

Great Ming 631

Chapter 631: Don't Act Recklessly

Tie Niaofei and his men settled into the largest inn in Daizhou City.

There was no fine wine, no elaborate dishes. Years of drought had shattered local economies everywhere, and private businesses were barely surviving. Daizhou was no exception. The inn provided only the most basic food, and even that came at an outrageous price.

Tie Niaofei held a coarse steamed bun in his hand, chewing slowly, without appetite. Just as he was considering asking his men for some dried meat to wash it down, a sudden burst of noise erupted from the second floor.

Footsteps thundered down the stairs.

Tie Niaofei looked up—

And the instant his eyes landed on the group, murderous fury surged through him.

"Tian Shenglan!" he growled.

Among the descending crowd, one man walked at the front. Tian Shenglan—later counted among the Eight Great Jin Merchants. His gaze swept the hall and immediately locked onto Tie Niaofei. A flicker of surprise crossed his face, but it vanished in an instant.

"Well, well," Tian Shenglan said calmly, "if it isn't Tie Niaofei."

Tie Niaofei's hand dropped to the hilt of his saber.

Behind him, all thirty cavalymen followed suit, hands resting on their weapons.

Tian Shenglan's men did the same.

In an instant, the inn's main hall turned into a powder keg.

The innkeeper ducked behind the counter without hesitation. The servants scattered, clearly prepared to bolt at the first sign of bloodshed.

Everyone knew—if these two sides clashed here, the authorities would be alerted immediately.

Tian Shenglan, usually a man of few words, now spoke at length.

"I never expected a bandit siege to save your miserable life. And now you've chased me all the way to Daizhou. What—do you really intend to start a fight here?"

"This isn't Hedong," Tie Niaofei snapped back.

"Your bribes don't run this city's salt administration. Since your men didn't attack me the moment they saw me, I know the prefect here hasn't been bought—and won't cover for you."

"And he won't cover for you either," Tian Shenglan sneered.

"I am a legitimate merchant, sanctioned by the court, supplying the Nine Border Garrisons. Touch me, and see if the local troops don't tear you apart."

Tie Niaofei's mind raced.

Could he kill Tian Shenglan instantly, burst out of the city, and rely on cavalry speed to escape pursuit?

Was it actually feasible?

At that moment, a faint voice rose from the small avatar resting against his chest.

So soft only he could hear it.

"Don't act rashly," said Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Tie Niaofei's face lit up.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived!"

Remembering the warning, he immediately lowered his voice.

"If this subordinate strikes now and escapes quickly, there's a chance I could get away."

"There's also a chance you won't," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied calmly.

"And even if you escape, your men may not. Several lives would be lost."

The logic was irrefutable.

Tie Niaofei instantly cooled down, silently cursing himself for letting hatred override reason.

"Think carefully," Dao Xuan Tianzun continued.

"You now possess a lawful identity—a merchant with salt permits. From now on, you can walk openly into border garrisons, drink and mingle with soldiers as equals. Is it worth throwing that away for a moment of rage? Becoming a wanted criminal—does that truly appeal to you?"

Tie Niaofei scratched his head awkwardly.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun's wisdom is flawless."

"What you reported to Sun Chuanting," Dao Xuan Tianzun said,

"he didn't fully believe—but he believed enough. He has already written a document urging stricter border control and closer scrutiny of Jin merchants."

Tie Niaofei's eyes sharpened.

"Zhang Zongheng is stationed at Yanmen Pass, only twenty li from here," Dao Xuan Tianzun went on.

"A mounted courier can deliver that letter in half an hour. Zhang Zongheng understands border affairs far better than Sun Chuanting. Once he reads it, he will act."

Tie Niaofei understood completely.

Slowly, his hand moved away from his saber.

Behind him, the thirty cavalymen relaxed as well.

Across the hall, Tian Shenglan let out a silent breath of relief. Seeing Tie Niaofei back down, his confidence surged at once.

"Hmph," Tian Shenglan sneered.

"Stay put, like a good dog. A petty salt smuggler like you can't touch me."

He paused, then added coldly,

"And take my advice—stay away from the border with your so-called business. Otherwise... heh."

With that, he turned and headed back upstairs.

"Bah!" Tie Niaofei spat.

His old comrades had been slaughtered by salt officials and Jin merchants alike. He himself had been tortured in their dungeons. Seeing Tian Shenglan's smug retreat made him want to tear the man apart with his bare hands.

But a divine order had already been given.

Suppressing his fury by force, he thought grimly:

Just wait. Dao Xuan Tianzun will not let you off so easily.

An hour and a half later—

At the gates of Daizhou City, a massive formation of cavalry arrived.

Every rider was impeccably equipped, exuding lethal discipline—elite border troops at a glance.

At their center rode a civil official, armored and mounted.

Zhang Zongheng, Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da, had arrived.

He had originally been preparing to depart Yanmen Pass and return to Datong when he unexpectedly received an essay from the famed scholar Sun Chuanting.

Sun Chuanting was well known—fond of discussing border affairs, endlessly proposing strategies against Mongols and Manchus alike.

Thus, when the essay arrived, Zhang Zongheng read it with mild impatience.

After finishing, he scoffed inwardly.

Merchants colluding with enemies? Supplying invaders? Do you think we don't know? Of course we do. But the border is vast—how could anyone control it? A few small peddlers sneaking goods across on dark, windy nights—what can I do? String barbed wire across the entire frontier? Even if I did, someone would cut a hole.

He was about to dismiss the matter entirely—

When his eyes caught a name at the very end of the document.

Tian Shenglan.

Zhang Zongheng's expression changed instantly.

This was no petty smuggler. Tian Shenglan was a prominent Jin merchant, dealing in massive volumes. Zhang Zongheng himself had heard of him—had even admired him.

He had personally received Tian Shenglan before, praising him for easing the supply hardships of Datong's border troops.

Such a man... colluding with the Manchus?

Zhang Zongheng could not remain still.

Daizhou was close.

He immediately assembled a cavalry escort and galloped there at full speed.

The arrival of a large cavalry force threw Daizhou City into uproar.

Rumors spread like wildfire through the streets.

In the inn's main hall, whispers buzzed:

"A high official has arrived!"

Li Daoxuan sensed it at once.

He chuckled softly—and with a familiar whoosh, shifted his consciousness back into the palm-sized puppet.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun lay hidden among fallen leaves. The stone table beneath its branch was now empty.

The puppet twitched, then sprang to life.

It pushed off the branch with both hands, dropped heavily to the ground without pain, and scampered swiftly toward the front hall.

Chapter 632: A Figure Lurks Behind the Shrine

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun moved silently toward the front courtyard.

Pavilions, towers, winding corridors, rockeries, ponds—he slipped through them all with practiced ease. Having entered earlier together with Tie Niaofei, he already had the entire layout engraved in his wooden "mind." Retracing the route now was effortless.

Besides, as a puppet, he didn't need to follow human paths.

If there was a shortcut, he took it.

A hole in the wall? Crawl through it.

A pond in the way? Float across it.

Wood floated on water, after all. And floating while drifting lazily across a pond was, surprisingly, quite refreshing.

In only a short while, he reached the front hall.

Slipping in along the edge of the main doorway, he scurried beneath tables and chairs, weaving through a forest of legs, until he reached a large folding screen. He ducked behind it and cautiously peeked out.

Inside the hall, Sun Chuanting had already composed himself and was sitting upright, face solemn. A guest sat opposite him.

That guest wore civil robes paired with armor—no one else but Zhang Zongheng, Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da.

"Master Sun," Zhang Zongheng said coldly, "one may eat whatever one wishes, but words—once written—cannot be taken back. You cannot smear a man's reputation with nothing but empty talk."

This was the first sentence the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun heard upon arriving.

Clearly, the two had already discussed the issue of evidence. And just as clearly, Sun Chuanting had been unable to produce any. Zhang Zongheng's tone carried open reproach.

Sun Chuanting sighed lightly. "To be honest, I do not possess concrete proof. Neither did the person who reported this to me. That is why I did not entirely believe his words."

"If you didn't fully believe him," Zhang Zongheng pressed, "then why did you dare to write Tian Shenglan's name into a document and place it before me?"

Sun Chuanting remained calm. "It is said that one should harbor no ill will—but it is even more foolish to have no guard at all. My informant claimed that while outsiders may not see the truth, those inside the trade all know about Tian Shenglan's dealings with foreign enemies. Governor Zhang, does that not warrant attention?"

Zhang Zongheng's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

Sun Chuanting gave a soft, humorless chuckle. "For example—there are officials whom the common people praise as upright and incorruptible. Yet within official circles, merely hearing their names makes everyone shake their heads."

Zhang Zongheng's expression darkened.

Indeed.

No one understood internal affairs better than those on the inside.

If even fellow merchants whispered about Tian Shenglan, then the odds of his guilt were far from small.

"Still," Zhang Zongheng said after a pause, "without solid evidence, I cannot move against him. Tian Shenglan is no ordinary merchant. Many officials and soldiers stationed at the Datong frontier rely on him for provisions. To act on rumors alone would only please our enemies, alienate our allies, and chill the hearts of the troops."

"That is only reasonable," Sun Chuanting replied. "I merely ask that Your Excellency keep a discreet watch on him. When he conducts business at the border, assign men to observe closely. Who knows what useful clues might surface."

Zhang Zongheng nodded slightly, then asked, "Why not summon the man who reported this matter to you? I would question him myself."

"He has not yet left the city," Sun Chuanting answered. "He is staying at an inn. I will send someone to bring him."

At that moment, Li Daoxuan flicked his thoughts and shifted his awareness back to Tie Niaofei.

"Zhang Zongheng has arrived," Li Daoxuan said. "He wants evidence."

Tie Niaofei panicked. "But I don't have any real proof! What am I supposed to say?"

"We truly have none," Li Daoxuan replied calmly. "Tell him the names of all eight great Imperial Merchants. Include Huang Yunfa—the one we already killed. Stress how serious the situation is, and let Zhang Zongheng decide how to act."

Tie Niaofei took a breath. "Understood."

Li Daoxuan's consciousness shifted back to the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun.

By now, Sun Chuanting had already sent a servant to fetch Tie Niaofei. While waiting, he and Zhang Zongheng spoke casually about frontier affairs—conditions beyond the Great Wall, military deployments, recent campaigns.

Li Daoxuan listened idly. Many of the names they mentioned were unfamiliar. He couldn't even be bothered to consult his computer.

His attention was beginning to drift—

When suddenly, a name snapped him awake.

"Kong Youde."

The three syllables struck his ears like a hammer.

Sun Chuanting sighed deeply. "That wretch Kong Youde has betrayed the court and laid siege to Laizhou. The city has been surrounded for over a month now. I can only wonder how the people inside are enduring."

Li Daoxuan's memory stirred instantly.

He knew this history.

In the second month of the fifth year of Chongzhen, Kong Youde rebelled and besieged Laizhou. The siege would drag on for more than four months, only ending in July. After being defeated and left with nowhere to flee, Kong Youde would defect to the Manchus.

That defection would be catastrophic.

Warships. Firearms. Technology. Skilled personnel.

All handed over.

It was now early June of Chongzhen Year Five. The turning point was barely a month away—and Li Daoxuan knew he might be powerless to stop it.

Then, a thought surfaced.

He chuckled silently.

Hadn't he been worrying about the lack of evidence to convince Zhang Zongheng of the Jin merchants' treachery?

If he played the Kong Youde affair well... perhaps this could become the lever.

His gaze swept through the hall.

And then—he found it.

In one corner stood a small shrine. Inside it rested a statue of Guanyin.

Li Daoxuan grinned.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun crept forward, climbed the shrine with care, and slipped behind the statue, clinging tightly to its back. The Guanyin figure stood thirty to forty centimeters tall, while the puppet was smaller than a palm—utterly invisible from the outside.

A red cloth draped the shrine, blocking any oblique view.

This hiding place was perfect.

Once he confirmed there were no gaps, he spoke.

"Sun Chuanting..."

"Zhang Zongheng..."

He deliberately slowed his speech, stretching the final syllables, alternating between a thin whisper and a gravelly rasp. The voice was neither clearly male nor female, neither old nor young.

It echoed through the hall like something dredged up from a nightmare.

Both men jolted.

"Who's there?"

"Who spoke?!"

Their eyes locked onto the shrine.

"Sun Chuanting..."

"Zhang Zongheng..."

The voice came again.

They exchanged glances and reached the same conclusion—the sound was coming from the Guanyin statue.

Yet neither man was a fool.

Both instantly dismissed the idea of a real spirit.

Someone is hiding behind the shrine.

That was their shared thought.

Never inside it. Only behind.

In perfect coordination, both men lunged forward, sabers flashing, flanking the shrine from left and right.

Nothing.

Their expressions changed.

At once, they spun back, yanked open the shrine's cabinet doors—

Empty.

Utterly empty.

Chapter 633: All Secrets Laid Bare

Sun Chuanting and Zhang Zongheng were completely at a loss.

There was no one behind the shrine.

No one inside the cabinet beneath it.

So where had that voice come from?

Zhang Zongheng's gaze drifted downward, scanning the floor. A strange suspicion crept into his mind.

"Could someone be hiding underground?"

Sun Chuanting slowly shook his head. "There are no tunnels beneath this hall."

Zhang Zongheng pushed the shrine slightly aside and stomped hard on the floor.

Thud.

The sound was dull and solid—the unmistakable sound of firm ground. If there were hollow space beneath, it wouldn't ring like that.

Now even Zhang Zongheng fell silent.

Both men were utterly baffled.

"You heard it too, just now, didn't you?" Zhang Zongheng asked at last.

Sun Chuanting nodded. "I heard it clearly."

Zhang Zongheng frowned. "Could it be... someone hid here, spoke, and then immediately leapt out the window?"

Almost in perfect sync, the two men rushed toward the nearby window.

They flung it open and leaned out.

Several stewards and maids stood quietly in the corridor outside. Earlier, Sun Chuanting had ordered them to wait there while he received his guest. When the window suddenly flew open, they jumped in alarm.

Sun Chuanting's face darkened. "Did anyone just jump out of this window?"

The servants shook their heads in unison. "No, Master."

Sun Chuanting had nothing more to say.

Zhang Zongheng was equally speechless.

Then—

From behind them, from the shrine they had just searched—

That same strange voice sounded again.

"Zhang Zongheng... Sun Chuanting... stop searching. This Venerable One is right here... and has not moved an inch..."

Both men froze.

They turned around at the same time.

This time, there was no doubt.

The voice came from the Guanyin Bodhisattva statue itself.

Their eyes locked onto the statue—yet neither dared to approach. They remained by the window, backs pressed near the open frame.

Their posture said everything.

If anything went wrong, they were ready to flee through the window at once.

Hidden behind the statue, Li Daoxuan found the scene deeply amusing.

I'm only borrowing Guanyin's statue to speak, he thought.

If I showed my own divine form, wouldn't they think I was Wusheng Laomu herself?

He continued, deliberately dragging out each word.

"You were just discussing... Kong Youde..."

Sun Chuanting and Zhang Zongheng exchanged a glance. A chill ran through both their hearts.

The Guanyin Bodhisattva... was speaking?

The thought alone made their scalps tingle.

Li Daoxuan pressed on.

"In just over one month... Kong Youde will be defeated... and after his defeat... he will surrender to the Manchu..."

Sun Chuanting sucked in a sharp breath.

Zhang Zongheng was no less stunned.

"Just over a month from now?" they blurted out almost simultaneously.

"Indeed..." the voice replied. "Just over a month... This is a secret of Heaven... a secret not meant to be revealed. Yet this Venerable One, seeing your concern for the realm and its people... has come especially to inform you."

Sun Chuanting did not dare believe it.

Zhang Zongheng dared even less.

They exchanged another glance—both saw deep suspicion mirrored in the other's eyes.

The voice continued, unhurried, precise.

"In the seventh month... Kong Youde will feign surrender... but the scheme will fail. Thereafter, General Wu Xiang will attack Dengzhou... Kong Youde and Geng Zhongming will flee to Gaizhou... and surrender to the Manchu..."

The details were too specific.

Too concrete.

The more the voice spoke, the heavier the atmosphere became.

Sun Chuanting could no longer hold back. "Bodhisattva... Kong Youde commands countless warships, firearms, and skilled artisans. If he surrenders... would that not be—would that not be a massive gift to the Manchu?"

Zhang Zongheng frowned deeply, unable to answer.

Li Daoxuan lowered his voice, making it slow and resonant.

"Kong Youde will indeed present the Manchu with a great gift... but there are others... who have been offering them gifts for many years already..."

Sun Chuanting's heart jolted. "Who?"

Hidden behind the statue, Li Daoxuan smiled.

Good. You finally asked the right question.

Slowly, solemnly, he recited the names:

"Fan Yongdou... Wang Dengku... Jin Liangyu... Wang Dayu... Liang Jiabin... Tian Shenglan... Zhai Tang... Huang Yunfa..."

He paused briefly.

"Ah... Huang Yunfa is already dead."

Sun Chuanting recognized only a few of these names. But Tian Shenglan struck him like a hammer—he had just heard it not long ago.

Zhang Zongheng, however, knew them all.

Every single one.

He had personally met several.

His expression tightened. "Can this... truly be so?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled silently.

If I start debating truth and falsehood now, I'd ruin the mystique entirely. Since when do gods provide evidence to mortals?

His voice turned distant and cool.

"The heavenly secret has been revealed to you... Act wisely."

Then—silence.

No more words followed.

The great hall fell deathly quiet.

Only the sound of two men breathing could be heard.

After an unknown stretch of time, Sun Chuanting slowly took two steps toward the shrine. He raised a hand, as if intending to touch the Guanyin statue—but halfway there, his courage failed him, and he withdrew his hand.

Zhang Zongheng murmured, "As for what will happen in just over a month... Master Sun, what do you think?"

Sun Chuanting shook his head slowly. "I don't know... I truly don't know."

Zhang Zongheng frowned. "Laizhou has already been fighting for three months. No one can predict how it will end."

Sun Chuanting hesitated. "Kong Youde may be a traitor... but surely he wouldn't go so far as to surrender to the Manchu?"

Zhang Zongheng sighed. "Hard to say. There has never been a shortage of Han Chinese willing to serve the Mongols."

Having spent years on the frontier, Zhang Zongheng had seen such things countless times. Even now, north of Xuanfu and Datong, many White Lotus sect members relied on Mongol protection to stir unrest.

At that moment, a servant entered.

"Master, the merchant Tie Niaofei is outside the hall. Shall I let him in?"

Sun Chuanting replied, "Let him enter."

The two officials swiftly composed themselves. The shock and unease provoked by the Guanyin statue vanished behind practiced expressions of calm authority. They returned to their seats, posture dignified once more.

Soon, Tie Niaofei entered.

The formal greetings, polite refusals, invitations to sit, and other rituals were skipped entirely. They went straight to the matter at hand.

Zhang Zongheng spoke first. "Tie Niaofei, Master Sun says you discovered that the Jin merchant Tian Shenglan has been trading with the northern barbarians?"

"Yes," Tie Niaofei answered firmly.

"Do you have proof?" Zhang Zongheng asked.

Tie Niaofei shook his head. "No."

Ordinarily, Zhang Zongheng would have rebuked him on the spot.

But after what had just occurred—

His expression merely grew thoughtful.

Deeply thoughtful.

Chapter 634: What's the Hurry?

Zhang Zongheng sank into deep thought.

At that moment, Tie Niaofei continued—carefully carrying out what he believed to be Dao Xuan Tianzun's instruction.

"Actually," he said, "it isn't only Tian Shenglan. I also know of seven others who have been selling goods to the Manchu and Mongols."

Sun Chuanting's heart skipped violently.

Zhang Zongheng snapped out of his contemplation at once. "Who are these seven?"

Tie Niaofei recited their names clearly:

"Fan Yongdou, Wang Dengku, Jin Liangyu, Wang Dayu, Liang Jiabin, Zhai Tang, and Huang Yunfa. Of course, Huang Yunfa is already dead—so that leaves six."

The moment the final name left his mouth, both Sun Chuanting and Zhang Zongheng stiffened.

They had just heard these exact names—spoken one by one—from the mouth of the Guanyin Bodhisattva.

To hear them again so soon, now spoken by Tie Niaofei, sent a chill down their spines.

Almost simultaneously, suspicion rose in both their minds.

Could that strange voice just now... have been this man's trick?

But the thought immediately collapsed.

Impossible.

He hadn't even entered the residence before. How could he have arranged for the Guanyin Bodhisattva to speak?

And more importantly—how could a mere mortal force a Bodhisattva to speak at all?

If the Bodhisattva was real, then Tie Niaofei's words merely confirmed the heavenly secrets already revealed.

Only if the Bodhisattva were fake would such a scheme even be conceivable.

Their thoughts churned violently.

In just a few breaths, they reasoned through more possibilities than they ever had while staring at an imperial examination paper.

Trust him?

Or not?

Believe... or doubt?

Just then, Zhang Zongheng suddenly seized upon a critical detail.

"Kong Youde."

He leaned closer to Sun Chuanting and whispered, "When the Bodhisattva spoke earlier, Kong Youde was mentioned first. And events one month from now were clearly foretold."

Sun Chuanting's eyes widened slightly.

He lowered his voice as well. "You mean... we'll know the truth once Kong Youde's fate becomes clear?"

"Exactly," Zhang Zongheng replied softly.

Sun Chuanting hesitated. "But if there's even a chance that Kong Youde might defect to the Manchu, shouldn't we submit a memorial to the court immediately, warning them?"

Zhang Zongheng gave a bitter smile. "We ourselves aren't fully convinced. Would you really dare write such a memorial? And how would you phrase it?"

He shook his head.

"If we rashly report this, claiming the Guanyin Bodhisattva foretold Kong Youde's defection, wouldn't the court accuse us of spreading White Lotus heresies?"

Sun Chuanting fell silent.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized Zhang Zongheng was right.

He himself barely dared believe what he had just witnessed—how could he expect others to accept it?

Would the ministers believe it? Would the Emperor?

Given his habit of submitting unsolicited essays on border affairs, many officials already viewed him as unhinged. Even his own student, Feng Rong, had advised him repeatedly to stop meddling in state matters.

Sun Chuanting let out a long sigh. "So... all we can do is wait?"

Zhang Zongheng nodded. "Yes. We wait."

"If Kong Youde truly defects to the Manchu, then the Bodhisattva's revelation will be proven correct. And if that is true, then the matter of the Eight Great Jin Merchants supplying the enemy will naturally also be true."

"At that point, why would we still need this merchant to provide proof? A thorough inspection of the caravans moving along the border would be enough. If they're colluding with the enemy, evidence will surface quickly."

Sun Chuanting sighed heavily. "That... makes sense. Alas."

With the matter settled, Zhang Zongheng finally turned to Tie Niaofei.

"Mr. Tie, we have recorded the names you provided. I will personally arrange for additional personnel to monitor these merchants. If they truly commit treason by colluding with the enemy, I assure you—I will show no mercy."

Tie Niaofei bowed. "The Supreme Commander is wise and discerning."

Seeing tea being served—a clear signal of dismissal—Tie Niaofei took his cue and withdrew, exiting Sun Chuanting's residence.

He had not walked far when the cotton-thread talisman on his chest stirred.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice sounded calmly within him.

"That's enough. You may return now. For the time being, do not clash with Tian Shenglan here."

Tie Niaofei was startled. "What? We're leaving just like that? I haven't even had the chance to deal with Tian Shenglan yet!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly.

"Some things cannot be rushed. Let events unfold naturally."

"Once you return, prepare for border trade. Take a little over one month to prepare thoroughly."

"When the Eight Great Jin Merchants fall, the border army will inevitably face a shortage of supplies. At that time, you will naturally take over their business and their standing."

"From then on, the supply of materials to the border armies will be handled by us."

Tie Niaofei hesitated, then lowered his voice.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, forgive my boldness... but Gao Family Village's path clearly leads toward replacing the imperial court sooner or later. When that day comes, all under heaven will surely revere you and establish a new regime."

"If that's the case... wouldn't supplying the border army be tantamount to aiding the enemy?"

Li Daoxuan laughed lightly. "No."

"This is not aiding the enemy."

"This is resisting the enemy."

Tie Niaofei's mind reeled.

Li Daoxuan continued calmly, "Let the imperial court hold the Manchu at bay while we steadily expand our influence in the Central Plains."

"That is far better than allowing the Manchu to surge south and devastate everything."

"Because the Manchu are far more brutal than roving bandits."

Tie Niaofei froze. "More brutal...?"

"Yes," Li Daoxuan said evenly. "Bandits loot, burn, and kill—but they rely on coercion. They lack the means to sustain massive populations, so they force people to follow them and move constantly, leaving most civilians alive."

"The Manchu are different."

"They have a far simpler solution for populations they cannot sustain."

"Kill."

"Kill until a hundred million become thirty or forty million. Once the numbers are small enough, they become easy to control."

A chill crawled up Tie Niaofei's spine, locking his body in place.

Now he understood.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's restraint was not weakness—it was mercy.

He could not bear to see the common people suffer.

As Gao Family Village had not yet grown strong enough to confront the Manchu directly, destabilizing the border armies now would only invite catastrophe.

As long as the border armies held, Gao Family Village could safely consolidate power in the Central Plains.

Nibbling away... was better than swallowing whole.

Because swallowing whole would crush the people beneath it.

Tie Niaofei felt his chest tighten with emotion.

Dao Xuan Tianzun truly cared for the common people.

I could weep.

With power enough to overturn mountains in a single palm, he still chose patience—slowly laying out a path that minimized suffering, seeking a peaceful transition for all under heaven.

If even Dao Xuan Tianzun is not in a hurry... what right do I have to rush my revenge?

Tian Shenglan's head can remain on his shoulders a while longer.

With clarity settling in his heart, Tie Niaofei felt lighter than he had in days.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said solemnly, "your subordinate will return at once to prepare caravans and gather sufficient supplies for the Xuanfu and Datong border armies, to help them hold back the Manchu."

Without delay, Tie Niaofei left Daizhou.

Outside the city, in the forest, he reunited with Zao Ying and Zheng Daniu—then returned to his own territory to begin preparations.

Chapter 635: Traversing the Jianghu for Over Twenty Years

Xi'an.

The highest-ranking figure Gao Family Village dispatched to oversee Xi'an Prefecture turned out to be Flat Rabbit.

This decision stunned almost everyone.

It was not Wang Tang—Headmaster Wang's adopted son, the well-rounded talent proficient in both civil administration and military affairs. Instead, it was Flat Rabbit.

Flat Rabbit was illiterate.

His combat ability was mediocre at best.

Among the core members of Gao Family Village, he was—objectively speaking—the weakest.

Worse still, he had a long history of ignoring military discipline. Being reprimanded by Dao Xuan Tianzun was practically a routine part of his life.

That he had been appointed the top leader here made Wang Tang deeply dissatisfied.

Wang Tang was among the first batch of middle-school graduates from Gao Family Village. He possessed solid cultural foundations and outstanding political sensitivity. After joining the army, his training results had consistently ranked near the top. His combat skills were first-rate, and his marksmanship exceptional—perhaps not quite at Bai Yuan's monstrous level, but still firmly elite.

As part of the third wave of orphans adopted by Headmaster Wang, his pedigree was impeccable.

How could he possibly rank below Flat Rabbit?

As Wang Tang walked through the bustling streets of Xi'an Prefecture, this thought kept circling in his mind.

Just then, a man hurried out from a side alley, stepped directly in front of Wang Tang, bowed deeply, and smiled.

"Greetings, Shopkeeper Wang."

Wang Tang raised an eyebrow. "Oh? You recognize me?"

The man smiled even wider. "You are the Li family's second manager assigned to Xi'an, overseeing all of their assets here. Anyone of even modest standing in this city knows who you are."

Wang Tang felt a surge of quiet satisfaction.

The feeling of being recognized was intoxicating.

The man continued, "I am the steward of Master Zheng Qing, a contractor specializing in construction and decoration projects in Xi'an Prefecture."

"Zheng Qing... the contractor?" Wang Tang didn't know the man personally, but he understood the trade. Contractors controlled networks of craftsmen—masons, carpenters, plasterers. Whenever wealthy families built residences, shops, or gardens, contractors were indispensable.

Back in Chengcheng County, there had once been a contractor named Teng Yifeng—who later joined Gao Family Village and became the director of the cement factory.

Wang Tang frowned slightly. What does this fellow want with me?

The steward smiled mysteriously. "My master wishes to become better acquainted with Shopkeeper Wang. This is merely a small token of goodwill."

He presented a finely crafted box with both hands.

Wang Tang opened it slightly.

Inside lay a jade lion—carved exquisitely, gleaming softly. It was unmistakably valuable.

"I cannot accept gifts without reason—" Wang Tang began.

The steward laughed gently. "There is no request attached. My master simply admires Shopkeeper Wang's ability and character. Please be at ease—there is no impropriety intended."

Hearing this, Wang Tang relaxed. Pleased, he nodded. "Very well."

The steward clasped his hands. "Then I shall take my leave. When you have time, my master would be honored to invite you for wine and music."

"Excellent," Wang Tang said with a smile.

The steward departed promptly, making no demands at all.

Wang Tang felt almost buoyant.

Holding the gift box, he walked with noticeably lighter steps.

After circling the city and purchasing daily necessities, Wang Tang suddenly spotted Flat Rabbit emerging from a tavern that Gao Family Village had recently acquired.

Flat Rabbit's ancestral sword hung diagonally at his waist. His steps were exaggerated, his posture arrogant—his swagger somehow even more outrageous than Wang Tang's own.

Wang Tang hesitated. Should I greet him?

...No.

As a cultured intellectual, he found it hard to connect with the first-generation leaders of Gao Family Village. They lived in different worlds, spoke different languages. There was nothing to talk about.

Wang Tang quietly ducked behind a vegetable stall.

At that moment, he saw something unexpected.

The same steward who had just given him a gift now walked straight up to Flat Rabbit.

The steward bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Master Rabbit."

Flat Rabbit squinted at him. "Who are you?"

The steward hurriedly explained, "I am the steward of Master Zheng Qing, a contractor."

"A contractor?" Flat Rabbit asked. "What's that?"

Wang Tang almost laughed out loud.

Unbelievable. He doesn't even know what a contractor does.

Didn't he meet Teng Yifeng back then? How could he forget? Truly ignorant.

The steward looked awkward, but forced a polite smile and began explaining—at length—what contractors did, how they coordinated craftsmen, managed projects, and liaised with wealthy patrons.

Flat Rabbit nodded along. "Oh. So that's what it is. Sounds impressive."

The steward brightened. "My master has extensive connections throughout Xi'an. He knows people from all walks of life and loves making friends."

As he spoke, he produced the same kind of gift box and offered it forward.

"My master wishes to befriend you. There will be no requests, no impropriety."

Wang Tang thought, That's exactly what he told me.

Flat Rabbit will surely accept it.

But—

He was wrong.

Flat Rabbit didn't even reach for the box.

Instead, he jumped back three steps, eyes wide. "Whoa—are you trying to set me up, kid?"

The steward panicked. "Not at all! Just... just hoping to make a friend!"

"Spare me." Flat Rabbit snorted. "Do you think Master Rabbit is some naive child? I've been traversing the jianghu for over twenty years. What tricks haven't I seen?"

"Today it's 'making friends.' Tomorrow it's watching an opera together. After that, we'll be 'doing business,' right?"

"The Li family's stores in Xi'an—renovations, expansions, factory land—those projects should naturally go to 'good friends,' correct?"

The steward froze.

Flat Rabbit continued relentlessly, "And between good friends, we can't be too stingy, can we? No haggling over prices."

"Work that costs fifty taels elsewhere—your master would charge a hundred. And that extra fifty? Half for him, half for me. Isn't that how it goes?"

The steward said nothing.

Flat Rabbit suddenly drew his ancestral sword and pointed it straight at the steward's face.

"You look down on Master Rabbit, don't you?" he barked. "I've upheld justice and righted wrongs for over twenty years! You think I can be bought with a bit of jade?"

"Get lost. And don't let me see you again."

He paused, coughed lightly.

"...Well. Dao Xuan Tianzun says a knight-errant shouldn't violate prohibitions. Chopping people randomly with a sword is bad."

He sheathed the blade with a flourish, then raised a fist the size of a rice bowl.

"But punching people?"

"That's allowed."

Chapter 636: Just Give It to Them

The steward staggered backward several steps, utterly flustered, until his back hit the edge of the street. His legs went weak, and he nearly slid to the ground.

Flat Rabbit snorted twice, clapped the dust from his hands, and continued strolling down the street. He even began humming a little tune, wandering along without a care in the world.

Ahead of him, a beggar lay curled up by the roadside, looking miserable and pitiful.

Flat Rabbit paused.

He reached into his inner pocket and rummaged around for a long time—but couldn't find a single piece of silver. A rare hint of embarrassment flickered across his face.

After a moment's hesitation, he took off one shoe.

Three copper coins tumbled out.

Flat Rabbit bent down, placed the coins into the beggar's hand, nodded with satisfaction, and ambled off.

The instant the beggar closed his fingers around the coins, a powerful stench assaulted his nose.

With a thud, he collapsed backward onto the ground.

For a long while, he couldn't get back up.

Flat Rabbit walked away cheerfully, disappearing around the street corner.

Only then did Wang Tang cautiously emerge from his hiding place.

He first glanced in the direction where Flat Rabbit had vanished. Then he lowered his head and looked at the gift box still clutched in his hands.

In that instant, shame washed over him so strongly that he almost wished the ground would open up and swallow him whole.

At last, he understood.

Why Flat Rabbit was the main leader.

And why he himself was merely a subordinate.

In terms of ideological awareness, he was still far, far behind.

Taking two deep breaths, Wang Tang walked briskly forward. He placed the gift box back into the steward's hands.

"If you want work," he said calmly, "come to us openly and honestly. As long as your price is reasonable and your work is solid, we'll naturally give your master the business. Relying on gifts and connections—this is not the right path."

The steward stammered, "H-Hey? Hey?!"

Wang Tang ignored him. He took a few more steps forward, pulled a piece of silver from his pocket, and placed it into the beggar's hand—the poor fellow was still half-unconscious from the copper coins' aroma.

Then Wang Tang broke into a run, rounded the corner, crossed onto another street, and soon caught up with Flat Rabbit.

"Lord Rabbit!" Wang Tang called loudly.

"What a coincidence! Are you also out for a stroll?"

Flat Rabbit laughed heartily. "Just wandering around, seeing if there are any heroic deeds to be done! Hahaha! I just ran into a beggar who was so poor he couldn't even eat. In my great spirit of chivalry, this Lord Rabbit gave him a silver ingot."

He gestured with his hand, indicating something fist-sized.

"An ingot this big! Hahaha! He was overjoyed when he saw it!"

Wang Tang smiled. "Lord Rabbit truly is a model for our generation."

"A real hero of the jianghu must be bold and generous!" Flat Rabbit laughed again and reached out to clap Wang Tang on the shoulder.

"If the silver is too small, why even give it? When helping the poor, you give big pieces of silver! You, lad, should learn from your elder—this is how you walk the jianghu and become a true great hero! Hahahaha!"

Wang Tang said sincerely, "I still have much to learn from you."

"Oh, right," Flat Rabbit suddenly turned his head. "Xiao Tang, that first tavern we took over... hasn't it been losing money these past few days?"

Wang Tang nodded with a smile. "Yes. It has started losing money."

Flat Rabbit looked mortified. "That's terrible! When Dao Xuan Tianzun ordered me to take over that place, he warned me that randomly appointing people could lead to losses. That's why I only made the waiter an assistant manager and hired a middle-school graduate from Gao Family Village as the head manager."

He scratched his head, utterly baffled.

"How could it still be losing money? Middle-school graduates are incredible! They study the Heavenly Books—their knowledge is ten thousand times greater than mine! I really didn't expect even him to lose money."

Wang Tang smiled. "That's because this batch of middle-school students lacks social experience. In that regard, they still need to learn from older, seasoned people."

He continued, "Would you consider inviting back that somewhat fierce head manager we dismissed last time?"

Flat Rabbit frowned. "That fellow is nasty—very harsh with his subordinates."

Wang Tang replied gently, "But perhaps it's precisely because he's harsh that his subordinates obey him strictly and follow regulations. Our middle-school graduates are fresh out of school. They're easily deceived by junior staff—procurement tricks, stolen ingredients... with all these small schemes, losses are inevitable."

Flat Rabbit slapped his forehead. "So that's how it is!"

Wang Tang went on, "Speaking of which, the truly troublesome issue is the coal mine we're operating jointly with the Prince of Qin's Residence."

Flat Rabbit blinked. "Oh? What's wrong with it?"

Wang Tang spread his hands.

"The stewards from the Prince of Qin's Residence want more control. After shares were delineated, we sent our technical personnel to build the factory on their land. But once the factory was completed and running smoothly, they suddenly grew bold again—constantly scheming to force out our people and seize full control."

Flat Rabbit looked completely lost. "Then... what should we do?"

Wang Tang shook his head. "I don't know either."

At that moment, the Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet on Flat Rabbit's chest chuckled.

"The Baqiao Iron Mine has two pits, and two factories, correct?" it said.

"Since the Prince of Qin's Residence wants control so badly, just give them one."

"Withdraw all technical and management personnel from one factory. Hand that mine over entirely. We'll simply wait for our sixty percent share of the profits."

Flat Rabbit hesitated. "Is... is that really alright?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed.

"I've said it before—backward systems restrict advanced productive forces. Let the Prince of Qin's Residence manage an advanced factory with backward methods. We'll see how long it lasts."

"Also," it added, "inform Wu Shen and Shi Kefa. Have them witness the outcome with their own eyes."

Flat Rabbit still didn't quite understand.

But Wang Tang did.

"If Wu Shen and Shi Kefa personally witness how backward systems restrain advanced productivity," he said slowly, "they'll be forced to reflect. The more people who think about this, the faster the nation can change."

"Exactly," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied.

That evening, Wang Tang visited Wu Shen and Shi Kefa and explained in detail the Prince of Qin's Residence's attempt to seize control of the coal mine.

The two civil officials had no good solution.

They weren't afraid of the Prince of Qin's Residence—but they were helpless against them. After all, the Baqiao Coal Mine lay within the Prince of Qin's fief. Fundamentally speaking, it was originally their property.

Forceful intervention was simply impossible.

Wang Tang said, "Our Master Li is deeply angered by their conduct. He has decided to withdraw all technical and management personnel from one factory, cease involvement in its construction and operation, and remain only a shareholder—collecting dividends."

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa sighed.

"Master Li has truly been placed in a difficult position," they said.

"That coal mine was originally theirs. With two factories, it's natural they'd want one back. Since they insist, let them have it."

"As long as they still deliver the agreed sixty percent of profits, there's no need for us to clash with the Prince of Qin's Residence."

Chapter 637: Savior to the Masses

Henan Province.

No one could stop the breach at Mengjin County.

The Yellow River continued to rage, wild and unrestrained.

In just a few short days, the river changed its course again and again, like a colossal yellow dragon twisting across the plains at will. Wherever it passed, the land was reshaped.

The plains around Luoyang were completely swallowed by floodwaters.

The imperial court offered no relief.

Or rather—given its current condition—it was no longer capable of organizing large-scale disaster relief at all.

Mengjin County.

The Yellow River had finally shifted away, flowing elsewhere, and the floodwaters surrounding the county town slowly receded.

What remained was a vast, sickening yellow-brown wasteland, every inch covered in thick, sticky mud.

The common folk who had survived by sheltering inside Mengjin County town—protected by its walls—now carried hoes, shovels, and every crude tool they could find. They began digging outward from the city gate tunnels.

They dug with everything they had.

At last, they cleared a narrow stretch of road.

Then... they collapsed.

The city had run out of food.

Mengjin County town had been cut off like an isolated island for several days. No merchant caravans could pass through. The already meager grain reserves were quickly exhausted.

The people rationed every mouthful, scraping by on dwindling stores.

They had endured until the waters receded.

Now the county magistrate urgently organized the populace for self-rescue. Using primitive tools, they tried to dig through the mud, hoping to clear the official road and reconnect with Luoyang City—hoping to secure desperately needed supplies.

But how could starving people muster strength?

They dug only briefly before collapsing again, sitting on the ground and gasping for breath. They stared at the pitifully short section of road they had cleared, then at the boundless sea of yellow mud stretching ahead.

A crushing sense of despair settled over everyone.

Suddenly, an old soldier on lookout atop the city walls shouted,

"Everyone—look! Look to the west!"

The people instinctively turned their heads.

Out there, in the endless yellow mire to the west, a large cluster of boats appeared—heading straight toward Mengjin County town.

"Boats?"

That made no sense.

There was no water outside—only mud. How could boats travel here?

The sentry squinted hard, then suddenly understood.

"They're not boats! They're small craft—mud sleds!"

Some well-traveled elders recognized them at once.

"Someone's made mud sleds and is paddling them here!"

"But... they're coming from the west," someone said nervously. "Not from Luoyang. West means Xiaolangdi... could they be pirates?"

That thought sent a chill through the crowd.

The Mengjin magistrate immediately shouted, "They could be pirates! Everyone, retreat into the city! Close the gates!"

The common folk scrambled back inside. The gates slammed shut. People crowded onto the city walls, watching the approaching mud sleds with tense eyes.

The sleds moved fast—nearly forty li an hour across the mud.

Before long, they reached the outskirts of the city.

On the foremost mud sled stood two men.

One was powerfully built, muscles corded as he paddled with steady strokes.

The other stood proudly at the front, hands clasped behind his back. He wore flowing white robes and struck a dramatic pose, as though performing on a stage rather than crossing a sea of mud.

In this vast yellow wasteland, his presence felt utterly absurd.

The mud sled jolted slightly. The man in white swayed, nearly losing his footing—but with a smooth twist, he regained balance and burst out laughing.

"Among a gentleman's six arts," he declared loudly, "I am particularly skilled in charioteering! There's no way I'd fall off while charioteering a mud sled!"

Behind him, the muscular man—his household retainer—forced a wry smile.

"My lord... I am the one charioteering," he said helplessly. "You're just riding."

The man in white cleared his throat and pretended not to hear a word.

The people on the walls exchanged baffled looks.

These didn't look like pirates.

Pirates weren't usually this theatrical.

The man in white looked up and cupped his fist toward the city wall.

"Greetings, everyone," he called. "My name is Bai Yuan, from Shaanxi. I've traded along the Yellow River for years and manage a fleet. Passing through Luoyang, I saw the suffering here and came specifically to help."

The Mengjin magistrate blurted out, "You're... not pirates?"

Bai Yuan looked offended. "Do I look like a pirate? Even in dire circumstances, I don't forget proper conduct. Among the six arts, I'm especially particular about rites. I'm a gentleman! A gentleman! How could a gentleman be a thief?"

The magistrate fell completely silent.

For a good thirty seconds, he had no idea how to respond.

The common folk were equally torn between exasperation and disbelief.

What is this man doing here—performing?

They would soon understand.

Bai Yuan half-turned and swept his arm backward.

"Mengjin has suffered a great calamity," he said. "You've been trapped inside the city for days. Supplies must be tight."

"Do not worry."

"I've hired laborers to build five hundred mud sleds and brought five hundred sacks of grain. Let this serve as emergency relief."

Behind him, across the yellow sea, countless mud sleds glided closer. As far as the eye could see, long trails carved through the mire.

Each sled carried a strong paddler—and one large, bulging canvas sack.

"Throw down a rope!" Bai Yuan called.

The magistrate hurriedly ordered ropes lowered.

One sack was tied and hauled up.

The moment it was opened—grain spilled into view.

Each sack held roughly one shi.

Five hundred sleds.

Five hundred shi.

Sixty to seventy thousand jin of grain.

Enough to give the entire county town several full meals.

Doubt vanished.

Seeing that Bai Yuan's men carried no weapons, the last trace of suspicion dissolved.

The magistrate shouted joyfully, "They're friends! Open the gates—open them wide!"

The city gates opened once more.

Mud sleds glided inside.

Bai Yuan entered with his five hundred men.

The people of Mengjin erupted into cheers.

"Good Samaritan Bai!"

"Good Samaritan Bai!"

Bai Yuan basked in it. This was his favorite moment.

He raised both hands, waving grandly.

"Fear not! I'm here—you're saved! All of you will be saved!"

The magistrate pushed through the crowd and bowed deeply.

"Sir Bai, donating five hundred shi of grain—this is nothing short of salvation. To call you a Savior to the Masses would be no exaggeration."

Bai Yuan waved dismissively.

"No need for such courtesy. Please arrange porridge at once—let the starving eat first. Once everyone's fed, we can discuss everything else."

Chapter 638: Master Bai Is So Powerful

Smoke soon rose from every chimney in Mengjin County.

The townspeople—who had been starving for days—each received a portion of flour. Fires were hastily lit, pots were set on stoves, and thin gruel began to bubble everywhere. As they cooked, people murmured a single name over and over again, voices filled with gratitude.

"Master Bai... Master Bai..."

On the city wall, however, the Mengjin county magistrate was not nearly so carefree.

In times like these, he thought, one shi of grain fetches at least three or four taels of silver. Five hundred shi... that's close to two thousand taels.

No small sum at all.

For Master Bai to give such a massive donation with a wave of his hand... if he truly acts out of pure benevolence, then fine. But if there are conditions attached... those conditions will be no small matter.

With that in mind, the magistrate resolved to treat Bai Yuan with the utmost caution.

He looked out over the vast yellow sea of mud beyond the city walls, then finally lowered his voice.

"Master Bai," he said carefully, "as the saying goes, 'one accepts no reward without merit.' You have come and bestowed such an enormous gift upon Mengjin County. May I ask... what does Master Bai require of us?"

Bai Yuan smiled faintly.

"Your Excellency worries too much," he said. "I have no demands at all."

The magistrate blinked. "Eh?"

Bai Yuan continued calmly, "When I arrived earlier, I noticed the people of Mengjin County had opened the South Gate and were digging silt from the official road leading south."

The magistrate nodded. "Yes. Mengjin has become an isolated island. If the people are to survive, their only option is to clear the road southward to Luoyang. Otherwise, we'll remain trapped here, waiting for death."

Bai Yuan shook his head gently.

"Forgive my bluntness, Your Excellency—but clearing the road to Luoyang may not be as useful as you imagine."

The magistrate stiffened. "Eh?"

Bai Yuan explained, "Can Luoyang truly rescue Mengjin County? The Yellow River has changed its course and flooded nearly the entire Henan plain. It's not only Mengjin—countless counties have become isolated, and countless people have lost their livelihoods. How many counties can Luoyang possibly save?"

The magistrate froze.

Indeed.

How many could Luoyang save?

If every surrounding county cried for help, the most likely outcome was that Luoyang's officials would save none of them at all.

His hands trembled slightly. For the first time, he felt truly helpless.

Bai Yuan spoke again, his tone steady. "In my humble opinion, it would be better to clear the official road to the west."

"The west?" the magistrate asked. "Toward Hengshui Town?"

"Exactly," Bai Yuan replied. "Clear the silt westward first and open the road to Hengshui Town. That town escaped the flood and remains intact. Once the road is open, my caravan can continue supplying grain to all of you."

Only then did the magistrate fully understand.

This man had no intention of simply dumping five hundred shi of grain and leaving.

He planned to keep helping.

Such generosity left the magistrate both moved—and uneasy.

Then another concern struck him.

"Hengshui Town is only twenty li from Eagle Beak Mountain," he said in a low voice. "The Yellow Turban Fortress there is infested with river pirates. Master Bai... your caravan—"

Bai Yuan smiled. "No need to worry. The river pirates of Eagle Beak Mountain have already been dealt with by me."

The magistrate was stunned.

"Dealt with?"

"For now, my fleet can transport grain from Shaanxi and unload it at the base of Eagle Beak Mountain," Bai Yuan continued. "Your people can pass through Hengshui Town, collect the supplies at the riverbank, and transport them back to Mengjin. The round trip is about forty li—easily done in a single day. That way, everyone here can survive."

The magistrate was shaken.

For over a thousand years, no dynasty had ever truly resolved the pirate problem in Xiaolangdi. And yet this man casually claimed to have wiped them out?

Seeing his expression, Bai Yuan immediately laughed.

"I exaggerated a little just now," he said. "I only cleared the Yellow Turban Fortress on Eagle Beak Mountain. As for Shizu Mountain, Huanglu Mountain, Mopan Mountain, Basket Hollow, and the rest—those pirate dens still exist."

"Ah!" The magistrate finally exhaled in relief.

That made sense.

If all of Xiaolangdi's pirates had been eliminated, he would have suspected Bai Yuan was an immortal.

The magistrate cupped his hands. "Very well. This official will immediately organize laborers to clear the road westward toward Hengshui Town, and open the land route as soon as possible."

Bai Yuan nodded. "Good. Before the road is cleared, we can rely on mud sleds for transport and communication. Before I depart, I'll leave twenty mud sleds here. If Your Excellency needs to contact me, simply send someone by mud sled to Hengshui Town. I'll leave a contact point there."

The magistrate hesitated, then ventured, "When Master Bai departs later... might this official send some men to accompany you? Just to... observe matters firsthand."

"That would be excellent," Bai Yuan replied readily.

With the agreement settled, the magistrate went to make arrangements.

He dispatched his trusted aide, Liu Bawan, and selected around a dozen capable constables and attendants, forming a team of twenty men.

Bai Yuan had his subordinates set aside twenty mud sleds and handed them over.

The devices were easy to learn—anyone could figure them out after one try.

The problem was...

After a few pushes, every rider ended up covered head to toe in mud.

Only Bai Yuan remained spotless.

He never "drove" the sled himself—he was always the passenger. His white robes fluttered cleanly in the wind as he stood at the front, looking every bit the elegant gentleman, leading a grand convoy of five hundred mud sleds westward.

From Mengjin County to Hengshui Town was only twenty li in a straight line.

Mud sleds could reach forty li per hour, and even the untrained constables managed twenty to thirty. In less than half an hour, the group arrived.

Once they reached Hengshui Town, the mud sleds became useless.

The ground here was dry and solid—untouched by the flood.

Liu Bawan jumped down, his boots landing firmly on earth. Only then did his heart truly settle.

He looked up—and froze.

Hengshui Town was under massive construction.

Town walls were being built, houses rebuilt, roads leveled. It was clear this wasn't simple repair—it was the creation of an entirely new town. Large numbers of common folk worked tirelessly, carrying loads on their shoulders and in their hands.

Liu Bawan couldn't help asking, astonished, "Hengshui Town was small and rundown, close to Eagle Beak Mountain, and constantly looted by river pirates. Now, right after a disaster... they're already rebuilding?"

Bai Yuan smiled. "The pirates are gone, so the area is safe. And many disaster victims have nothing to do. If they eat their fill but don't use their strength, wouldn't that be wasteful? Better to let them expand the town—and earn wages while doing so."

Liu Bawan blinked. "Wages? Who's paying for all this?"

Bai Yuan pointed to himself.

"I am."

Liu Bawan was overwhelmed.

Not only does he distribute grain to save lives... he even pays the people to rebuild.

This isn't just benevolence.

This is power.

Chapter 639: Building Yellow Turban Fortress

The development of Hengshui Town was, naturally, inseparable from the long-term plans of Gao Family Village.

After all, the Yellow Turban Fortress on Eagle Beak Mountain was highly likely to be transformed into a fully militarized stronghold in the future. If that happened, it would be extremely inconvenient to have large numbers of warships concealed there while ordinary civilians wandered in and out every day.

Because of this, Bai Yuan—who was also known internally as Li Daoxuan—had already formulated a clear development plan.

Hengshui Town and Yellow Turban Fortress would be built up simultaneously.

Once both locations were completed, carefully vetted and trustworthy individuals would be left behind at Yellow Turban Fortress. Over time, they would either become soldiers of the Gao Family Village militia or logistical personnel for the river fleet.

As for the majority of the common folk, they would be settled in Hengshui Town.

Separating the military from the civilians—this was the only truly rational approach.

Of course, none of this could be explained to the magistrate's aide. Let him assume the town was being rebuilt on a whim; that was simpler and safer.

Once the mud sleds were no longer needed, the group continued on foot.

Moving at a brisk pace, they covered more than a dozen li, arriving at their destination in just over an hour.

Ahead rose the famous Eagle Beak Mountain.

Even now, Liu Bawan felt an instinctive chill when he looked at it. Among the people living nearby, who wasn't afraid of the Xiaolangdi water bandits?

Yet before they had even begun ascending the mountain, he saw something unexpected.

The slopes were filled with people.

Common folk were digging earth, carrying stones, and laying foundations, busily constructing roads that wound their way up and down the mountain. These roads were deliberately designed with long, winding curves, clearly meant to reduce the slope and make passage easier for carts and horses.

Workers were everywhere. The entire mountainside buzzed with activity.

This was not the sort of work water bandits would ever do.

Only honest, hardworking common folk would toil like this.

The fear in Liu Bawan's heart vanished instantly, replaced by a flicker of excitement.

"So many laborers?" he exclaimed. "Master Bai, where did you find so many people to build roads?"

Bai Yuan sighed softly. "All of them are disaster victims from the Yellow River flood zone."

Liu Bawan immediately understood.

Master Bai had built more than five hundred mud sleds. Of course, they weren't meant solely to rescue the people inside the county town.

The common folk scattered across the countryside needed saving even more.

During a natural disaster, those sheltering behind city walls still had a chance to survive. But rural villagers—trapped on rooftops or isolated hills—would starve to death within three to five days if no one reached them.

Clearly, Master Bai had used the mud sleds to rescue large numbers of rural common folk first, before ever coming to Mengjin County.

Liu Bawan's respect deepened further.

The group followed the newly carved mountain road and soon arrived at a battered fortress clinging to the mountainside.

Bai Yuan smiled faintly. "Aide Liu, care to guess what fortress this is?"

Liu Bawan's heart skipped. "Yellow... Yellow Turban Fortress?"

"Correct," Bai Yuan chuckled. "This is the Yellow Turban Fortress where water bandits entrenched themselves for years. A few days ago, I led my household guards and the refugees in an assault and captured every bandit inside. From now on, this fortress belongs to the refugees."

As they spoke, a group of common folk emerged from the fortress gate, carrying shovels and sledgehammers, clearly heading out to join the road construction.

When they spotted Bai Yuan, they immediately bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Master Bai!"

Bai Yuan straightened his robes, struck a dashing pose, and waved cheerfully.

"Greetings, everyone!"

Liu Bawan was stunned.

Such a powerful lord... yet he greets ordinary common folk so warmly, even returning their bows?

Just then, Bai Yuan laughed. "No matter who greets me, I always return the courtesy properly. Of the gentleman's six arts, I'm especially particular about 'rites.'"

Liu Bawan was left speechless.

Entering Yellow Turban Fortress, he saw construction everywhere.

Fortress walls were being rebuilt, watchtowers and arrow towers erected, living quarters expanded. Men labored tirelessly, while large numbers of women cooked meals, boiled water, and washed clothes, efficiently managing logistics.

After walking through the fortress inside and out, Liu Bawan realized there were no fewer than twenty thousand common folk here.

The scale was astonishing.

At the innermost area lay a vast open ground.

There, a large group of able-bodied young men stood in neat formation, arranged in rows. Each held a wooden staff and was clearly undergoing training. A man dressed in Bai family guard attire commanded loudly from the front:

"Left turn!"

"Right turn!"

"Forward—march!"

Liu Bawan nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Master Bai!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing? Are you training troops for rebellion?!"

"Rebellion?" Bai Yuan shook his head with a smile. "I am a law-abiding commoner. How could I possibly train troops for rebellion? This is merely militia training—preparing to deal with the dozens of smaller water bandit factions still lurking in Xiaolangdi."

He continued calmly, "The Xiaolangdi water bandits have existed for over a thousand years. The authorities suppress them again and again but never truly eradicate them, largely because they commit too few resources. I've given it careful thought—only a large militia, sweeping through the entire region like a carpet, can leave the bandits with nowhere to hide."

Liu Bawan pondered this. It did sound reasonable.

Bai Yuan went on, "After eliminating the bandits, we must also station common folk in their former strongholds, turning those places into proper settlements. Only then will the water bandits have no chance of reemerging."

Liu Bawan thought it over again, then his eyes lit up.

"Brilliant! Truly brilliant! Places where bandits gather are always devoid of ordinary people. Once common folk settle there, the bandits will lose their foothold entirely. Only this method can eradicate the Xiaolangdi water bandits once and for all!"

He hurriedly bowed deeply.

"Master Bai, what extraordinary talent!"

Bai Yuan merely chuckled inwardly.

If I raised a banner tomorrow, he thought, every one of these people would follow me into rebellion. But there's no need to tell you that.

Just as the two were speaking, a shout rang out from the watchtower.

"Water bandits! Water bandits approaching on the river!"

Liu Bawan's heart clenched.

The twenty yamen runners and attendants who had accompanied him immediately began to tremble.

But inside the fortress, there was no panic.

Many workers simply paused what they were doing and looked toward the water.

Below Eagle Beak Mountain, a flotilla of small sampans appeared—around twenty boats in total. Each carried five or six water bandits, adding up to roughly a hundred men. On the lead boat fluttered a banner bearing a single character:

Li.

Liu Bawan gasped. "Where did these water bandits come from?"

Bai Yuan glanced at them and smiled faintly.

"From the southern waters," he said confidently. "Led by Li Dayu, chieftain of Stone Stronghold. He usually keeps his distance from our fortress. For him to show his face today..."

His smile deepened slightly.

"...it seems he's been left alone for too long and is itching for trouble."

Chapter 640: Master Bai the Benevolent

Eliminates Another Scourge

Ever since Bai Yuan seized Yellow Turban Fortress, he had never stopped moving.

One bandit stronghold after another was discovered, surrounded, and crushed. Within a short time, a large number of water bandits in the surrounding region had already been wiped out.

But Xiaolangdi was vast—an enormous, churning "pond." No matter how thorough the sweep, a few fish would always slip through the net.

Li Dayu was one such survivor.

This man usually entrenched himself deep within Mopan Mountain, inside a stone-built fortress that rivaled Eagle Beak Mountain in height and difficulty. It was a hard nut to crack, and not something that could be taken lightly.

In fact, Bai Yuan had already dispatched scouts to pinpoint the exact location of the stone fortress. Preparations for an assault on Mopan Mountain were nearly complete.

Then fate intervened.

The Yellow River shifted course yet again. The floodwaters around Mengjin County receded.

With the water gone, the rescue boats became useless overnight. Bai Yuan was forced to divert manpower and materials into urgently constructing mud sleds to save the stranded population.

Because of that interruption, the attack on Mopan Mountain had been temporarily postponed.

What Bai Yuan had not expected was that the very bandits he had spared for later would take this as weakness—and launch an attack themselves.

Such audacity.

Bai Yuan's voice rang out across the mountain.

"Militia—advance! Attack from both land and water! Erase that stone fortress!"

At first glance, there seemed to be almost no one around him. Yellow Turban Fortress was still under construction, and only a handful of visible guards stood nearby.

Yet the instant his command fell, a militia soldier burst out from behind a tree.

"Yes, sir!"

Then another appeared.

Then another.

In the blink of an eye, militia soldiers emerged from every direction—as if the mountain itself had given birth to them.

One group sprinted toward the riverbank, rushing to ready the boats.

Another group moved inland, forming up for a land assault toward Mopan Mountain.

Even the young recruits—who moments earlier had been training with wooden staves behind the fortress—abandoned their drills and surged toward the main gate.

These were fresh recruits, newly drawn from the refugees. They were not yet qualified to carry flintlock rifles.

But cold weapons?

Those posed no problem at all.

At the fortress gate, a squad of militia soldiers dragged out a massive wicker basket, filled to the brim with weapons: swords, spears, bows, arrows, shields.

The recruits grabbed what they could.

Some chose bows, slinging quivers across their backs.

Others hefted long spears.

Some took shields in one hand and sabers in the other.

In mere moments, a cold-weapon force of more than a thousand men was assembled.

Liu Bawan stood frozen, staring at the scene in disbelief.

"Master Bai..." he breathed. "You've raised such a militia in the blink of an eye?"

"Raised?" Bai Yuan laughed loudly. "Hardly. This bunch just grabbed whatever they could find. They've only just started training—calling them impressive would be an exaggeration."

He waved his hand casually.

"Now, the militia I organized back in Chengcheng County—that was something worth boasting about. They defeated people like Bu Zhan Ni and Bai Yuzhu."

Liu Bawan recoiled.

"Bu Zhan Ni? Bai Yuzhu?" His eyes widened. "Those are infamous bandit leaders!"

"They were," Bai Yuan replied calmly. "Before they were beaten."

Liu Bawan's admiration surged like a tide.

Anyone capable of defeating those two was no mere wealthy merchant. This was a man of real substance—someone worthy of absolute trust.

Before they could exchange more words, the massive cargo ships of Gao Family Village surged forward from the reeds.

From Liu Bawan's vantage point, the sight was overwhelming.

The flat-bottomed ships were enormous—like moving fortresses on the water.

"What colossal vessels..." he gasped. "How much grain can a single ship carry? No wonder Master Bai could provide Mengjin County with such vast relief supplies."

The ships slammed into the bandits' sampans.

Battle erupted instantly.

From halfway up Eagle Beak Mountain, Liu Bawan could only see the broad strokes of the fight—boats colliding, figures scattering—but that was more than enough.

Then—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sharp crack of flintlock rifles echoed across the river.

Boom!

A hand grenade detonated.

Liu Bawan flinched.

"Firearms?" he asked hesitantly. "Master Bai... aren't these weapons... perhaps a bit excessive?"

"You mean illegal?" Bai Yuan chuckled.

Liu Bawan smiled awkwardly. "Just... slightly."

"Spend some time in Shaanxi," Bai Yuan said lightly. "Then you'll understand. Without weapons like these, how does one survive the rebels?"

Liu Bawan paused, then nodded slowly.

Indeed—Shaanxi had been in flames for years. And during the Japanese pirate raids in Jiangnan, even common folk had taken up firearms. The court might call them illegal, but after the chaos ended, it rarely bothered to investigate.

With that thought, his unease faded.

The river battle ended swiftly.

Li Dayu was cut down. The remaining bandits scattered like startled fish.

At the same time, the land-based militia reached the base of Mopan Mountain.

The scouts had already locked onto the stone fortress's location. The assault proceeded with brutal efficiency.

From Eagle Beak Mountain, flames flickered faintly on Mopan Mountain to the south.

The crack of rifles and the thunder of explosions echoed between the peaks.

Bai Yuan raised a telescope and observed for a moment.

Then he smiled.

"Good. The stone fortress has fallen."

Liu Bawan blinked. "You can see that clearly?"

Bai Yuan handed him the telescope. "See for yourself."

Liu Bawan peered through it—and gasped.

The distant mountain leapt closer. Dense forests parted, revealing the hidden fortress.

Militia soldiers poured inside, blades flashing as water bandits fell one after another.

Liu Bawan clenched his fists.

"Kill them! Cut them down!" he shouted, exhilarated. "Watching these scoundrels wiped out—it feels indescribably satisfying!"

After a long while, a thunderous cheer rose from Mopan Mountain.

The battle was over.

Liu Bawan returned the telescope, letting out a long sigh.

"Master Bai the Benevolent... another great scourge has been erased."

"It's still too early to celebrate," Bai Yuan replied calmly. "Xiaolangdi is vast. Clearing it will take time. And this region straddles both Mengjin County and Xin'an County..."

"We won't interfere in Xin'an County," Liu Bawan said quickly. "But as for Mengjin County—I can promise you on behalf of the magistrate. Do as you see fit. We will not obstruct you in any way."

Bai Yuan smiled.

"Excellent."

Having seen everything he needed, Liu Bawan clasped his fists.

"I will return at once to report to the magistrate. Mengjin County will accelerate the opening of the land route to Hengshui Town. We hope to deepen our cooperation."

"Excellent," Bai Yuan repeated.

Liu Bawan led his men down Eagle Beak Mountain, returned to Hengshui Town, and mounted the waiting mud sleds.

They splashed through the endless yellow sludge back toward Mengjin County.

After hearing the full report, the magistrate fell silent for a long time.

Finally, he sighed.

"Forget it. Even if there are problems... what can I possibly do about them?"

Just keeping this disaster-stricken county alive already consumed every ounce of his strength.