them.

They lasted exactly one charge.

Just one.

The border troops smashed through like a blade through rotten wood.

"Kill!"

"Kill the corrupt officials!"

"Seize the salt!"

"Give us back our military pay!"

"Let this salt repay what the court owes us!"

These men didn't need acting lessons. Years of unpaid wages, frozen nights, and broken promises fueled every shout.

Old grudges boiled over.

Chen Baihu raised his saber and pointed straight at the Salt Inspector.

"Brothers!" he roared. "How much have we suffered these years? Freezing on the frontier while these corrupt dogs feast in comfort! Damn it—I don't submit!"

Six hundred voices thundered back:

"Don't submit!"

"Chop him up!"

"Chop him up!"

"Hack him into mincemeat!"

The Guyuan border troops surged forward as one.

The Salt Inspector's world collapsed.

Chapter 599 Name Your Price

The Salt Commissioner panicked.

It was not the kind of panic that merely quickened the pulse, but the sort that shattered the mind entirely, leaving him hollow and shaking from the inside out.

More than six hundred fierce men were charging straight toward him, faces hard and eyes burning, while the city garrison troops scattered in all directions like startled rats, abandoning posts, trampling one another, fleeing wherever their legs would carry them. Faced with such a scene, how could he possibly hold out?

His fifty household guards were no better. Fear swallowed them whole. They clustered tightly around him, retreating step by step toward the official residence, hoping, desperately, to rely on its walls for one last stand.

But the residence walls were thin and low, decorative more than defensive, and before the hardened border troops, they might as well have been paper.

The soldiers surged forward without hesitation. Some formed human ladders, bracing themselves shoulder to shoulder. Others sprinted up, planted a foot on clasped hands, pushed off a comrade's shoulder, and vaulted cleanly over the wall in a single fluid motion. The breach was swift and merciless.

The Salt Commissioner retreated again and again.

From the outer courtyard, he fell back into the main hall, losing several more guards in the process. From there, he was driven into the inner courtyard, where another handful of loyal men died buying him seconds of life. Finally, he stumbled into the back garden, breath ragged, heart pounding like a drum about to burst.

In the rockery, he frantically pushed aside a slab of stone, revealing a concealed hatch. Beneath it lay a narrow underground passage. Taking only two trusted confidants, he slipped inside, slammed the hatch shut, and hurried through the tunnel until they reached a small, dim basement.

Inside the basement, someone was already waiting.

Tie Niaofei.

The moment the Salt Commissioner entered, Tie Niaofei lifted his head, and a strange, twisted smile spread across his face.

"Oh?" he said lightly. "So the rebels have broken through the city gates and rushed in? And the Jin merchants abandoned you instead of lending a hand? How does that feel? Satisfied?"

A chill crawled up the Salt Commissioner's spine. He forced himself to speak, though his voice trembled. "It's not strange that you guessed there were rebels outside. But how did you know they broke the gates? And how did you know the Jin merchants fled?"

Tie Niaofei only smiled wider.

The blood-stained Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidered on his chest also smiled.

That smile was so uncanny that the Salt Commissioner's scalp went numb, cold fear seeping straight down his back.

Tie Niaofei's voice grew softer, darker. "You're dead. The people outside will find this tunnel soon enough."

The Salt Commissioner straightened, clinging to defiance like a drowning man to driftwood. "Impossible. They'll assume I escaped through the back gate. They'll search the entire city and the outskirts, but they'll never think I'm still hiding in my own residence. They'll never find this basement."

"No," Tie Niaofei replied calmly. "They know you're still here. They know your distance and direction precisely. Finding this tunnel will be effortless."

The Salt Commissioner's heart slammed violently against his ribs. "How can you be so sure?"

Tie Niaofei laughed again, that same eerie laugh that made the air itself feel unclean.

Suddenly, the Salt Commissioner snapped, rage flaring through his terror. "What are you laughing at, you bastard? Even if I'm going to die, I can kill you first. You think you can still act proud in front of me?"

Tie Niaofei threw his head back and roared with laughter. "You're afraid. You're terrified."

The blood-stained Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest bared its teeth as well, laughing in perfect unison.

At first, the Salt Commissioner had thought it was only the fabric shifting. But this time, he saw it clearly. The embroidery was not moving with the cloth.

It was laughing.

The same sound came from Tie Niaofei's throat and from the Dao Xuan Tianzun at the same time.

The Salt Commissioner staggered back several steps, legs trembling uncontrollably. His two trusted guards were pale as paper.

"Boss," one of them whispered, voice shaking, "this Tie Niaofei isn't right. And that thing on his chest is even less right."

"Correct," the Dao Xuan Tianzun said, its voice deep and chilling, as though it rose from the depths of Yama's Underworld itself. "Would you like to see what lies beneath the Yellow Springs?"

The Salt Commissioner gasped. "Who... who's speaking?"

The two guards nearly collapsed. "It's... it's the embroidery..."

"Impossible," the Salt Commissioner stammered. "Absolutely impossible."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly. "Hehehe... hehehehe... come closer. It has been a long time since I tasted fresh human flesh. Come. Let me try a bite or two."

The two guards screamed and turned, bolting madly out of the basement.

The Salt Commissioner was driven half-mad by terror. He no longer dared remain there for even a breath and ran after them, stumbling wildly through the tunnel.

Outside there were rebels, yes, but even the fiercest rebel was preferable to a flesh-eating monster.

A blade would be quick. A monster would savor him piece by piece. Faced with that choice, death by steel was mercy.

The three of them burst toward the tunnel exit. The moment they shoved the hatch open and stuck their heads out, they froze.

A crowd stood there, surrounding the opening in a tight circle, staring down at them with wide, expectant eyes.

Just as Tie Niaofei had said, they had already found the entrance and were waiting, as if they had known all along that he would emerge here.

The Salt Commissioner opened his mouth. "I..."

He never finished the sentence.

Blades flashed in a chaotic blur. His two guards were cut down instantly, blood splashing across the stone. Only the Salt Commissioner was left standing, shaking.

Chen Baihu reached out, seized him by the collar, and lifted him up like a plucked bird.

"Spare my life!" the Salt Commissioner screamed. "Let's talk. Let's talk this through!"

Seeing that they had not killed him immediately, a sliver of hope flickered in his chest. Perhaps words could still save him.

Chen Baihu only laughed. "Come. Let me show you something."

He reached into his robes and produced a handkerchief, holding it up before the Salt Commissioner's eyes.

Embroidered upon it was a divine image identical to the one on Tie Niaofei's chest.

And worse still, that image was laughing too.

It bared its teeth at him, voice dripping with malice. "Come. Let me take a bite and see how you taste."

The Salt Commissioner let out a scream so shrill it cut through the din of battle outside.

Still holding him, Chen Baihu descended back into the tunnel and into the basement. There, he unlocked Tie Niaofei's shackles and placed a dagger into his hand.

Tie Niaofei stood before the Salt Commissioner, smiling faintly. "Now you understand who you shouldn't provoke, don't you?"

The Salt Commissioner collapsed, sobbing incoherently. "Good sir..."

Tie Niaofei interrupted him coldly. "Name your price. Name it properly, and I'll give you a clean death. Name it poorly, and I'll torture you for three days and three nights, cut you into a thousand pieces, and leave you begging for death without ever finding it."

The blood-stained Dao Xuan Tianzun grinned. "I will eat him for three days and three nights, gnawing away every scrap of flesh."

"Aaaah!" the Salt Commissioner screamed. "My money. It's all in the back garden, left wing room. Five steps east, four steps south from the window. Dig down. Everything is there. Everything. Please, don't eat me. Just kill me quickly."

Tie Niaofei nodded slowly. "That price will do."

His saber flashed.

With a wet, heavy sound, the blade cut cleanly through the Salt Commissioner's neck. Blood sprayed outward in a crimson arc.

When it was done, Tie Niaofei's strength finally gave out. After days of torture and starvation, his body could endure no more, and he collapsed backward.

Chen Baihu caught him in time and helped him outside.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun muttered in displeasure, "He died too easily."

Chen Baihu bowed. "This subordinate failed to capture the Jin merchants. I ask Dao Xuan Tianzun for punishment."

"It is not your fault," the Dao Xuan Tianzun replied. "We will deal with the Jin merchants later. For now, appease the people and prepare, as planned, to face Xing Honglang."

Chen Baihu answered firmly, "This subordinate obeys."

Chapter 600 Greed Beyond Measure?

The moment the war cries ripped through the night, fear seized Hedong City by the throat.

This wasn't some backwater hamlet with a few mud walls and a tavern. Hedong housed tens of thousands of souls. To be jolted awake at midnight by distant shouts of battle, to hear steel clashing from the southern quarter, and then—worst of all—to hear people screaming "The bandits have broken into the city!"...

That kind of news could stop a man's heart cold.

Doors across the city slammed shut one after another, bolts sliding into place from the inside. Windows were sealed. Lamps extinguished. No one dared step outside.

Behind those closed doors, countless families pressed their palms together, praying the imperial troops would hold the line, praying the city would survive the night.

But hope died quickly.

Before long, a new cry spread through the streets like wildfire:

"The Salt Inspector is dead!"

Under normal circumstances, that would have been cause for celebration. The man was universally loathed. If he'd dropped dead quietly in his bed, half the city would've set off firecrackers.

But tonight was different.

The official was dead—but the rebels were inside the city.

And so the people's joy never had the chance to bloom. Instead, dread took root. They braced themselves for what usually followed such chaos: doors kicked in, homes ransacked, women weeping, men beaten, savings stolen...

Yet the night passed.

Chaotic. Terrifying.

But strangely—bloodless.

At dawn, the city stirred.

From behind cracked windows, cautious eyes peeked out. A few braver souls slipped into the streets, hugging the walls, moving beneath the eaves, desperate to see what had become of their world.

Who held the city now?

Did the imperial banners still fly?

Or had Hedong truly fallen?

They found the answer in the marketplace.

There, mounted high for all to see, was the Salt Inspector's severed head.

It hung like the head of a common criminal—an indignity normally reserved for thieves and murderers, not high officials. The sight sent a shiver through the crowd.

Soon after, groups of rebels appeared on the streets.

They weren't charging or looting. Instead, each small squad carried an odd contraption—a cone-shaped tube hammered from sheet metal. Holding them to their mouths, they shouted as they walked:

"People of Hedong City, do not be afraid!

We are not bandits!

We were once imperial soldiers, forced into rebellion because the court failed to pay us!

We have taken what we needed from the Salt Inspector's estate!

We will not harm the common people!

Resume your lives as usual!"

Their voices echoed again and again.

They shouted it until their throats were hoarse.

They shouted it for hours.

Gradually, the people dared to believe.

Shop doors creaked open. Street vendors peeked out. Entire families gathered to watch from a safe distance.

Then they noticed something truly bizarre.

The rebels weren't looting the city at all.

They were... digging.

Inside the Salt Inspector's mansion, men worked like ants, shovels flashing, earth flying. Courtyards were torn up. Walls dismantled. Floors pried open.

As curiosity overwhelmed fear, crowds gathered openly to watch.

And then—

Gold.

Silver.

Jewels.

Chest after chest emerged from the ground.

Gasps rippled through the crowd.

How had this wealth been amassed? The people of Hedong knew the answer all too well.

The Salt Inspector had long sold salt illegally. He siphoned off government stores, colluded with smugglers, and sold excess salt quotas—far beyond what the law allowed—to Jin merchants across the border.

Everyone knew he was corrupt.

No one knew he was this corrupt.

Looking at the glittering mountain of wealth, the people finally understood: their imaginations had never stood a chance against an official's greed.

"Absolutely venal."

"Serves him right."

"Deserved it."

Chen Baihu waved his hand.

At once, more than six hundred soldiers stepped forward, stuffing gold, silver, and jewels into their pockets. They laughed as they did so, grins splitting their dust-covered faces.

"Hahaha! At last—we're collecting the military pay the court owes us!"

"So this is what being rich feels like!"

"I swear, I'm eating meat every day from now on!"

The Guyuan rebels laughed openly, but even as they looted, they whispered among themselves:

"Hey—don't actually take this home."

"Right. Discipline says: All captured spoils belong to the public."

"If you hide any, they'll send you back to the labor reform camp."

"...Forget that. That place is hell."

"Exactly. It's way more fun out here."

Before long, every man's pockets bulged obscenely.

Chen Baihu turned toward the watching crowd and laughed loudly.

"Alright! This old man has taken enough! We won't plunder you good people. Go on—live your lives."

The crowd dispersed in a low buzz of chatter.

Even as they walked away, they couldn't stop talking.

"That official was truly shameless. How could one man ever spend that much?"

"Robbed by rebels—karma."

"Too bad they didn't share any with us."

"They're rebels! The fact they didn't rob us is already heaven's mercy. And you still want a handout?"

"Hahaha—fair point."

And just like that, Hedong City returned to its routines—as if nothing had happened.

Meanwhile, in Puzhou.

A subordinate of the Salt Inspector rode through the night on a fast horse, whipping it forward relentlessly. Seventy li passed in a blur of exhaustion, dust, and panic.

He arrived before dawn.

At the city gate, he argued with the sentries at length, only to be told he'd have to wait. Puzhou Prefect Qiu Qianfan and Puzhou Commander Xing Honglang were still—according to the guards—"slowly getting out of bed."

By the time the subordinate was finally admitted, daylight had broken.

When Qiu Qianfan heard that neighboring Hedong City had fallen, his face drained of color.

Hedong was a Circuit—effectively a military district.

If even a military district had fallen, what chance did Puzhou, a mere administrative prefecture, have?

"This... this..." Qiu Qianfan stammered. "The rebels captured Hedong? Are they truly so powerful now?"

Xing Honglang, who knew the deeper truth, kept her expression solemn.

"The rebels grow stronger by the day," she said calmly. "Northern Shanxi is already in chaos. The Governor is stationed in Taiyuan, but nearly every surrounding city has fallen."

Qiu Qianfan swallowed hard. "Then... what should we do?"

Xing Honglang straightened, confidence radiating from her posture.

"Prefect Qiu, do not fear. With me here, Puzhou will remain stable. It will not fall into bandit hands."

Qiu Qianfan immediately clasped his hands. "With General Xing guarding the city, this official is fully at ease."

The two began discussing defenses as if the matter were settled.

The subordinate nearly wept.

"General Xing!" he burst out. "I beg you—send troops to rescue Hedong City!"

Xing Honglang raised an eyebrow.

"My duty is to defend Puzhou," she replied coolly. "Hedong is not under my jurisdiction. Leaving my post without orders would be a violation of military law."

The subordinate blurted out, "But didn't you reinforce Pingyang Prefecture last time? You traveled hundreds of li!"

Xing Honglang snorted.

"That was then. This is now. That time, Governor Song Tongyin issued a clear order for all nearby forces to assist. Only then did I move."

She paused, eyes cold.

"This time, there is no order—only you, asking me to abandon my post. I was once a rebel who surrendered. People already watch me closely. If civil officials impeach me for acting rashly, my career would be finished."

The subordinate fell silent.

Her reasoning was airtight.

Desperate, he turned to Qiu Qianfan.

The prefect pondered for a long moment, then sighed.

"General Xing," he said slowly, "Hedong is only seventy li away. With rebels so close, Puzhou is exposed. They could march here at any moment."

He bowed slightly.

"Please make the journey. As for the court—this official will write the memorial and bear the responsibility."