

Great Ming 621

Chapter 621: An Ancient Rebel Stronghold

Bai Yuan watched the approaching troops with a calm, measuring gaze, his expression unreadable.

Jiang Cheng sensed the chill in the air immediately. Afraid that Bai Yuan's temper might flare and complicate matters, he hurried forward first, forcing a conciliatory smile onto his face.

"Officer," he said politely, "these are all common folk displaced by the floods. They're merely sheltering here to escape the rising waters."

The leading officer's brows knit together, impatience written plainly on his face.

"Why are so many people gathered in one place?" he snapped. "Are you trying to stir up trouble?"

Jiang Cheng let out an awkward chuckle. "They have no choice. Food is only being distributed here, so naturally everyone has gathered."

He gestured toward Bai Yuan.

"This gentleman is Mr. Bai of Shaanxi, a well-known philanthropist. By coincidence, he passed near Luoyang. Seeing the people suffering, he couldn't bear it and personally organized a gruel distribution to relieve the disaster victims."

Although uncommon, it wasn't unheard of for wealthy gentry to distribute gruel during famine years.

Hearing this, the officers did not immediately doubt the story.

They looked toward Bai Yuan.

White robes. Clean and immaculate. His bearing was both elegant and aloof, carrying a faint but unmistakable sense of authority.

A flicker of unease passed through their eyes.

The leading officer clasped his hands and offered a stiff bow.

"So it's Mr. Bai from Shaanxi. Your reputation precedes you."

Bai Yuan snorted.

"My reputation precedes me? Rubbish. This is the first time you've ever heard my name, isn't it?"

The officer froze.

For a moment, he didn't know how to respond.

Just a little courtesy, and he's already acting so high and mighty...

Annoyance surged in the officer's heart—but the more arrogant Bai Yuan appeared, the less the officers dared to offend him. What if they had unknowingly provoked someone far above their station?

In the end, it was the officers who forced smiles onto their faces.

"Mr. Bai jests," the officer said hurriedly. "Ahem... we merely heard there was a large gathering here and came to investigate. Since Mr. Bai is present, we can be at ease..."

He turned, clearly intending to leave with his troops as quickly as possible. His plan was obvious: investigate Bai Yuan's background first, then decide how to deal with him later.

"Hold it."

Bai Yuan's voice was unhurried, yet it cut cleanly through the air.

The officer's steps faltered. He turned stiffly.

"Does Mr. Bai have further instructions?"

Bai Yuan spoke slowly, his tone meticulously polite—and unmistakably condescending.

"Mengjin County has been flooded for thousands of li. I wouldn't complain if I never saw soldiers rescuing people; after all, one could argue that relief work isn't your responsibility."

"But bandits are running rampant, looting villages and preying on the helpless."

He looked straight at the officer.

"As soldiers, eliminating bandits is your duty. So tell me—why haven't I seen any of you doing it?"

The pressure was immediate.

The officer's heart thudded violently. A terrifying thought surfaced in his mind:

Could this man be an imperial censor? Sent secretly by the Son of Heaven to inspect the provinces?

If such a person reported him to the capital, he wouldn't even know how he died.

That single possibility shattered the officer's bravado.

"Well... ahem..." he stammered, sweat beading on his brow. "As for those water bandits... we have been suppressing them. Very diligently, in fact."

"It's just that they're hiding in Xiaolangdi. The waterways there are extremely complex—countless inlets, countless hiding places. Bandits can disappear at any moment. We're... somewhat outmatched..."

Bai Yuan's face hardened.

"Excuses."

"I don't want to hear excuses. All I see are common people suffering at the hands of pirates. Their misery is unbearable to look at."

The harsher Bai Yuan became, the more the officer collapsed.

He didn't even dare raise his head. He clasped his hands tightly and bowed deeply.

"I will return at once, muster my troops, and proceed to Xiaolangdi to eliminate the bandits. I will give Mr. Bai a satisfactory result."

With that, he practically fled.

The detachment of soldiers vanished in moments.

Bai Yuan snorted coldly.

"A bunch of useless cowards."

Jiang Cheng lowered his voice. "Mr. Bai, you frightened him for now, but once he investigates and discovers you're not a high official, he may return with a far nastier attitude."

Bai Yuan nodded. Of course he understood.

He was completely unconcerned.

"If he dares cause trouble, I'll just put a bullet in him."

Jiang Cheng's heart skipped a beat.

He dares... shoot an official?

Bai Yuan abruptly changed the subject.

"This Xiaolangdi—what kind of place is it?"

Jiang Cheng blinked. "Why does Mr. Bai ask?"

Bai Yuan replied calmly, "Qichuan Ferry and Yongji Ferry are too small."

In truth, Li Daoxuan had long since recognized this problem.

Qichuan and Yongji were ancient docks—nothing more than widened coves along the riverbank. They were suitable for wooden boats, but hopelessly inadequate for the divine ships Li Daoxuan had placed into the box.

Just a few modern vessels were enough to pack those old docks to bursting.

Worse still, Li Daoxuan's gunboats carried over a dozen cannons. Leaving them exposed along open riverbanks was a serious security risk. Any merchant ship traveling north or south could spot them at a glance.

Li Daoxuan had already discussed this with Bai Yuan:

Civilian docks and military docks needed to be separated.

Now, hearing the officer mention that Xiaolangdi's waterways were intricate and ideal for hiding pirates, Bai Yuan's interest was immediately stirred.

Wouldn't such a place make the perfect concealed military harbor?

True, it was far from Gao Family Village.

But distance was a temporary concern.

Once Gao Family Village truly rose to dominate the land, this stretch of the Yellow River's middle reaches would become its strategic heart.

Planning ahead was not only acceptable—it was necessary.

Jiang Cheng quickly began explaining Xiaolangdi.

It turned out to be a notorious rebel stronghold in the central Yellow River region.

As early as the late Eastern Han, when the Yellow Turban Rebellion erupted, the rebels had chosen Xiaolangdi as their base. They built a fortress there, exploiting the tangled waterways to evade government suppression and plunder passing merchant ships.

Through successive dynasties, pirates had never truly been eradicated from the region.

When Jiang Cheng finished speaking, Bai Yuan was secretly delighted.

Li Daoxuan, listening through the connection, was equally pleased.

This place was perfect.

Gao Family Village's navy had already outgrown Qichuan Ferry. Expanding into new territory was inevitable, and an infamous pirate den was the ideal foundation for a fortified base.

Seize it from the pirates.

Turn it into a stronghold.

It would be even more convenient than when Xing Honglang first established her water fortress at Yongji.

Far away?

So what.

Yongji had been distant once, too—and hadn't it been managed just fine?

Moreover, the ten thousand flood victims gathered here could serve as the initial workforce for construction.

Everything aligned too neatly.

Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke through the connection:

"This plan is feasible."

Bai Yuan's eyes lit up.

"Even Dao Xuan Tianzun approves? Then I won't hesitate."

Jiang Cheng also smiled.

"If we build a water fortress here, won't it be quite close to my home?"

Bai Yuan laughed.

"Perfect. I remember you're skilled in sailing. Brother Jiang, when the time comes, help manage the water fortress."

Jiang Cheng nodded firmly.

"Count me in."

With the decision made, they spread out a map and examined it carefully.

Eagle Beak Mountain, with the ruins of the ancient Yellow Turban Fortress below it, stood out immediately as the optimal site.

Before construction, however—

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice turned cold.

"First, cleanse the pirates of Xiaolangdi. The one who escaped earlier must be found."

"He exploited disaster and brutalized the people."

"He will pay."

Chapter 622: Everyone Has Arrived

The military officer who had been frightened away by Bai Yuan did not give up.

After retreating, he immediately began asking around. He questioned anyone he could get his hands on, eventually tracking down several merchants who regularly did business at Qichuan Ferry.

This time, he actually obtained clear information.

The so-called Bai family of Shaanxi was nothing more than a local gentry household. Bai Yuan himself was merely a militia instructor, frequently active around Qichuan Ferry.

He was absolutely not an imperial censor.

The officer's face flushed red with fury.

"So that's how it is..." he snarled. "A mere local gentry dares lecture an imperial official? Is he courting death?"

He slammed his fist down.

"Just you wait. Just wait until I get back."

The officer gathered over a hundred government soldiers and once again set off toward the refugee camp at Hengshui Town.

Meanwhile—

Xiaolangdi. Eagle Beak Mountain. Yellow Turban Fortress.

This location, chosen by Bai Yuan and Jiang Cheng as the future naval base, happened—quite coincidentally—to be a favorite hideout of water bandits.

The bandit who had attacked the high slope earlier, known as Flipping Boat Dragon, was currently inside the ruined fortress, gathered with several other bandit leaders.

These men were all active in the Xiaolangdi region. Each commanded their own small fleet, ranging from dozens to several hundred men. They operated independently, rarely cooperating.

Flipping Boat Dragon laughed and said,

"Brothers, I've called you all here today because I've got a big opportunity to share."

The other leaders snorted.

"A big opportunity?"

"We heard you've been taking advantage of the floods, robbing stranded disaster victims around Mengjin."

"That kind of business is pocket change. Why bother calling us for that?"

Flipping Boat Dragon sneered.

"Heh. You're behind the times."

"Those disaster victims? They've all been rescued by a gentry lord. He's gathered them in Hengshui Town—and he's feeding them."

"If that's not a big opportunity, then what is?"

One of the duller-looking leaders scratched his head.

"How is that a big opportunity?"

Flipping Boat Dragon shot him an irritated look.

"Are you thick? He's feeding over ten thousand refugees. How much grain do you think that takes?"

"If we seize that grain, every one of our camps will be set for food and drink for at least a year."

The room went quiet.

Then realization struck everyone at once.

Right!

To feed over ten thousand people—what terrifying reserves that must be!

If they could pull this off, it would be a fortune beyond imagination.

Flipping Boat Dragon continued,

"I won't lie. That gentry lord isn't easy to deal with. His guards have at least a dozen flintlock firearms. I clashed with him once and still can't figure out how he pulled it off."

"I can't handle him alone. That's why I invited you all."

"We attack Hengshui Town together. Kill the gentry lord. Take his grain. Then we split it evenly. Grain for ten thousand people—everyone here gets a generous share."

These were men who had lived by the blade for years.

Not one of them hesitated.

Instead, they erupted into excited shouts.

"Good!"

"Then we storm Hengshui Town!"

"Butcher him!"

"What's there to fear?"

"With this many of us, how could we lose?"

Flipping Boat Dragon gave one last warning.

"His ships are large. His firearms are powerful."

The others laughed loudly.

"Like we've never fought armed merchants before!"

"Kill him!"

"Nothing to worry about!"

And so—

The plan was happily settled.

The straight-line land distance between Yellow Turban Fortress at Eagle Beak Mountain and Hengshui Town was only sixteen li.

But the water bandits would never travel by land.

They planned to sail north from Yellow Turban Fortress, enter the Yellow River, drift downstream into the Mengjin region, and then approach Hengshui Town from the water.

Originally, Hengshui Town was not located on the riverbank.

Under normal circumstances, water bandits would never have been able to attack it.

However—

After the Yellow River burst its banks, floodwaters spread for thousands of li. Hengshui Town, once several li from the river, now sat directly beside a vast expanse of yellow water.

To the east stretched a boundless floodplain. Isolated "islands" dotted the water, and occasionally the tip of a rooftop could be seen breaking the surface.

No one knew how many more days this catastrophe would last.

As dusk fell, over ten thousand refugees lit fires and prepared their evening meal.

Suddenly, a sentry aboard one of Gao Family Village's cargo ships shouted,

"Government ships incoming!"

"Oh?" Bai Yuan set down his rice bowl and stood up.

Looking east, he immediately spotted several government warships.

The lead vessel was a medium-sized ship, without cannons, equipped only with a ship tower—clearly designed for close combat, relying on arrows and boarding actions.

The remaining ships were all small skiff-like warboats.

At the prow of the lead ship stood the same military officer Bai Yuan had humiliated earlier, surrounded by soldiers. Altogether, there were over a hundred men.

They advanced toward Hengshui Town with obvious hostility.

Bai Yuan chuckled.

"Well, looks like that fellow is back to cause trouble."

Jiang Cheng lowered his voice.

"Mr. Bai, you're still smiling? This situation is serious."

Bai Yuan waved a hand.

"Serious? Hardly."

"If he talks politely, I'll talk politely. If he causes trouble, I'll teach him a lesson."

"We're not locals anyway. Beat them up and leave—who's going to stop us?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed softly through the connection.

"Heh. Well said."

Jiang Cheng nodded.

"Since Dao Xuan Tianzun agrees, then there's nothing to worry about."

The government warships drew closer, preparing to dock—

Only to find that the shoreline was completely occupied by Gao Family Village's large flat-bottomed cargo ships.

There was nowhere to dock.

The officer stamped his foot furiously.

"Move those cargo ships! Are you blind?"

The cargo ships, having received no orders from Bai Yuan, did not move an inch.

The warships circled repeatedly, unable to find a place to land.

The officer raged,

"This is rebellion! Outright rebellion!"

Just as Bai Yuan was about to signal the ships to move—

The sentry shouted again, his voice cracking.

"More ships!"

"So many ships!"

"Water bandits! It's water bandits!" another sentry yelled in panic.

"Over a hundred ships! They're coming!"

Bai Yuan looked toward the northeast and laughed softly.

Countless small boats swarmed across the yellow water like black ants.

The military officer, who had come to confront Bai Yuan, was instantly terrified. His mind went blank.

His soldiers—bullies to civilians, cowards in battle—immediately began rowing frantically, trying to flee.

But it was already too late.

The water bandits surged in from the east, sealing off the waterway completely.

At the front stood a fierce man on the prow of a ship—

Flipping Boat Dragon himself.

He threw his head back and laughed wildly, brazen and fearless.

Chapter 623: It's Our Turn

The water bandit leader Fan Zhoulong was brimming with arrogance.

Last time, he had come with only fifty-six men and had been scared off almost immediately by Bai Yuan.

But this time was different.

This time, he had summoned dozens of water bandit gangs from Xiaolangdi.

Over a hundred boats.

Nearly a thousand men.

Why would he fear a handful of spineless government soldiers armed with flintlock rifles?

Fan Zhoulong stood at the bow of his boat, saber raised high, pointing toward Hengshui Town. He threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"All the brave men of Xiaolangdi are here!"

"You dog-faced government soldiers—prepare to die!"

The water bandits answered him in thunderous cheers.

"What's so great about government soldiers?"

"This pathetic navy is nothing!"

"Brothers, today we'll wipe out the government soldiers too!"

Numbers bred confidence.

Confidence bred recklessness.

At this moment, the water bandits no longer even considered the government soldiers a threat.

"Charge!"

"Hack those dog-faced soldiers to pieces!"

"Plunder Hengshui Town clean!"

"Snatch a few wives to take back, hahahaha!"

The bandits surged forward in a violent tide, small boats swarming toward the few government warships.

The government military officer was scared out of his wits.

"Prepare for battle!" he roared, his voice cracking.

Dozens upon dozens of small boats closed in from all directions.

The government flagship was a medium-sized warship. Seen from above, the scene was absurd—like ants swarming a cockroach.

The government soldiers scrambled onto the ship's superstructure and began firing arrows downward in desperation.

But these were garrison troops.

Weak arms.

Light bows.

No training.

Their arrows flew crookedly, lacking force and accuracy. To the water bandits below, they were little more than a nuisance.

The bandits easily dodged or slapped the arrows aside as their boats drew closer.

Grappling hooks flew.

Ropes tightened.

Boarding began.

The government soldiers stabbed downward with long spears in blind panic.

The surface of the Yellow River instantly devolved into chaos—shouting, splashing, metal clashing against wood.

The refugees in Hengshui Town were terrified.

They understood one thing very clearly:

Once the government soldiers were defeated, the water bandits would turn on them.

Ten thousand refugees sounded like a lot, but against a thousand armed bandits?

They stood no chance.

The common people trembled.

Some young, able-bodied men grabbed wooden sticks.

Others even pushed small boats into the water, preparing to row out and help the government soldiers.

Many of these disaster victims had grown up along the Yellow River. They knew the water. They knew boats.

But before anyone could move—

Bai Yuan's voice rang out, calm and firm.

"Ordinary citizens, do not join the battle."

"We cannot distinguish you from water bandits. Accidental injury is inevitable."

"Remain on shore. Remain on shore."

The crowd murmured in confusion.

"Eh? You don't want our help?"

Bai Yuan stepped forward, his expression unruffled. The river wind tugged at his white robes, making him stand out sharply against the endless yellow floodwaters.

"Matters of war are handled by professionals," he said evenly.

"Ordinary people should focus on production and survival."

"This is called division of labor."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has said: division of labor brings higher efficiency."

"Do not try to do everything yourselves."

A family retainer beside him muttered under his breath,

"Our master himself wishes he could master all Six Arts..."

Bai Yuan: "..."

Yet strangely, his composure steadied the crowd.

Facing such a terrifying force of bandits, he showed no panic at all.

As the saying went—those who know what they're doing are never afraid.

The common people felt their hearts lift, just a little.

But when they looked again—

The government soldiers were finished.

The hundred-plus troops were overwhelmed and slaughtered. Their flagship was seized, falling entirely into bandit hands.

The officer who had been shouting moments ago was now dead, his head impaled high atop a long spear.

The water bandits roared in triumph.

Then, their gazes shifted—slowly, greedily—back toward Hengshui Town.

Bai Yuan raised his hand.

"Gao Family Village navy," he said calmly, "attack."

In truth, the command was almost unnecessary.

The militia had already boarded their ships the moment the government soldiers and bandits clashed. Only Bai Yuan himself still stood on shore.

He didn't bother boarding.

In naval combat, shouting orders mattered less than preparation. Better to let trained crews fight.

The flat-bottomed cargo ships of Gao Family Village surged forward.

They had no proper warships.

They fought with cargo ships.

But it was enough.

After all, the enemy had no real warships either—just countless small sampans.

The instant the Gao Family Village ships moved, Fan Zhoulong's eyes lit up.

"That ship!" he roared.

"That's the one that bullied me last time!"

"The real masters are here—kill them!"

A bandit leader nearby stared at the approaching vessel, puzzled.

"That ship has no sails. No oars. Just a flat hull... how is it moving?"

To men who lived their entire lives on the water, this was deeply unsettling.

The bandits hesitated, staring.

"What are you idiots staring at?!" Fan Zhoulong screamed.

"They're charging us! We charge them back and cut them down!"

"Attack!"

"Ah—right!"

The bandits howled and paddled furiously toward the flat-bottomed ships.

Though still some distance away, the Gao Family Village militia had already raised their flintlock rifles.

"Bang!"

A water bandit, saber raised mid-swing, was struck and toppled into the muddy river.

"They've got flintlock rifles!" someone shouted.

Fan Zhoulong cursed loudly.

"I told you bastards they had flintlock rifles! Be careful!"

This wasn't unfamiliar territory. The bandits had fought government troops before.

They knew the trick.

Flatten down.

They lay as low as possible in their boats, practically hugging the planks, paddling at an angle. Their speed remained high, but their targets shrank drastically.

This made accurate shooting difficult.

But that wasn't a problem.

If rifles were troublesome—

They still had hand grenades.

A militia soldier pulled a grenade from his pouch and lit the fuse. The burning cord hissed softly as he fixed his eyes on a boat charging straight toward him.

A nearby comrade laughed.

"Aim well! This isn't land—miss, and it sinks straight to the bottom!"

The thrower stiffened.

"Oh—damn it! He's right!"

His heart wavered for a split second.

The grenade left his hand—

Just slightly off.

It arced through the air, splashed into the river, and vanished beneath the surface.

Missed.

Chapter 624: Even Dao Xuan Tianzun Fell Silent

The pirates burst into raucous laughter the instant they saw the object arcing toward them.

"They're throwing rocks at us!"

"Hahahaha!"

"Can't hit us with their flintlock rifles anymore, so now they're hurling stones?"

"And they didn't even pick a big one!"

Mockery rolled across the river in waves, the sound growing more brazen by the breath. In their eyes, the militia had clearly run out of tricks, reduced to desperate, laughable gestures.

Yet at that very moment, another militia soldier calmly stepped forward and produced another hand grenade.

This one was different.

He was the bronze medalist of the Gao Family Village First Militia Games throwing competition.

In those games, Gao Chuwu had taken gold, Zheng Daniu silver, and this man had come in third.

Ordinarily, a bronze medal might sound unremarkable. But in Gao Family Village, earning bronze was equivalent to an ordinary person winning gold, because the two men above him were not human by any reasonable standard. They were monsters.

The bronze medalist lit the fuse with practiced ease, weighed the grenade lightly in his palm, and laughed loudly at the brother who had thrown the previous one off target.

"Watch carefully," he shouted. "I'll show you how to throw a hand grenade properly."

His right arm swung forward in a smooth, unhurried motion.

The grenade, fuse spitting bright sparks, soared through the air in a perfect arc. It was not merely thrown far, but thrown with calculation, its trajectory subtly adjusted for the forward momentum of the pirate ship itself.

Precise. Flawless.

It landed squarely inside the lead pirate vessel.

The five pirates aboard were still roaring with laughter.

"Hahaha, they threw a little rock and still missed!"

"Brother, why is this rock on fire?"

"Is that... a fuse?"

The grenade answered their foolish yet strangely innocent questions with a thunderous explosion.

"Boom!"

All five pirates were blasted clean off the boat, their bodies flung outward like broken dolls before splashing heavily into the dark river.

The sudden reversal stunned every pirate nearby.

Someone screamed, voice cracking with terror, "The rocks they're throwing explode!"

"Bloody hell, what kind of devilry is that?!"

"It's gunpowder, gunpowder charges!"

"How can something like this even exist?!"

"Another one is coming!"

Yet another militia soldier hurled a hand grenade with its fuse already burning.

Splash.

It landed directly on another pirate boat.

The six pirates aboard shrieked in panic.

One man lunged forward, grabbing the grenade with the desperate hope of flinging it into the river before the fuse burned down. His fingers had barely closed around it when the fuse reached its end.

"Boom!"

His palm vanished in a spray of blood and fragments. Shrapnel tore into his chest, and the five pirates beside him were struck at the same time. In the space of a heartbeat, the entire boat fell silent, its occupants sent straight to the Yellow Springs.

"Waaah! Waaah! Waaah!"

The pirates screamed in complete disorder. "What kind of demonic weapons are they using?!"

Even Boat Flipper Dragon, their leader, was shaken. Faced with weapons utterly beyond his understanding, his mind went blank for several dozen breaths. Only then did he roar, forcing himself to think.

"Get closer! Close in and board them! They can't blow up their own ships!"

At this point, it was the only tactic left to them.

The pirate boats paddled frantically, men rowing as if their lives depended on it, desperate to shorten the distance.

Only then did they realize something even more horrifying.

The massive flat-bottomed cargo boats were charging toward them at full speed.

"A head-on collision? What's there to be afraid of?!"

Small boats normally feared crashing head-on into large vessels. In such encounters, they relied on agility, first pulling away sideways, then circling around to attack from the flanks.

The pirates instinctively tried to veer off laterally.

But something was terribly wrong.

The medium-sized flat-bottomed boat before them was astonishingly fast, faster even than their small sampans paddling with all their strength.

So fast that the pirate boats did not even have the chance to pull away.

"It's going to ram us!"

"Watch out!"

The pirates screamed in terror.

A deafening crunch rang out as one small boat was smashed aside and capsized.

Five of the six pirates aboard were hurled straight into the river. Only one, the most agile among them, standing at the bow, leapt forward with all his might and actually managed to land on the flat-bottomed boat.

His bravery achieved nothing.

Before his feet could properly touch the deck, five bayonets plunged into him at the same time. They were withdrawn just as cleanly, and his lifeless body was kicked back into the river without a second glance.

This fate was not unique.

Several pirate boats that attempted head-on engagements were struck down in much the same way, capsized or sent spinning helplessly across the water. The militia soldiers aboard the cargo boats seized each opening with ruthless efficiency, erasing the pirates in the blink of an eye.

"From the sides!"

"Approach from the flanks!"

"Throw grappling hooks!"

The pirate boats tried to swarm from both sides, grappling hooks flying through the air. But the flanks of the flat-bottomed boats were killing grounds for flintlock riflemen.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

A volley rang out, and pirates fell in clusters. Those throwing grappling hooks had exposed half their bodies, and they caught the worst of it, riddled with lead like fishing nets full of holes.

A militia soldier stepped forward and slashed downward, severing the rope of a grappling hook. The pirate boat attached to it drifted away helplessly, its boarding attempt cut short.

"Fire arrows! Torches!" Boat Flipper Dragon bellowed. "Burn their strange boats!"

The pirates had prepared such weapons in advance. Arrows wrapped with oil-soaked rags, meant to cling to a ship's hull and ignite it, along with burning torches meant to be thrown aboard.

They unleashed everything at once.

Yet almost immediately, they sensed that something was wrong.

On the flat-bottomed boats, a group of men was not fighting at all.

They were firefighting.

Wherever a fire arrow struck and flames sprang up, these men appeared at once, stamping it out or dousing it within moments. Once the fire was extinguished, they retreated calmly, eyes already scanning for the next spark.

Such discipline was unheard of.

The pirates collectively sucked in a sharp breath. "Who in the heavens are these people?"

They had fought armed merchant ships and government troops for years, yet they had never encountered an enemy so composed, so methodical, and so utterly unstoppable. Against this force, they were completely helpless.

The few flat-bottomed boats cut through hundreds of pirate sampans like a blade through reeds, charging in and out again and again, just like Zhao Zilong at Changban, until the pirates were beaten so badly that their screams filled the river.

On the bank of Hengshui Town, Bai Yuan watched the battle unfold, his expression complicated.

"Oh dear," he muttered. "I haven't even given a single order, and they've already fought like this. Could it be that our fleet no longer needs a naval commander at all?"

From the golden image of Dao Xuan Tianzun hanging on his chest came a soft chuckle. "The better the training in peacetime, the clearer soldiers are about what to do in battle, and the less they rely on commanders. In the end, the role of captain becomes more like a mascot."

Bai Yuan blinked. "Huh?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued calmly, "So from now on, when choosing admirals and captains, simply pick the prettiest handsome men and the most beautiful women."

Bai Yuan's eyes lit up instantly. "Then there's no problem at all," he said happily. "I fit the criteria perfectly!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun fell silent.

Standing beside them, Jiang Cheng quietly wiped a bead of cold sweat from his forehead and thought to himself, Mister Bai actually managed to leave even Dao Xuan Tianzun speechless.

Chapter 625: We're Going to Raid the Pirate Stronghold

The pirates, as it turned out, were extremely loyal to their ancestral craft.

They were far better at running away than fighting.

The moment their courage collapsed, the smaller pirate boats scattered like a flock of startled birds. Hundreds of sampans fled eastward in a chaotic rush, disappearing into the vast yellow waters of the flooded Yellow River in the blink of an eye.

The Gao Family Village flat-bottomed ships were few in number. There was no way to pursue everyone.

So they chose wisely.

They locked onto one single target.

The pirate flagship.

That ship had once been an imperial warship—medium-sized, sturdy, freshly seized from the government forces. Fan Zhoulong had barely had time to enjoy his brief fantasy of being a "grand naval commander" before he saw a flat-bottomed cargo ship pivot, align, and charge straight toward him at terrifying speed.

Fan Zhoulong nearly screamed himself hoarse.

"Don't come over here!"

A subordinate beside him howled in panic, "Boss! Abandon ship! Take a small boat and run!"

That shout snapped Fan Zhoulong back to reality.

This warship was too big.

Too conspicuous.

Too slow.

It was impossible to escape in it.

Without hesitation, he abandoned the vessel, leaping onto a nearby skiff and rowing like a madman, face pale, posture pathetic. As he fled, he watched helplessly as the flat-bottomed ship slid up beside the abandoned warship and reclaimed it with effortless ease.

Fan Zhoulong could only grind his teeth and curse under his breath as he vanished into the distance.

Not long after, the river surface grew calm again.

The pirates had come like a storm—and vanished just as suddenly, leaving no trace behind.

The flat-bottomed ships of Gao Family Village slowly returned to shore, towing the recovered warship and hauling back a large number of captured sampans.

The moment they docked, Hengshui Town exploded into cheers.

"So powerful!"

"Master Bai's men are unbelievable!"

"They beat the pirates!"

"Those beasts finally got what they deserved!"

"Those scoundrels robbed me on that island a few days ago—took everything I had!"

"They violated the Zhang family's daughter and slaughtered her whole household!"

"My daughter..."

"My daughter's vengeance... does this count as revenge?"

Joy and grief mixed together.

There was relief—because the pirates had been driven off.

And sorrow—because the dead would never come back.

From the golden image resting against Bai Yuan's chest came a quiet sigh.

Even Dao Xuan Tianzun was moved.

"Bai Yuan," he said softly, "take this chance. Bring the common folk with us. Have them help build a water stronghold."

Bai Yuan's eyes lit up.

"Understood."

He stepped forward, climbed onto a high rooftop overlooking the refugee camp, pulled out a tin megaphone, and raised it to his lips.

"Ahem... hello? Hello? Can you hear me?"

For reasons unknown, those words were always spoken first into a megaphone.

The refugee camp answered in unison.

"We can hear you!"

Bai Yuan raised one hand.

The entire crowd fell silent.

Between the porridge that had saved their lives and the battle that had driven off the pirates, Bai Yuan had already earned their trust twice over. At this moment, not a single person dared speak while he stood there.

Bai Yuan spoke loudly.

"My friends, that group of pirates just now—did they rob you of everything you had?"

"Yes!"

"Those bastards!"

"I wish I could eat their flesh!"

"A pack of shameless thieves!"

Anger surged like a tide.

Bai Yuan raised both hands. It took some effort before the noise died down.

He continued calmly.

"Your homes have been swallowed by the Yellow River. No one knows when the floodwaters will recede. And even if they do, your land will not be usable for a very long time."

The crowd fell silent again.

They all knew this was true.

Once land was submerged by the Yellow River, it became part of the dreaded Yellow Flood Zone. The soil would be ruined. Crops wouldn't grow. Plagues would follow.

Worse still—when the Yellow River abandoned its channel, it became a river without bounds.

A wandering water dragon.

It would roam the plains at will.

Which meant the flood zone itself would keep shifting.

For years to come, returning home would be impossible.

Bai Yuan asked quietly, "No homes. No money. How will you live from now on?"

No one answered.

Not a single person.

Bai Yuan nodded.

"I have a solution."

Heads lifted instantly.

Eyes filled with desperate hope locked onto him.

"The pirates took your money," Bai Yuan said evenly.

"So why don't you take it back?"

The crowd stirred.

"We'll seize their water stronghold," he continued.

"And then—we'll live there ourselves."

"Wouldn't that be a fine life?"

Murmurs rippled through the refugees.

"That... actually makes sense."

"That's right! They stole my money—it's only right I take it back!"

"Once the pirates are gone, their stronghold will be empty. We'll have homes again!"

"But how will we live after that?"

"We can fish."

"I don't know how."

"Neither do I—but we can learn."

"There's no farmland left anyway."

"The Yellow Flood Zone won't support crops for years."

"And even then, the officials will still come to collect taxes!"

The discussion grew heated.

Bai Yuan smiled faintly.

"Don't forget," he said, "I'm here."

"I'll help you settle down in the water stronghold."

Then he asked clearly:

"How many of you are willing to follow me to Xiaolangdi—to the pirate stronghold?"

"I am!"

"Our whole family will go!"

"I'll go too!"

At first, only a handful stepped forward.

Then more.

Once over half the crowd agreed, momentum took over. Those who hesitated found themselves swept along, unwilling to be left behind.

In truth...

This was coercion.

What Bai Yuan was doing resembled the tactics of roving bandits.

But the difference lay in intent.

Bandits forced people into becoming tools.

Li Daoxuan forced them to survive.

Bai Yuan announced,

"Tonight, rest well."

"Tomorrow morning, eat your fill."

"We'll march by land to Eagle Beak Mountain—"

"And seize the pirates' Yellow Turban Fortress!"

"Good!"

"Let's wipe out those thieves!"

"We're attacking a pirate stronghold—why does that sound so exciting?!"

"I won't be able to sleep tonight! I'll bring my hoe!"

"My hoe's gone—flood took it. I'll grab a stick instead!"

Hearing this, Bai Yuan burst out laughing, half amused, half exasperated.

"What are you all excited for?" he said helplessly.

"My men will handle the fighting."

"You just need to cheer from behind."

"There's no need for you to fight at all."

Chapter 626: Both Land and Water Routes Are Blocked

The next morning, after everyone had eaten their fill, Bai Yuan set out.

Back in Bai Family Fortress, he had once served as a militia instructor. Organizing people—especially large crowds—was something he was exceptionally good at.

He immediately split the Gao Family Village militia into two detachments.

One half boarded the flat-bottomed boats, sailing north into the Yellow River, then circling along the waterway toward Xiaolangdi, aiming for the base of Eagle's Beak Mountain.

The other half marched on land alongside the refugees, leading more than ten thousand displaced people straight toward Eagle's Beak Mountain on foot.

In straight-line distance, Hengshui Town was only a dozen or so li from Eagle's Beak Mountain.

But there were no official roads.

Only barren hills, tangled brush, ravines, and wild terrain.

Travel was exhausting.

Fortunately, the Gao Family Village militia took the lead—cutting through undergrowth, chopping paths through hillsides, building makeshift bridges over streams. They quite literally carved a road out of the wilderness so the common folk behind them could pass.

The vast procession moved steadily forward, stretching endlessly across the land.

Eagle's Beak Mountain was surrounded by water on three sides—east, north, and west—forming a massive peninsula with an area of over five hundred hectares.

Its coastline twisted and turned, dotted with countless bays and small headlands. To the north, within the Yellow River itself, lay Danzhuyu Island, creating a naturally complex, maze-like waterway.

Halfway up Eagle's Beak Mountain, deep within dense forest, sat a concealed stronghold.

The Yellow Turban Fortress.

It had first been built by Yellow Turban rebels in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, destroyed by government forces, rebuilt by later bandits, destroyed again, and rebuilt yet again.

As long as river pirates existed, Yellow Turban Fortress would never truly vanish.

The pirate currently occupying it was none other than Capsizing Dragon—the same man who had clashed with Bai Yuan twice and been beaten senseless both times.

Among the Xiaolangdi bandits, he was the strongest.

He controlled the prime location of Yellow Turban Fortress and commanded more than two hundred pirate soldiers.

Normally, he split his forces: half guarded the fortress while the rest roamed the river, robbing merchant ships, fishermen, and riverside villages.

With the Yellow River flooding and spreading in all directions, his hunting grounds had expanded enormously.

This morning, Capsizing Dragon had just awakened.

He sat on a tiger-skin chair, his expression dark and ugly.

Two consecutive defeats had crushed his prestige among the Xiaolangdi pirates.

After yesterday's retreat, several pirate chiefs had openly sneered at him. Their disdain wasn't even hidden.

Capsizing Dragon knew very well what that meant.

The next time those men gathered, they might not recognize him as leader at all.

They might even band together, storm Yellow Turban Fortress, and seize his position outright.

The thought made his molars ache with hatred.

And all of it—

All of it—

Was Bai Yuan's fault.

As he brooded, plotting revenge, a subordinate hurried in.

"Boss! Bad news! Those strange flat-bottomed boats have reached Xiaolangdi. They're circling this area, like they're searching for something."

Capsizing Dragon sneered.

"Looking for me?" he said contemptuously.

"Hah! Do they think we're that easy to find?"

"How many times have government troops searched this place?" he continued.

"Did they ever find us?"

"Even if they do stumble upon the fortress, we'll just abandon it, hide in the mountains nearby, and rebuild once they leave."

His subordinates laughed loudly.

Indeed—when had the Xiaolangdi pirates ever feared government patrols?

A few boats meant nothing.

They walked out, calmly covering the fortress walls with branches and leaves, restoring the camouflage.

From the river, visibility was limited. From afar, it would look like nothing more than dense woodland.

Soon, a flat-bottomed cargo ship passed along the shoreline below.

Gao Family Village militia stood on deck, scanning the mountainside carefully.

Just as the pirates expected—

They saw nothing.

Capsizing Dragon snorted coldly.

"The government is blind, but we see everything," he said smugly.

"This is called 'the enemy is in the light, I am in the dark.' We're unbeatable."

The pirates burst into laughter.

"Boss even knows idioms!"

Capsizing Dragon puffed out his chest.

"So what if I do? I'm a hundred times better than those pedantic scholars who only know how to quote them!"

Somewhere far away—

"Achoo!"

San Shier, back in Gao Family Village, sneezed violently.

"Huh?" he muttered. "Who's talking about me? Am I that popular?"

The flat-bottomed ship sailed off.

The pirates felt no pressure at all.

Before long, another flat-bottomed ship appeared, again searching the shoreline. This time, it didn't take long before they found several small sampans hidden among the reeds at the foot of the mountain.

The militia cheerfully towed them away.

The pirates exploded in anger.

"Boss! Those bastards are stealing our boats!"

Capsizing Dragon waved dismissively.

"Don't panic. Just a few boats. Losing them doesn't matter—we can always build more."

"As long as the fortress isn't discovered, we're safe."

The flat-bottomed ship soon left again.

Once more, Yellow Turban Fortress remained undiscovered.

Capsizing Dragon was feeling quite pleased with himself.

"The test of endurance has begun," he said smugly.

"Let's see how many days they keep searching. They can't look forever."

He was still savoring his confidence—

When a subordinate suddenly screamed.

"Boss! Look—look at the land!"

Capsizing Dragon turned his head.

And froze.

At the southeastern foot of Eagle's Beak Mountain, a vast sea of people had appeared.

Ten thousand.

More than ten thousand.

A surging mass of common folk, climbing the mountain like an unstoppable tide.

Capsizing Dragon sucked in a sharp breath.

"What... what the hell is this?"

"They're the refugees we robbed before!"

"It's the people from Hengshui Town!"

"Damn it—why are they here?!"

"They're helping that man in white search the mountain!"

Capsizing Dragon's face turned pitch black.

This—

This was truly disastrous.

Government troops weren't frightening. Even if they found the fortress, they lacked the manpower to wipe everyone out.

But ten thousand civilians?

If they spread out, climbed from all directions—

Discovery was only a matter of time.

Capsizing Dragon finally understood what it meant to enrage the masses.

What government soldiers couldn't do—

The common folk could accomplish with terrifying efficiency.

Both land and water were sealed.

There was nowhere left to run.

"This is bad," Capsizing Dragon said hoarsely.

"We must retreat."

His subordinates panicked.

"By land or by water?"

Capsizing Dragon looked toward the river—flat-bottomed ships still patrolled slowly.

Then he turned toward the mountain—where ten thousand people climbed relentlessly.

In that instant, his confidence collapsed completely.

"By water!" he barked.

"On land, they've got half their troops and ten thousand people. Our two hundred men can't fight that."

"Going by water... there's still a slim chance!"

A subordinate cried out, "Boss! We don't have enough boats for all two hundred brothers!"

Capsizing Dragon clenched his teeth.

"Then—then go by land!"

Orders contradicted orders.

Even the chief had begun to panic.

The Yellow Turban Fortress—

Once untouchable—

Was now a trap.

Chapter 627: There's a Monster Here

Ten thousand common folk spread out across the mountainside like an enormous net.

Someone suddenly shouted, "Look! Footprints here!"

"Yeah—someone's been walking this way a lot."

"Oh? I found a mushroom. Looks edible."

"Hey, focus! We're here to hunt bandits and get our things back. Why are you picking mushrooms?"

"But... the mushroom really is edible."

"Enough nonsense. Look at the ground—this path's been trampled flat."

"Only bandits would use a trail like this. Regular people wouldn't climb the mountain this way."

Excitement rippled through the crowd.

Members of the Gao Family Village Militia were immediately called over. With the militia soldiers taking point and the commoners following behind, they advanced up the mountain along the well-worn trail.

At the same time, every other path that the river bandits had used over the years was seized—blocked and occupied by militia and civilians working together.

All roads lead to Rome.

And every path on this mountain led straight to the Yellow Turban Fortress.

From halfway up the mountain, Capsizing Dragon looked down.

His whole body went cold.

"Not a single escape route..."

"They're sealing us in completely?"

"Damn it all!"

Fierce determination surged up his spine. He grabbed his blade and roared, "Brothers! Follow me! We charge down the mountain and carve out a path with blood!"

A cornered dog would leap a wall.

Cornered river bandits were far more terrifying.

Capsizing Dragon led over two hundred bandits in a wild charge down the slope.

They had the advantage of high ground, momentum, and desperation—

—but the Gao Family Village Militia on land was even more terrifying than on water.

Hand grenades were made for terrain like this.

On the river, a bad throw meant the bomb sank uselessly.

On land, even a crooked toss could still kill.

Militia soldiers swung their arms and hurled grenades uphill.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Explosions ripped through the charging bandits. Bodies flew, screams tore through the smoke. Those who survived the blasts stumbled forward—only to be cut down by disciplined volleys of flintlock fire.

Even if the bandits had held a numerical advantage, they would still have been slaughtered.

Now, they didn't even have that.

When the main bandit force collapsed, leaving only a handful of trembling men clutching their blades, the commoners finally found their courage.

With a unified roar, ten thousand people surged forward.

The scene that followed was simple and brutal.

Ten thousand beating down a few dozen.

No one could survive it.

Capsizing Dragon still gripped his waist-saber, trying to fight back—but a dozen clubs struck him at once. His blade never had a chance to rise. He was smashed to the ground, and in the next breath, blows rained down like hail, shattering bone after bone.

Li Daoxuan had never intended to send these scoundrels to labor reform.

The moment they took advantage of the flood to rob isolated disaster victims, their fate had already been sealed.

Death was the only verdict.

The chaos on Eagle Beak Mountain lasted a long time.

River bandits hiding in distant river forts and mountain dens were terrified out of their wits and dared not approach.

More than an hour later, the mountain finally fell quiet.

The commoners flooded into the Yellow Turban Fortress.

As expected, there was gold, silver, and valuables inside—but not much.

The disaster victims had already been desperately poor. Most families had lost only a few taels of silver or a handful of copper coins. Piled together in the bandit storehouse, the loot looked pitiful—nowhere near enough to support over ten thousand mouths.

Slowly, the crowd turned to Bai Yuan again.

Hopeful.

Uneasy.

Almost pleading.

Bai Yuan smiled and raised his tin megaphone.

"Fellow villagers, don't worry. The silver here really is limited—it's not enough to divide fairly. So..."

He paused.

"I will distribute additional silver myself."

"Oh?" the crowd exclaimed.

"First," Bai Yuan said, "each person will receive three taels of silver as resettlement money."

The mountain exploded with cheers.

Then Bai Yuan raised a hand.

"However," he continued, "we're deep in the mountains, far from towns. What use is silver if you can't buy food? Grain is what truly keeps people alive."

The crowd murmured uncertainly.

"So," Bai Yuan declared, "I'll exchange that silver for an equal value of rice and flour, and distribute it to everyone."

"Good!"

"Wonderful!"

"Long live!"

The cheers rolled like thunder.

"Next," Bai Yuan went on, "we'll start building our new home. This bandit fortress must become a place fit for living—strong, warm, and secure. A place where river bandits, mountain bandits, government troops, or wandering rebels will never dare bully you again."

With that opening, Bai Yuan launched into the familiar Gao Family Village routine.

Work assignments.

Pay rates.

Food rations.

In a disaster-stricken late Ming world, this system was irresistible.

The moment it was announced, ten thousand people erupted in joy.

Bai Yuan stepped down, moved aside, and quietly spoke to the small avatar on his chest.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, this place is temporarily settled."

Dao Xuan Tianzun let out a soft sigh. "Too early. As I said yesterday, the Yellow River has lost its course. It can sweep across the Henan plains at any moment. The disaster won't stop here—more regions will suffer, and more people will be pushed to the brink."

Bai Yuan nodded. "Understood. We must rescue as many disaster victims as possible and bring them here. But Eagle Beak Mountain alone..."

"Is not enough," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied. "There are many mountains near Xiaolangdi—Grindstone Mountain, Winnowing Basket Hollow, Ancestor Mountain. We will wipe out every river bandit in the region, seize their strongholds, settle the people, and build docks."

Bai Yuan answered without hesitation, "As you command."

— —

Meanwhile...

In northern Shanxi, outside Daizhou City, deep within a forest.

Tie Niaofei, Zao Ying, and Zheng Daniu lay hidden in dense undergrowth, watching the city walls from afar.

"I had my salt-smuggling brothers investigate," Tie Niaofei whispered. "Tian Shenglan is inside Daizhou."

Zao Ying nodded. "What about Zhai Tang?"

"Still nothing," Tie Niaofei replied. "That one's slippery."

Zheng Daniu grinned. "Then why not charge in, kill Tian Shenglan, grab his money, and leave? We're dressed as wandering rebels anyway—no one would trace it back to us."

"Absolutely not," Zao Ying cut in.

He lowered his voice. "You haven't read the court reports. There's a monster in Daizhou—terrifying in battle. The Chuang King and the Chuang General led a joint force and were beaten back by his personal guard. We only have a few hundred cavalry. We can't chew a bone that hard."

Zheng Daniu blinked. "Who's that scary?"

"Sun Chuanting," Zao Ying said. "A civil official who was supposedly just staying at home."

Zheng Daniu scratched his head. "Why are court civil officials always monsters on the battlefield?"

Zao Ying and Tie Niaofei shrugged together. "Who knows?"

At that moment, the small avatar on Tie Niaofei's chest stirred.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice sounded calmly:

"Oh? It's been a while since I checked on you. Tie Niaofei—how goes the hunt for the Jin merchants?"

Chapter 628: So That's What It Meant

Tie Niaofei, Zao Ying, and Zheng Daniu were instantly overjoyed when they sensed Dao Xuan Tianzun's presence.

The three of them had led several hundred cavalry far from Dao Xuan Tianzun's domain, chasing Jin merchants across Shanxi. They had been away for a long time, and without realizing it, a strange emptiness had settled in their hearts. Now that Dao Xuan Tianzun appeared, that emptiness vanished at once.

Their spirits soared.

Even their tired bodies felt lighter.

Tie Niaofei stepped forward and said respectfully,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, what brings you here today?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun sighed softly.

"The flood relief efforts in Henan have temporarily wrapped up, so I took the opportunity to come and check on how things are going with you."

Tie Niaofei immediately straightened.

"Jin merchants traditionally deal in border trade. When they fled north, we pursued them further and further. Now we've reached Daizhou—this is already close to the northern frontier."

Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded.

"From Daizhou, twenty li north lies Yanmen Pass."

Beyond Yanmen Pass lay Datong, under the jurisdiction of the Xuan–Da Commander Zhang Zongheng. That region was perpetually at war with the northern nomadic tribes and never truly knew peace.

Tie Niaofei continued,

"Of the two Jin merchants who opposed me in Hedong City back then, one—Zhai Tang—has yet to be found. The other, Tian Shenglan, is currently hiding inside Daizhou City."

He then briefly described the formidable reputation of a man named Sun Chuanting within Daizhou.

Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded slowly.

"Zao Ying is correct. Daizhou City cannot be taken like Hedong City was. With Sun Chuanting defending it, a few hundred cavalry won't be enough."

Tie Niaofei frowned.

"Then how should we deal with Tian Shenglan?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun asked calmly,

"Do you have any salt warrants on you?"

Tie Niaofei grinned.

"Yes."

By now, Xing Honglang had already secured the position of Salt Revenue Commissioner. With salt warrants, when one's own people issued them to one another, the numbers could be... quite generous.

Tie Niaofei indeed carried two salt warrants, both for sizable quantities.

Dao Xuan Tianzun said,

"Good. From now on, you are a Jin merchant. Walk into the city openly, with the posture of a merchant."

Tie Niaofei was a sharp man. The moment he heard this, he understood completely.

There was no need for elaborate disguise. He simply pulled out a merchant's robe and draped it over himself. With his natural bearing, he instantly looked like an authentic trader.

He selected thirty men to accompany him, ordering them to leave behind firearms and armor. They dressed in ordinary jianghu attire, carried waist sabers, and followed him toward the city.

Meanwhile, Zao Ying and Zheng Daniu remained hidden in the forest outside Daizhou, ready to respond at any moment.

As Tie Niaofei approached the city gates, he whispered,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, once I enter the city, should I look for a chance to assassinate Tian Shenglan?"

"No need," Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled.

"Our goal this time isn't to kill him. We're here to make contact with Sun Chuanting."

Tie Niaofei was puzzled.

"Why him?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun explained,

"Sun Chuanting resigned due to his dissatisfaction with the Eunuch Party's monopoly of power and returned home. But he's not the type to sit idle. Every day, he writes essays on border strategy."

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly.

"Those essays are highly valued by Zhu Youjian and are often adopted."

Tie Niaofei's eyes lit up in sudden realization.

"If we inform him that Jin merchants are selling supplies to aid the Manchus, and he includes it in his essays, then the court might finally pay attention."

"Exactly," Dao Xuan Tianzun said.

"The Jin merchants need a thorough reckoning. We don't have the time to handle this ourselves—let the imperial court do the dirty work."

Now everything was clear.

Tie Niaofei felt a wave of confidence surge through him.

Before long, they reached the gates of Daizhou City.

Not long ago, the combined forces of the Chuang King and the Chuang General had attacked this place. As a result, Daizhou's defenses were exceptionally tight.

City guards stood watch, backed by large numbers of militia. Several retainers of the Sun family even patrolled atop the gate tower.

The moment Tie Niaofei and his group appeared, they drew attention.

A guard shouted,

"Who goes there?"

Tie Niaofei replied calmly,

"A merchant."

"A merchant?" the guard said suspiciously. "You don't seem to be carrying any goods."

Tie Niaofei pulled out a salt warrant and waved it toward the wall.

"I recently acquired a salt warrant and am exploring a new trade route. Naturally, I came ahead to scout the road first. Why would I bring cargo while reconnoitering?"

That explanation made sense.

The guards examined the salt warrant carefully and confirmed it was genuine. Their remaining doubts dissolved.

After all, merchants passed through Daizhou daily—especially Jin merchants heading north through Yanmen Pass to supply the Datong garrison.

"Alright," the guard said. "Entry tax—five copper coins per person."

Tie Niaofei paid promptly, then asked,

"I've long admired Master Sun Chuanting. May I ask how to reach the Sun estate?"

This time, the guards didn't answer.

Instead, they looked toward the Sun family retainers on the wall.

One retainer immediately stepped forward, alert.

"You wish to see my master? For what reason?"

Tie Niaofei smiled.

"I wish to discuss matters concerning the border."

"Border matters?"

The retainer stiffened.

His master was obsessed with border affairs. Anyone who came to speak on such topics was bound to interest him.

"In that case," the retainer said, "follow me."

He personally led Tie Niaofei and his companions to the Sun estate.

The Sun estate was expansive, a classic wealthy-landowner mansion—gardens, flowing streams, rockeries, pine trees, lotus ponds, everything.

Dao Xuan Tianzun couldn't help muttering inwardly,

This backyard looks like a full-fledged 5A scenic attraction.

They entered the rear garden, where a stone table and several stone stools stood.

A middle-aged man with a scholarly air sat at the table. He could only be Sun Chuanting.

Before him stood a young scholar, respectful as a disciple before his teacher.

The young man sighed.

"Master, the world is already beyond saving. Everywhere is chaos and decay. Why not put these matters aside and live peacefully?"

Sun Chuanting snorted.

"Let it begin with me. Whether it succeeds or fails—that is fate."

Dao Xuan Tianzun was momentarily stunned.

Damn... I didn't understand that at all. I really am a philistine.

Fortunately—

Tie Niaofei understood perfectly.

Seizing the moment, he stepped forward and praised loudly,

"What profound words! 'Let it begin with me; success or failure lies with fate.' To act first oneself, leaving Heaven to judge the outcome—Master Sun's righteousness is truly lofty. I am deeply in awe."

Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly realized:

Ah—so that's what it meant.

Chapter 629: Beyond Our Grasp

The moment Tie Niaofei spoke, the two men seated at the stone table were both startled. They turned at the same time to look at him.

A household retainer immediately stepped forward and bowed.

"My lord, this merchant is named Tie Niaofei. He claims to be a Jin merchant and holds an official salt certificate. He says he is scouting trade routes, intending to conduct business along this line in the future. He also mentioned that he wishes to discuss matters related to the frontier."

Sun Chuanting had met countless Jin merchants over the years and normally spared them little attention.

But the words frontier affairs made his eyes light up instantly.

Frontier affairs?

You've come to exactly the right place.

His spirits lifted at once. He pointed to the stone bench beside the table.

"Please sit, Mr. Tie."

Tie Niaofei adjusted his merchant's robes, smiled faintly, and walked over to sit opposite Sun Chuanting.

At the same time, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun followed him, quietly settling itself opposite Sun Chuanting as well.

Sun Chuanting cupped his hands in greeting.

"I am Sun Chuanting. This gentleman beside me is my student, Feng Rong."

Feng Rong also returned the salute—but his face was clearly unhappy.

He had only recently been urging his teacher to stop meddling in national affairs, to avoid getting dragged into trouble. Yet his teacher refused to listen, still brimming with interest whenever border matters were mentioned. Now a self-proclaimed merchant had appeared, openly asking to discuss frontier affairs.

How could Feng Rong possibly be pleased?

He spoke with obvious irritation.

"Mr. Tie claims he wishes to discuss frontier affairs? You are a merchant—what frontier affairs could a merchant possibly discuss?"

Tie Niaofei answered calmly,

"Since I am a merchant, the frontier affairs I speak of naturally concern cross-border trade. Though trade may seem insignificant, in truth it concerns the stability of the border garrisons and the very foundation of the state."

"Oh?"

Sun Chuanting's interest deepened.

"Please, go on."

Tie Niaofei clasped his hands and made a respectful gesture toward the sky.

"Our dynasty's Grand Ancestor established the rules, creating the Nine Border Garrisons to guard the realm..."

Feng Rong cut in impatiently.

"Who doesn't know that already? Get to the point."

Tie Niaofei did not seem offended.

"The point is this: the Nine Garrisons lie along the northern frontier, in lands bitterly cold and harsh. Transporting supplies there has always been extremely difficult."

Sun Chuanting nodded heavily.

"Indeed. Supplying the border garrisons has always been one of the most critical matters of our dynasty—nothing less than the foundation of the nation."

Tie Niaofei continued,

"Thus, the Grand Ancestor decreed that merchants could transport grain, cloth, salt, ironware, and other necessities to the soldiers stationed in the Nine Garrisons. In return, the court issued them salt certificates as compensation."

As he spoke, he took out a salt certificate and presented it.

Sun Chuanting was intimately familiar with these matters, yet he listened without interrupting.

Feng Rong, however, could no longer restrain himself.

"Why keep repeating these old platitudes?"

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled silently.

He's explaining this for my sake, it thought.

Afraid that I, a being above the mortal world, might not understand human logistics.

Tie Niaofei's expression suddenly grew serious.

"Lord Sun, merchants holding imperial trading privileges can easily transport large quantities of goods to the frontier. If these supplies reach our soldiers, that is naturally a good thing."

He paused, then lowered his voice.

"But what if those goods never reach the border garrisons at all? What if they are secretly diverted beyond the frontier—sold to the Mongols, or to the Later Jin?"

He let out a quiet, chilling laugh.

"Hehehe..."

Sun Chuanting's face instantly turned pale.

Feng Rong, who had looked utterly bored just moments before, shot to his feet in fury.

"How dare these villains!"

Sun Chuanting turned sharply.

"Sit down! Why are you so agitated? Weren't you the one telling me to let go of national affairs? Now you're jumping higher than your teacher."

Feng Rong flushed and sat back down, awkward.

"Ah—yes. No national affairs. I truly dislike national affairs."

Having said that, he fell silent.

Yet his ears seemed to perk up all the same—

alert and attentive, like a rabbit pretending not to listen.

Sun Chuanting's expression darkened.

"Mr. Tie, since you specifically came to me with this matter, I assume you already have some leads?"

"Exactly," Tie Niaofei said gravely.

"I know of a Jin merchant who colludes with the Mongols. He is currently here in Daizhou."

Sun Chuanting narrowed his eyes.

"What is his name?"

"Tian Shenglan."

Feng Rong's ears twitched.

"Teacher... this man visited our residence just a few days ago."

Sun Chuanting remembered him immediately.

"Indeed. He appeared calm, spoke little, and gave off a very reliable impression."

His expression grew even more solemn.

"Mr. Tie, you accuse Tian Shenglan of treason. Do you have evidence?"

Tie Niaofei spread his hands.

"None."

Sun Chuanting pressed,

"And yet you say many Jin merchants know of this?"

Tie Niaofei nodded.

"Yes. Those of us in the trade exchange information constantly. Some things can be hidden from outsiders, but not from those within the industry."

Sun Chuanting shook his head slowly.

"I need concrete evidence."

Tie Niaofei hesitated.

"At present... there is none."

"Very well," Sun Chuanting said.

"I understand what you have told me. I will have people investigate. But without evidence, I cannot punish a man based on rumor alone."

Tie Niaofei bowed.

"That was my intention in coming—to inform you, nothing more."

"Then I am informed," Sun Chuanting replied.

"Thank you, Mr. Tie."

He lifted his teacup—clear dismissal.

Tie Niaofei rose, clasped his hands, and took his leave.

Sun Chuanting and Feng Rong both stood to see him off.

At that instant, Tie Niaofei's sleeve shifted.

A miniature Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, no larger than a palm, slipped free and fell toward the ground.

Clink.

At the same moment, Tie Niaofei deliberately stamped his foot.

Thump.

The heavy sound completely covered the soft noise of the fall.

No human eye noticed.

No human ear heard.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun instantly darted into the grass beside the stone table.

Tie Niaofei said aloud,

"When I obtain evidence of Tian Shenglan's treason, I will come again."

Sun Chuanting replied,

"I shall trouble you, then."

The retainer escorted Tie Niaofei out.

Sun Chuanting did not relax. His expression remained grim.

After a moment of silence, he suddenly called out,

"Someone! Bring me paper and brush!"

Feng Rong grew alarmed.

"Teacher, what are you writing now?"

Sun Chuanting answered slowly,

"Even without evidence, the matter of Jin merchants colluding with foreign enemies is likely true. I cannot act on rumor—but I can submit a memorial, urging the court to be vigilant against merchants secretly supplying the northern barbarians."

Feng Rong panicked.

"This is beyond our grasp! Teacher—this is truly beyond our grasp!"

Chapter 630: To Whom Should This Article Be Sent?

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun crouched low in the tall grass, carefully peeking out.

Inside the courtyard, Sun Chuanting was bent over his desk, brush flying as he wrote without pause.

From this low angle, Li Daoxuan couldn't see a single word of what was being written.

Left with no choice, he turned his gaze to a large tree nearby. Stretching out his two wooden, stick-like hands, he began to climb.

Frankly speaking, climbing a tree was no easy task.

For a modern urban youth, this would have counted as a full five-star difficulty challenge. The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun managed to climb less than a meter before his grip slipped. His body tumbled straight back into the tall grass below.

Rustle.

Fortunately, Sun Chuanting was completely absorbed in his writing and heard nothing.

Feng Rong did hear it.

He turned his head and glanced toward the grass. Seeing the faint movement, he assumed it was probably a rabbit or a mouse and paid it no further attention, calmly turning his gaze away again.

Li Daoxuan waited a few seconds, making sure everything was quiet, then began climbing again.

This time, he found several knobby footholds on the trunk and finally managed to climb up. Perched high on a branch, he leaned forward and looked down.

At last, he could clearly see what Sun Chuanting was writing.

"On the Strict Management and Regulation of Border Merchants"

The short essay urged the imperial court to strengthen its supervision of merchants. It argued that border patrols should be increased to prevent merchants from privately crossing the frontier to trade with the northern barbarians.

Special emphasis was placed on so-called official merchants—those holding salt permits. Their authority was extensive, their networks deep, and frontier garrisons had no effective means of restraining them. If such merchants turned corrupt, it would be all too easy for them to conduct illicit cross-border trade.

When he finished writing, Sun Chuanting carefully folded the document, sealed it with wax, and handed it to a household retainer.

"Send this to the capital," he instructed.

The retainer hesitated, looking awkward.

"My lord... you no longer hold an official post. This essay cannot be submitted directly to the Six Ministries. To whom should it be delivered?"

"This..."

Sun Chuanting froze.

After a long pause, he finally said,

"Deliver it to the residence of Grand Secretary Wen Tirenin. He enjoys the Emperor's deep trust. If this essay catches his eye, the Emperor will surely see it as well."

The retainer bowed and hurried off.

From his perch in the tree, Li Daoxuan couldn't help but sigh inwardly.

Wen Tirenin?

That's it—this essay is doomed.

Wen Tirenin's greatest talent was accomplishing absolutely nothing.

Alas.

Then, suddenly, an idea flashed through Li Daoxuan's mind.

He reached out and plucked a large leaf from the tree. Using his wooden stick-hands, he dragged one edge across the surface, leaving a shallow groove.

With quick, nimble strokes, he carved a single character:

"Hong."

He plucked another leaf and repeated the process, carving a second character:

"Zhang."

The two leaves were ready.

Li Daoxuan climbed higher, branch by branch, until he was directly above the stone table in the courtyard.

He pointed twice at the table below.

Then he loosened his grip.

The two leaves drifted gently downward.

At the same time, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun withdrew deeper into the foliage, hiding himself completely.

The leaves fluttered slowly through the air.

By sheer chance, they landed squarely on the stone table.

At this moment, Sun Chuanting was still seated there, gazing off into the distance, lost in thought.

Two falling leaves did not catch his attention.

But Feng Rong, unable to sit still, had been glancing around restlessly. Seeing the leaves land on the table and partially cover it, he reached out to flick them aside.

The instant he touched them, he froze.

"Eh?"

Feng Rong stared at the leaves in his hand, then abruptly looked up into the tree canopy.

Above him were only branches and leaves—nothing else.

He immediately called out,

"Teacher! Look at these leaves!"

Sun Chuanting asked,

"What is it?"

"These leaves..." Feng Rong said, astonished.

"They have characters written on them!"

Sun Chuanting let out a surprised sound and took the leaves. He, too, looked up, but saw nothing beyond the branches overhead.

"These characters were written just now," Sun Chuanting said slowly.

"Look—the marks are still fresh. They weren't carved long ago."

Feng Rong nodded.

"They're clearly fresh. But it's just the two of us here, master and disciple. Above us are only branches—there's nowhere for anyone to hide. Who could have written these characters directly above our heads?"

Sun Chuanting fell silent for a moment.

Then he said softly,

"Could this be... a hint from Heaven?"

This was the difference between ancient and modern thinking.

A modern person might consider countless explanations—drones, hidden mechanisms, optical camouflage, elaborate pranks, or other absurd possibilities.

But an ancient scholar's first instinct went straight to the metaphysical.

Sun Chuanting studied the leaves carefully.

"One character is 'Hong,' the other 'Zhang.' What could Heaven be telling me?"

Feng Rong admitted honestly,

"This student does not know."

Sun Chuanting pondered.

"They appear to be surnames. But Hong and Zhang are both common names. Why would Heaven give me these two characters specifically?"

Feng Rong furrowed his brow, deep in thought.

Suddenly, Sun Chuanting's eyes lit up. He slapped his thigh hard.

"I've got it!"

Feng Rong jumped.

"Ah? What have you realized, Teacher?"

"I frequently discuss border affairs," Sun Chuanting said firmly.

"So if Heaven offers guidance, it must concern the frontier. These two characters must refer to people involved in border matters."

His voice grew confident.

"One is the 'Hong' of Hong Chengchou, Supreme Commander of the Three Borders. The other is the 'Zhang' of Zhang Zongheng, Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da."

"Ah!" Feng Rong exclaimed.

"Teacher's insight is surely correct!"

Sun Chuanting continued his analysis.

"The matter of the Shanxi border merchants has clearly long angered both Heaven and man. Heaven itself disapproves of their wickedness and has enlightened me. This essay must not be sent to Wen Tirenin."

He clenched his fist.

"It should be sent instead to Hong Chengchou and Zhang Zongheng—both men of military experience. They will certainly take it seriously."

Feng Rong praised him eagerly.

"Teacher's wisdom is profound. Shall we copy the essay twice, then? I will help transcribe one."

And so, master and disciple took up their brushes once more.

Each copied the essay with swift, practiced strokes, their calligraphy neat and forceful.

One copy was sent west to Shaanxi, addressed to Hong Chengchou, Supreme Commander of the Three Borders.

The other, intended for Zhang Zongheng, was even easier to deliver.

At present, Zhang Zongheng was not stationed in Xuanfu or Datong at all, but was resting at Yanmen Pass, just twenty li north of Daizhou.

For more than a year, he had barely fought the Mongols. Instead, he had been leading his troops through northern Shanxi suppressing bandits, clashing repeatedly with Zijing Liang, the Chuang King, the Dashing General, and others, leaving many bloody battlefields behind.

Only recently had the roaming bandits fled into the Taihang Mountains and vanished.

With no immediate enemies to pursue, Zhang Zongheng was now leading his army back toward Xuanfu and Datong, passing through Yanmen Pass, where they were temporarily encamped.