

Great Ming 641

Chapter 641: Zhu Cunji's Coal Mine

The Baqiao Coal Mine in Xi'an was divided into two separate pits.

One was called Baqiao Coal Pit.

The other was Baqiao Coal Factory No. 1.

Just from the names alone, one could tell they were very different in nature.

The Baqiao Coal Pit was an old asset of the Prince of Qin's Residence. It had been mined continuously for centuries, generation after generation.

By contrast, Baqiao Coal Factory No. 1 was a brand-new operation. It had been opened by Gao Family Village after their arrival, built from the ground up in a coal-rich area that the Prince of Qin's Residence had formally ceded to them.

Because the Prince of Qin's Residence and Gao Family Village were, at that time, in a temporary "cooperative relationship," Gao Family Village did not hold back.

All the newest mining technologies were used at Coal Factory No. 1—and, generously, those same techniques were also introduced into the old Baqiao Coal Pit.

Small rail carts, driven by gear systems, ran straight from the mine entrance deep underground. Coal ore could be transported rapidly and continuously, saving enormous amounts of manpower and time.

The result was immediate.

The output of the Prince of Qin's centuries-old Baqiao Coal Pit skyrocketed.

At first, the Prince of Qin's Residence was delighted.

They were more than happy to let Gao Family Village handle all management and technical matters. They simply sat back and took forty percent of the profits, doing almost nothing themselves.

But then—

Human nature reared its head.

After a few months, the people of the Prince of Qin's Residence began to feel they had "learned enough." They believed they had mastered Gao Family Village's techniques, and at the same time, they found Gao Family Village's management methods far too lenient.

Gradually, they began testing the waters, probing again and again, attempting to reclaim real control over Baqiao Coal Pit.

The moment Li Daoxuan gave the word, Gao Family Village complied without resistance.

They withdrew all administrative staff.

They withdrew all technical personnel.

They handed everything back—cleanly and completely.

The Prince of Qin's heir, Zhu Cunji, was overjoyed.

He immediately dispatched his own steward to take over the coal pit.

And from that very day onward—

Zhu Cunji's nightmare began.

The newly appointed steward was eager to make his mark.

His first act was simple and brutal: withhold wages.

In his eyes, these rough miners—earning three taels of silver per month—were being paid far too well. So he invented excuses out of thin air and cut their pay down to two taels.

As for the missing tael?

Naturally, it found its way into the steward's pocket... with a portion diverted to the pit manager as well.

The miners were furious.

Many of them quit on the spot.

Those who refused to swallow this injustice immediately left Baqiao Coal Pit and crossed over to Baqiao Coal Factory No. 1, which was still under Gao Family Village's management.

The steward's second move followed quickly.

Pocketing phantom wages.

It was an old trick, long used by military officers: list a thousand men on the rolls, recruit only six hundred, and quietly swallow the pay of the remaining four hundred.

The steward applied the same tactic to the coal mine.

The miners who quit were never replaced. Their positions remained "on the books" but empty in reality.

The wages for those nonexistent workers went straight into the steward's purse.

But with fewer hands actually working underground, coal production inevitably plummeted.

What, then, to do about the falling output?

That led to the steward's third move.

False reporting.

Every day, Zhu Cunji received bad news:

"The miners fought again today—output dropped sharply."

"Heavy rain flooded the pit bottom; work must stop for five days."

"A transport cart overturned halfway down the road and rolled into a ravine. Severe losses."

Zhu Cunji:

"AAARGH!"

The scene shifted.

It turned out that this entire series of disasters was being recounted—with great relish—by Wu Shen.

At this moment, Wu Shen, Shi Kefa, and Dao Xuan Tianzun were seated together in a private room at the largest restaurant in Xi'an.

The table was covered in fine dishes. Wine cups clinked.

Wu Shen slapped the table and burst out laughing.

"Zhu Cunji has really stabbed himself in the foot this time! Hahahaha! He's holed up inside the Prince of Qin's Residence, knows absolutely nothing about what's happening outside, and gets played like a fool by his own steward! I'm dying of laughter!"

Shi Kefa also chuckled.

"The collapse in coal output has driven him to desperation. His textile factory uses steam-powered looms from Gao Family Village—yet now there's not enough coal to keep the engines running. He's even forced to send people to Baqiao Coal Factory No. 1 to buy coal just to keep things barely operational."

He shook his head, amused.

"Utterly ridiculous."

The two officials laughed heartily, slapping the table so hard that wine cups rattled and nearly tipped over.

Only Li Daoxuan did not laugh.

A faint, strange smile lingered on his lips.

Noticing this, the two officials gradually sobered.

"Squire Li," Wu Shen said cautiously, "it seems you have something on your mind?"

Li Daoxuan spread his hands.

"Gentlemen, what if we... broaden our perspective a little?"

They blinked.

"Oh?"

Li Daoxuan continued calmly:

"Imagine this:

Zhu Cunji is the Emperor.

The Baqiao Coal Pit is the entire realm.

And the steward of the Prince of Qin's Residence—he represents the officials of the imperial court."

"What do you think?"

The instant those words fell, both men's expressions changed.

This—

Good heavens.

An heir confined within his residence, utterly deceived by his subordinates...

How was that any different from an Emperor shut away in the Forbidden City, completely misled by his court?

Wu Shen broke out in a cold sweat.

Shi Kefa went rigid.

After a long pause, Shi Kefa spoke hurriedly:

"Wait—let me explain! His Majesty established the Jinyiwei precisely to prevent such deception! As a Jinyiwei officer, I exist to see what the Emperor cannot see, and hear what he cannot hear!"

Wu Shen snapped back to himself as well.

"Exactly! As an Imperial Censor, I am His Majesty's eyes and ears. My role in Shaanxi is to monitor corruption and ensure the Emperor is not deceived!"

Li Daoxuan applauded softly.

"Excellent officials. Truly loyal to the Great Ming and to His Majesty. Admirable."

Then his tone shifted.

"But tell me—how much of what you report upward actually gets acted upon?"

He leaned forward slightly.

"Does the Emperor always listen?"

"Or does he sometimes choose to close his eyes and cover his ears, believing that as long as he neither sees nor hears, the realm will remain peaceful?"

His voice cooled.

"Or perhaps..."

"...some of these so-called 'eyes and ears' are already rotten at the root?"

Wu Shen froze.

Shi Kefa froze.

Li Daoxuan said nothing more.

He had made his point. Let it sink in.

Just then, the street outside abruptly fell silent.

A large carriage rolled to a stop.

The curtains were drawn aside.

Zhu Cunji stepped down and strode toward the restaurant.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"He's here," he said.

"The main character has arrived."

Chapter 642: No Solution

Zhu Cunji took the stairs two at a time, charging straight up to the second floor of the tavern.

He knew exactly who was drinking here. He even knew which private room they were in.

The moment he stepped inside, he didn't hesitate in the slightest—walking directly to the door, lifting his hand, and knocking lightly.

Inside, Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"Please, come in, Your Highness."

The door opened.

Zhu Cunji entered, his face dark and tight with irritation.

Three men sat around a square table. One side had clearly been left empty—almost as if it had been reserved for him.

Zhu Cunji dropped into the seat, poured himself a full cup of wine, threw it back in one gulp, then stared hard at the three men opposite him.

Though four people sat at the table, they actually represented three different factions.

The Prince of Qin's household.

The scholar-officials.

And Li Daoxuan alone.

Everyone present knew one thing very clearly:

the Prince of Qin's household and the scholar-official faction were sworn enemies.

Everyone knew it.

No one said it out loud.

After several heartbeats of silence, Zhu Cunji finally spoke.

"Why?"

His tone was low and tight, the sound of a man barely holding himself together.

Wu Shen frowned slightly.

"Your Highness's 'why' is rather vague. We truly don't understand what you mean."

Zhu Cunji's eyes flashed.

"Don't pretend. You know exactly what I'm asking."

Wu Shen replied calmly,

"Your household maintains private guards and controls the Eastern Guard—one of Xi'an's four garrisons. With that much manpower, surely you've already discovered the reason yourself?"

Zhu Cunji let out a cold snort.

"I did. And that's exactly why I'm furious."

His voice dropped.

"That steward... he's been with me since I was a child. An old family retainer. He watched me grow up. I treated him like an elder uncle."

Zhu Cunji clenched his fist.

"Why would he do this to me?"

For once, Wu Shen had no answer.

The room fell silent.

Zhu Cunji turned his gaze to Li Daoxuan.

"Mr. Li. When you withdrew your people, you must have expected this. That's why you left so decisively—just to teach me this lesson, wasn't it?"

Li Daoxuan smiled—but said nothing.

That faint smile, worn by a face that was clearly not human, sent an inexplicable chill crawling up Zhu Cunji's spine.

After a moment, Li Daoxuan relaxed his lips.

"I only knew there would be a problem," he said calmly. "I didn't know when it would happen. It was only after it occurred that I realized the steward had betrayed you."

He spread his hands slightly.

"So no—I didn't plan it in advance. I'm merely a strategist after the fact."

Zhu Cunji's expression shifted.

Something clicked.

"You're saying... even if the steward hadn't betrayed me, the coal mine would still have run into trouble?"

"Exactly," Li Daoxuan said with a grin.

"There are countless ways for things to go wrong. Even if he'd been loyal to the bone, the end result would still be the same."

"Output drops."

Zhu Cunji pressed,

"Such as?"

Li Daoxuan answered easily.

"For example, we upgrade our rail carts. Faster. More efficient. More convenient."

"And yours can't keep up."

Zhu Cunji frowned.

"I could have my blacksmiths copy them."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Think a little deeper."

Zhu Cunji fell silent.

Yes.

When he actually thought about it, the problem became obvious.

The technology of Gao Family Village wasn't simple at all. Pulleys. Gears. Lever systems. Precision fitting. Even maintaining the current carts already pushed his craftsmen to their limits.

If Gao Family Village advanced further...

Copying would be impossible.

Zhu Cunji asked stubbornly,

"Then I'll train better blacksmiths."

Li Daoxuan shook his head gently.

"Blacksmiths without hope cannot become great."

Zhu Cunji argued,

"Then I'll restore their status as commoners. Give them hope."

Li Daoxuan clapped his hands once.

"Excellent. Truly excellent."

Then he smiled.

"But that would violate the ancestral laws left by the Grand Ancestor. Wouldn't he leap out of his grave and strike you down?"

Zhu Cunji froze.

The system of the Grand Ancestor.

Zhu Yuanzhang had been a man of terrifying ability and unmatched will. But he had made one fatal mistake.

He turned his institutions into dead laws.

He forbade his descendants from altering them.

He believed no one could surpass him. That any change would invite chaos. That as long as his rules were obeyed, the Great Ming would last forever.

But—

The world changes.

Cold sweat seeped down Zhu Cunji's back.

Wu Shen broke into a cold sweat.

Shi Kefa did as well.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"When one person makes all the rules, problems are inevitable."

"Especially when that person has been dead for a long time."

That statement was outrageous.

Zhu Cunji abruptly stood up.

"I've already had the steward beaten to death," he said stiffly. "I'm returning the coal mine to you. Have your people take over again. I can't manage it."

He snorted.

"I'll just take my share of the profits."

With that, he turned and left, fleeing the tavern as if the room itself were pressing down on him.

Li Daoxuan shrugged and looked back at the two scholar-officials.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa both felt uncomfortable. They didn't dare openly agree with such dangerous ideas.

But they had already been drawn into Li Daoxuan's schemes before—using one power to check another.

They could endure it now.

In truth...

They agreed.

The emperor's power was too vast.

The power of the scholar-officials was too small.

They should reclaim some of it.

Just as that thought formed—

Li Daoxuan spoke again.

"Don't you think," he said casually, "that steward from the Prince of Qin's household resembles the Minister of Works?"

Both men stiffened.

They thought it over carefully.

It really... did resemble him.

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"If the Minister of Works holds too much power, would what he does really be any different?"

Wu Shen's eyes widened.

Shi Kefa's breath caught.

Li Daoxuan sighed theatrically.

"Oh dear. The emperor can't manage everything alone. And even with help, the scholar-officials can't manage everything either."

"So tell me—what should we do?"

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa were drenched in sweat.

They had no answer.

After a long silence, Wu Shen finally forced out a reply.

"The Minister of Works holds an exalted position. His learning and conduct are profound. He wouldn't act like a mere steward."

"It couldn't be. It couldn't be."

"Couldn't be?" Li Daoxuan laughed.

"Was Zhao Gao low-ranked? Was Qin Hui insignificant? Was Yan Song unlearned?"

Silence.

Wu Shen said nothing.

Shi Kefa said nothing.

Wu Shen's face hardened.

"Mr. Li... what do you believe is the solution?"

Li Daoxuan smiled slyly.

"You two possess far greater learning than I do. Perhaps you should think it through yourselves."

The truth was—

Even Li Daoxuan didn't have a perfect answer.

Not even in the year 2023 had humanity found one.

But an imperfect solution?

That, at least, could be taken step by step.

One step at a time.

Chapter 643 Give Me a Knight's Outfit

The cotton fields of Puzhou had exploded into white.

From the riverbank to the distant ridgeline, cotton bolls puffed open like clouds that had fallen from the sky and refused to float back up again. Each one was fat, clean, and bursting with fiber. A harvest so good it made people suspicious.

For the first time in their lives, the cotton farmers truly saw what the Celestial Fertilizer could do.

At first there was silence—long, stunned silence—broken only by the rustle of wind over the fields.

Then came shouting.

Then panic.

Then speed.

Straw hats flooded the fields. Men and women bent low under the summer sun, hands flying as they stripped cotton from the stalks. This year's rains had been generous to the point of menace; one more sudden downpour and all this white gold could rot on the stems. Nobody dared to joke about that.

Among them was Gao Yiye.

She stood out like a crane among sparrows.

Her robe was pure white, threaded with gold and silver, the kind of clothing meant for ceremonies and altars—not mud and sweat. And yet she wore a straw hat like everyone else, sleeves rolled, back bent, fingers quick and practiced as she picked cotton.

The farmers nearly dropped their harvest.

"Saintess!" someone cried.

"Please—please don't do this!"

"This kind of work is for us common folk!"

Gao Yiye laughed, light and unbothered, hands never stopping.

"When I was little, I did this all the time. Why can't I do it now?"

The farmers exchanged helpless looks.

"Oh dear..."

They truly didn't know how to persuade her.

Nearby, a hundred guards had already rolled up their sleeves, preparing to take over the work by force if necessary—when a presence made them all freeze.

From the edge of the field walked a life-sized figure.

A Dao Xuan Tianzun.

He smiled gently and waved them down.

"Don't bother her. Let her enjoy it. It's rare for her to find something she likes. If she couldn't even do this... how dull would life be?"

The guards locked up like statues.

This Dao Xuan Tianzun was labeled Test-02, the latest product of Gao Family Village.

Silicone skin over a steel skeleton—same as before—but the internal structure had been upgraded with additional joints. Movements were smoother, expressions subtler, posture far more human.

In short, he looked alive.

The only remaining flaw was... certain details that the engineers were still studiously pretending not to notice.

Test-02 stepped beside Gao Yiye, reached down, and picked up a freshly plucked cotton boll. He turned it over in his fingers, studying it with curiosity.

"Oh," he said. "So this is cotton. It's a bit different from what I imagined."

City folk, after all, rarely understood farming.

Gao Yiye turned her head. Her face lit up like sunlight breaking through clouds.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun! Look—so much cotton! I can weave so much cloth from this. And this time, it's cotton we grew ourselves. No more shamelessly begging you for it."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"That's wonderful."

Her eyes sparkled.

"I want to use this cotton to make you a Daoist robe."

He paused, then laughed softly.

"A Daoist robe? I already have too many. I don't really care for them."

He tilted his head.

"Instead—make me a knight's outfit."

"A knight's outfit?"

Gao Yiye understood instantly.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun liked to wander the world, passing through cities and rivers like a drifting traveler. A knight's outfit would be perfect—plain, practical, fit for disguising oneself as an ordinary adventurer.

"Alright!" she said brightly. "But when you go out wearing it, you have to take me with you."

Li Daoxuan replied calmly,

"It'll be very dangerous."

"I'm not scared at all!"

She bounced in place amid the cotton stalks, scattering white fluff into the air.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun promised! I'll make myself a knight's outfit too. You'll be the male knight, and I'll be the female knight."

He laughed.

"You don't know any swordsmanship. How exactly will you be a knight?"

Gao Yiye reached behind her robe.

With a smooth motion, she produced a silver handgun, about the length of her forearm. The metal gleamed coldly in the sun.

"Sir," she said sweetly, "times have changed."

Li Daoxuan fell silent.

...This was unexpectedly convincing.

He pointed at the little gun and laughed helplessly.

"Where did you get that? I've been focused on Henan lately—I didn't even know you had this."

Gao Yiye giggled.

"Li Da made it. He shortened the barrel of a Chassepot rifle and miniaturized the firing mechanism. He said it's lighter and easier for women to use, so he gave it to me."

She added seriously,

"The range is short, and the accuracy isn't great. But I'm not going to war. For self-defense, it's enough."

Li Daoxuan shook his head.

"Giving something this dangerous to a young girl to play with is unacceptable. I'll speak to Li Da later."

Gao Yiye pouted.

"But I'm not just an ordinary girl! The Dao Xuan Tianzun himself said I work in ideological and political education for the army. That makes me a soldier too! Isn't it reasonable for a soldier to practice shooting and carry a weapon?"

Li Daoxuan spread his hands.

"...Fine. So how's your marksmanship?"

"Within five paces," she said proudly, "I never miss."

"Five paces?"

For a moment, Li Daoxuan felt sweat pour down his back.

Then he remembered—this body didn't sweat.

On second thought, five paces was actually quite impressive.

Handguns were inherently inaccurate. Those stage plays where someone drops an enemy from a hundred meters with a single shot were pure fantasy. In reality, beyond twenty meters, even hitting the target wasn't guaranteed.

And that was with modern firearms.

For Li Da's crude early pistol to hit reliably within five paces was already no small feat.

"Very well," Li Daoxuan said, smiling. "You've developed some combat ability. Once the knight's outfit is ready, I'll take you out."

Gao Yiye nearly burst with joy.

Being the Saintess had been suffocating—too many rules, too many expectations, too little freedom. Now that Li Daoxuan could use Co-sensing, she no longer had to run messages everywhere. She could finally breathe.

"Then I'll hurry and weave the cloth!" she said eagerly. "I'll have the clothes made as soon as possible!"

Just then—

A long, mournful whistle rolled across the river.

They turned.

A massive vessel emerged from the distance. A tall chimney rose from its deck, belching thick black smoke into the sky.

"A steamship!" Gao Yiye gasped. "It's here!"

Li Daoxuan's lips curved upward.

"So Young Master Bai's steamship is finally finished."

Once the steam engine had broken through its final bottleneck, steamships were inevitable. The technology itself wasn't difficult.

What made it dangerous was the Yellow River.

Wild currents, shifting channels, sudden floods—one mistake and even an iron hull could vanish without a trace. The recent storms had only worsened things.

Only in the past few days, with the rains easing and the sun returning, did the experimental vessel dare to make its maiden voyage—sailing straight from Qichuan Ferry to Puzhou.

"Come," Li Daoxuan said. "Stop playing with cotton. Let's go see it at Yongji Dock."

Gao Yiye ran out of the fields and climbed into her carriage.

Li Daoxuan considered the massive steel skeleton inside his body, then decided not to torture the horses. He rose smoothly into the air, floating alongside the carriage as it rolled forward.

Gao Yiye glanced out the window.

She could see a giant hand supporting the Dao Xuan Tianzun's sculpted body as he flew.

She wondered quietly,

What kind of divine art is this? Why does the Dao Xuan Tianzun need to hold his own body to fly?

But she didn't question it.

How could one doubt the Dao Xuan Tianzun?

The carriage raced along the road.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun drifted through the sky.

Together, they headed for Yongji Dock.

Along the way, every cotton farmer who witnessed the scene dropped to their knees in reverence.

Chapter 644 Solving the Casting Problem

At Yongji Gudu Ferry, the steamship eased toward the shore, its paddle wheels slowing with a low, obedient hiss. Steam drifted lazily from the chimney, black smoke thinning as the engine wound down—like a beast that had finally decided to behave.

Before the gangplank was even fully secured—

Thud!

Bai Gongzi practically launched himself off the deck.

His feet hit the ground, momentum betrayed him, and he stumbled forward, barely avoiding an undignified face-first greeting with the dock. Years of living hunched over drafting tables and furnaces had done terrible things to his balance.

When it came to the Six Arts—archery, charioteering, and the like—anything involving muscles instead of brains, he had long since accepted that he would never catch up to his father.

And frankly?

He didn't care.

He spun around, stared at the steamship, and burst into laughter so loud it startled nearby seagulls.

"It's done! It's really done!"

"Hahahaha!"

"A successful maiden voyage!"

"Once again—we've replicated a celestial artifact using nothing but our own hands!"

People swarmed the dock, surrounding the iron vessel as if it were a living miracle. Fingers traced rivets. Eyes followed pipes and valves. Every hiss of cooling metal felt like history being written in real time.

Then Bai Gongzi felt it.

A pressure from above.

He looked up.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun descended from the sky, robes unmoving in the wind, presence calm and overwhelming. Beside him rolled the Saintess's carriage, stopping neatly at the dock.

When the Dao Xuan Tianzun touched down in front of him, Bai Gongzi instinctively straightened his back.

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"I've been in Henan lately, helping your father with disaster relief. You've done very well here at home."

Just that single sentence—

Bai Gongzi felt his chest swell inexplicably, as though he'd been knighted by heaven itself.

Li Daoxuan's expression turned serious.

"Remember this," he said. "Every invention must be recorded on paper. Do not fall into the foolish thinking of teaching only sons and not daughters."

"Knowledge must be passed down—layer by layer—to future generations. Only when they stand on the shoulders of those before them can progress truly accelerate."

Bai Gongzi bowed deeply.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, rest assured. I will do exactly that."

Soon after, more figures disembarked.

Song Yingxing.

Wang Zheng.

One after another—the core minds of Gao Family Village.

A steamship's maiden voyage was no small matter. No scientist worth his salt would miss it. Along with them came graduate students, senior engineers, Li Da, Gao Yiyi—nearly the entire soul of Gao Family Village had crammed itself onto this experimental vessel.

Li Daoxuan watched them pile off the ship and couldn't help laughing. He shook his head.

"I say—are you all out of your minds?"

"You boarded an experimental vessel together?"

"If this thing had failed and capsized in the Yellow River, the scientific progress of Gao Family Village would've been wiped back to square one."

Silence.

Faces went pale.

"...Ah?"

"...We didn't think of that."

"That was... dangerously close."

Li Daoxuan sighed.

"From now on, experiments require safety standards. No more reckless heroics."

Everyone nodded vigorously, as if afraid the river might hear and take offense.

Just then, Song Yingxing stepped forward.

His brows were furrowed, his beard slightly disheveled—the look of a man who hadn't slept properly in days.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said, bowing, "my research has encountered a frustrating impasse. I've exhausted every line of thought I know. I can only beg you for guidance."

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Speak."

Song Yingxing straightened.

"Previously, the Dao Xuan Tianzun gave me the guiding principle of standardization."

Li Daoxuan nodded. He remembered it clearly.

Unified measurements.

Division of labor.

Interchangeable parts.

Gao Family Village had already standardized the meter as a unit of length, forcing blacksmiths to craft parts so precise that components made by different hands could still fit together.

This alone had massively increased the production efficiency of flintlock rifles.

Song Yingxing continued,

"But in practice, problems arose. Parts forged by different blacksmiths—even when following the same standard—still contain microscopic differences. Too small for rulers to detect, but enough to cause poor fitting."

"These rifles wear down quickly and are easily damaged."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Go on."

"So I abandoned forging," Song Yingxing said, voice steady. "I turned to casting instead."

A faint smile appeared on Li Daoxuan's face.

"A very good direction."

Encouraged, Song Yingxing continued,

"I created identical molds for the rifle components. Molten iron was poured in, cooled, removed, polished. This allowed mass production of perfectly identical parts."

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"And you're here because those parts are identical—but useless, yes?"

Song Yingxing flushed despite himself.

"As expected of the Dao Xuan Tianzun... you saw the issue instantly."

"The cast parts are extremely brittle. A flintlock assembled from them breaks after one or two shots."

"Of course," Li Daoxuan said calmly.

"Cast iron parts aren't forged or compressed. Their internal structure is loose, riddled with pores. Air bubbles form. Strength is insufficient."

Song Yingxing sighed deeply.

"With my current capabilities... I truly don't know where to begin fixing this."

Li Daoxuan laughed softly.

"Well now..."

He deliberately drew out the words.

In truth—

He didn't know either.

But this was no problem.

When he didn't know something, he simply looked it up.

All he needed was time.

"To solve this," Li Daoxuan said solemnly, "will require an entire chain of new research. Are you prepared for that?"

Song Yingxing's eyes lit up.

"I fear research least of all! The more, the better!"

"Excellent," Li Daoxuan said.

"Wait here. I will return to the Scripture Repository above and retrieve a Heavenly Book for you."

Song Yingxing nearly trembled with excitement.

"A Heavenly Book!"

"Indeed."

With a flash, the Dao Xuan Tianzun froze in place—statue-still.

Song Yingxing knew at once that the deity had ascended to the divine realm. His beard puffed proudly as he waited.

Meanwhile—

Li Daoxuan was already back outside the box.

Back on the historical military forum.

Still anonymous.

He typed:

"Hypothetically—if you traveled back to the Ming Dynasty and needed to cast flintlock rifles, how would you solve the problem of insufficient strength in cast parts?"

Replies poured in.

Reply 1:

"Use vibranium."

Reply 2:

"Bury the first-floor poster alive. You're talking about density and porosity issues, right? Start with smelting furnace technology. Good molten iron naturally makes stronger castings."

Li Daoxuan replied humbly:

"And this smelting furnace technology...?"

Reply 3:

"Abraham Darby's coke smelting method. Coke enabled large blast furnaces. I'll give you the coke production process and data on the Coalbrookdale furnace. Sources: Harbin Institute of Technology library."

Reply 4:

"Casting iron is only transitional. You ultimately need steelmaking. I'll send Bessemer process materials too—but forget about doing that in Ming Dynasty tech. That's decades, maybe centuries, of groundwork."

Li Daoxuan leaned back.

"...Alright," he murmured.

"Let's start with coke."

Inside the box, a certain old craftsman was about to have his worldview shattered—again.

Chapter 645 It's Been a While Since I Stretched My Muscles

Before long, Li Daoxuan had gathered everything he needed on the new furnace technology.

After politely thanking the anonymous benefactor on the forum, he printed the materials onto tiny sheets of paper, stacked them neatly, and turned his attention back to the Diorama Box.

Inside, Yongji Ferry was buzzing.

Bai Gongzi, Song Yingxing, Wang Zheng, and a dense crowd of graduate students and senior engineers were all craning their necks upward, eyes wide, expressions unified in one unmistakable look—

They looked like a flock of quail waiting to be fed.

Wang Zheng, in particular, was vibrating with excitement.

He had only recently arrived in Gao Family Village and had immediately buried himself in study under Song Yingxing and Bai Gongzi. The books stored in the school—Physics, Chemistry, and countless others—had completely overturned his understanding of the world.

When he'd asked where those miraculous texts came from, everyone had given him the same answer:

Heavenly Books, bestowed by the Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Ever since, Wang Zheng had been endlessly curious about how exactly the Dao Xuan Tianzun "bestowed" these books. Now, finally seeing it with his own eyes, he was so excited he could barely stand still.

At that moment—

The clouds above parted.

A colossal golden hand descended from the heavens, gripping a thick stack of papers.

"Heavenly Books!" Wang Zheng shouted in delight.

"The Heavenly Books are here!"

"This is the first time I've ever witnessed the Dao Xuan Tianzun bestowing Heavenly Books in person!"

He clasped his hands together fervently.

"May the Dao Xuan Tianzun protect us! Amitābha! Infinite Life and Fortune! El-Lahil-Allah! Hallelujah—"

Song Yingxing blinked.

"...Old Wang, what exactly are you chanting?"

"I'm thanking all the deities!" Wang Zheng replied earnestly.

Song Yingxing frowned.

"These are Heavenly Books personally bestowed by the Dao Xuan Tianzun. Why are you thanking everyone else?"

Wang Zheng explained solemnly,

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun said he retrieved these books from the Celestial Scripture Repository. But who put them there in the first place? It might not have been the Dao Xuan Tianzun himself. Perhaps other deities researched them and stored them there, and the Dao Xuan Tianzun merely borrowed them."

He nodded to himself, deeply satisfied.

"If I only thank the Dao Xuan Tianzun, I might miss someone. That wouldn't be right. To avoid omissions, thanking everyone is the safest choice."

Song Yingxing stared at him.

"...Uh."

Li Daoxuan, watching from above, couldn't help but laugh.

Strictly speaking, Wang Zheng wasn't wrong.

The sources were indeed... other people.

With a thought, Li Daoxuan shifted into Co-sensing mode and entered the Test-02 Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet. He smiled and spoke aloud:

"Wang Zheng isn't mistaken. This method for smelting high-quality iron was not invented by me. It was researched by a deity far more brilliant than myself. I merely borrowed it."

Song Yingxing's eyes widened.

"So that's how it is!"

Wang Zheng beamed triumphantly.

"See? Even the Dao Xuan Tianzun says so. I was absolutely right to thank everyone!"

Song Yingxing covered his face with one hand.

"But your gratitude is still... a bit too wide-ranging. That 'El-Lahil-Allah' you mentioned—whose deity is that? I've never even heard of it."

Wang Zheng shrugged.

"I don't know either. I just shouted it out randomly. But what if such a deity really exists?"

Song Yingxing choked—and then burst out laughing.

Wang Zheng continued confidently,

"With all deities properly honored, there's no hardship we can't overcome and no corner of the world we can't conquer. Old Song, safety first!"

Song Yingxing laughed so hard his shoulders shook.

By then, the thick stack of "Heavenly Books" had already been laid out.

Graduate students and senior engineers swarmed around them. Though Li Daoxuan had printed the material on tiny sheets, to the people inside the box, each page was still enormous. Several people had to work together just to flip one page over.

Standing directly on the paper, they couldn't even see the full content.

So they climbed onto nearby rooftops, leaning over the edges, peering down to read.

And the moment they did—

Realization struck.

"So that's the problem! Coal contains sulfur. When sulfur enters iron, it makes it brittle and weak."

"That's why coal must first be turned into coke! Coke has low volatility—less sulfur enters the iron during smelting, so the strength increases!"

"And limestone—why limestone?"

"Turn the page! Hurry! It must explain it on the next one!"

Their voices overlapped, excitement mounting. Each line unlocked another piece of the world's hidden logic.

The mysteries of heaven and earth truly had no end.

While the scientists were completely absorbed—

Elsewhere, Tie Niaofei, Zao Ying, and Zheng Daniu were preparing to depart.

Three hundred cavalymen assembled behind them, guarding a fully loaded merchant caravan.

Yongji Ferry had now become a critical logistics hub. Supplies from Gao Family Village, Puzhou, and the entire Hedong Circuit flowed through here. Aid destined for Henan—supporting Bai Yuan's expeditionary army—was loaded onto ships day and night.

Tie Niaofei glanced at the scientists cheering and laughing over their papers and shook his head with a smile.

"These people are all quite old, yet they're making such childish noises."

Zheng Daniu snorted.

"Exactly! Laughing like kids—how embarrassing."

Before the words had even settled—

Zao Ying casually pulled out a piece of Jingjin rice puff candy from her pouch, snapped off a chunk, and handed it to Zheng Daniu.

"Daniu, try this. The Dao Xuan Tianzun rewarded me with it last time I earned merit. Food from the celestial realm."

Zheng Daniu popped it into his mouth.

His eyes went wide.

"Wow!"

"Hahahaha!"

"This is incredible! So good!"

He laughed thunderously—like a two-hundred-pound child who'd just discovered sugar.

Tie Niaofei stared.

Zao Ying smiled.

"Is it good? You like it? I still have more."

"More?!" Zheng Daniu's face lit up. "That's amazing!"

Zao Ying tilted her head.

"If you want more, take a walk with me after dinner tonight."

Zheng Daniu nodded so hard his helmet nearly fell off.

"No problem! A walk it is!"

Tie Niaofei closed his eyes.

Hopeless. Absolutely hopeless.

Ignore them. Just ignore them.

Still laughing and bickering, the trio led their men northward.

North—along the Yellow River.

The entire route was now paved with a proper road. They quickly reached the Yellow River Dragon Gate Bridge, crossed by boat near Jishan County, and continued north.

Several days later, they arrived at Pingyang Prefecture.

Wang Er and Bai Mao were stationed there.

They all sat down together for a meal.

Wang Er spoke gravely,

"Beyond Pingyang, we leave our sphere of influence. In lands untouched by the Dao Xuan Tianzun's blessing, act with caution. Stay on the main road. Go straight to Taiyuan."

Tie Niaofei nodded.

"We understand. By the way—it's already August. Any news from the Imperial Court?"

Bai Mao answered immediately,

"Yes. Just yesterday, the court gazette arrived. Kong Youde besieged Laizhou using every trick he had, but failed to take it. In early August, the imperial army counterattacked and encircled him."

He paused, then continued,

"Kong Youde couldn't hold out. He was defeated and retreated. Cornered, he now intends to surrender to the Later Jin."

Tie Niaofei clicked his tongue in awe.

"Impressive. Everything the Dao Xuan Tianzun predicted has come true."

A slow grin spread across his face.

"Looks like our trip north to Datong Prefecture is going to be lively."

"Hehehe. The blood debts those Jin merchants owe me... I can finally collect them openly."

Zao Ying clenched her fist, eyes shining.

"It's been a long time," she said quietly,

"since I stretched my muscles."

Chapter 646 What Now?

Datong.

Zhang Zongheng, Supreme Commander of Xuanfu and Datong, stared at the imperial gazette in his hands as if it might suddenly deny what it said.

But it didn't.

Laizhou's situation was unfolding exactly as the Dao Xuan Tianzun had revealed. Kong Youde had been ambushed, routed, and driven into a corner. Now—humiliated and desperate—he was preparing to surrender to the Manchus.

Every word matched.

Not a single deviation.

Seated across from him, Sun Chuanting—who had rushed over from Daizhou specifically to discuss border affairs—wore a complicated expression. He, too, had come after hearing the news.

"Governor-General," Sun Chuanting said slowly, "it seems the heavenly secret revealed by the Dao Xuan Tianzun... was entirely accurate."

Zhang Zongheng nodded heavily, his face dark.

"At this point," he said, "there's no longer any reason to question whether those words were truly heavenly secrets."

He paused, then continued in a low voice.

"In that case, his revelation that the eight great Jin merchants are traitors... must also be true."

Sun Chuanting's heart tightened.

"Governor-General, how do you plan to deal with this?"

Zhang Zongheng snorted coldly.

"Post men to watch them. Gather evidence of their dealings with the northern barbarians. Once we catch them red-handed—"

His eyes flashed.

"—I'll have them all executed."

Sun Chuanting nodded without hesitation.

"Excellent."

But before the word had even fully settled—

A general rushed in from outside, breathless, voice sharp with urgency.

"Report!"

"Jin merchant Zhang Fugui, who was scheduled to deliver fifty shi of grain and ten shi of salt three days ago, failed to arrive on time. My men went to search for him..."

The general swallowed.

"They only found Zhang Fugui's corpse. He—and his entire convoy—were taken by the rebels."

Sun Chuanting sucked in a sharp breath.

Zhang Zongheng slammed his fist down.

"What?!"

The outburst echoed through the hall. Then, slowly, Zhang Zongheng exhaled and sagged back into his chair.

"This is bad," he said quietly.

"Rebels are everywhere in northwest Shanxi—appearing and vanishing like ghosts. The smaller Jin merchants no longer have the strength to supply our border armies."

His voice grew heavier with each name.

"And the large ones—Fan Yongdou, Wang Dengku, Jin Liangyu, Wang Dayu, Liang Jiabin, Tian Shenglan, Zhai Tang..."

"They're all traitors."

He clenched his jaw.

"So tell me—what are we supposed to do now?"

Sun Chuanting felt a chill crawl up his spine.

The small Jin merchants who weren't traitors lacked the power to deliver supplies.

The powerful Jin merchants were traitors.

If they moved against the big Jin merchants immediately, the border armies would be cut off.

Food. Salt. Weapons.

Gone.

This was a deadlock.

Zhang Zongheng clenched his fists, at a complete loss for the first time in years—

—

Meanwhile.

Tie Niaofei and his group rode north, leaving Pingyang Prefecture behind.

Almost immediately, the world changed.

The roads grew empty.

No merchant caravans. No travelers calling out greetings. Only silence—and bones.

Human bones lay scattered by the roadside, bleached white by sun and wind, so common they barely drew a glance. Villages appeared now and then, but more than half of their houses had been burned to the ground.

The few still standing leaned crookedly, their walls scarred with axe marks and blade cuts.

For over a year, rebels had rampaged across the lands north of Pingyang. Only after the imperial court dispatched Zhang Zongheng and Xu Dingchen with a massive army had the situation been forced into uneasy restraint.

Major rebel leaders—

Zijing Liang (Wang Ziyong),

Chuang Wang (Gao Yingxiang),

the Dashing General (Li Zicheng),

the West Camp's Eight Great Kings (Zhang Xianzhong),

and Lao Huihui—

had all been driven into the Taihang Mountains.

What remained were smaller rebel forces.

Less famous.

But no less vicious.

One of them was known as Cao Cao.

Cao Cao—real name Luo Rucui—was from Yan'an Prefecture in Shaanxi. He dared to call himself Cao Cao because he genuinely believed he was just as cunning and resourceful as the ancient warlord.

Recently, he'd come up with a clever idea.

He stopped robbing peasants.

Northwest Shanxi had been ravaged for too long. Most cities—aside from strongholds like Taiyuan and Daizhou—had already fallen. The people were dead, scattered, or forcibly conscripted. There was nothing left to squeeze.

So Cao Cao changed targets.

He robbed Jin merchants.

These merchants were responsible for supplying the border armies. Whenever they appeared, they carried grain, salt, weapons, cloth—everything a rebel camp could dream of.

One raid could bring more loot than a month of pillaging villages.

At this moment, Cao Cao was camped in a small village near Lingshi County.

An official road curved past the village. Just earlier that day, Cao Cao had ambushed a small Jin merchant convoy right there, seizing huge quantities of grain and weapons.

He was in an excellent mood.

As he counted the spoils, a subordinate hurried over.

"Boss," the man said, "another convoy is coming."

Cao Cao's eyes lit up.

"Oh? Another fat lamb walking itself into the slaughter?"

The subordinate hesitated.

"This lamb... seems a bit too fat."

Cao Cao frowned.

"Explain."

"It's a massive convoy," the subordinate said.

"Grain, salt, cloth—piled high on fifty large carts. And it's escorted by three hundred cavalry."

Cao Cao squinted.

His eyes were narrow to begin with; when he did this, they nearly vanished.

"Oh," he said softly. "A very powerful Jin merchant."

"Yes," the subordinate confirmed.

Cao Cao sneered.

"That kind of strength only scares weaker rebel bands."

He waved his hand.

"To us, it's nothing."

He stood up.

"Give the order. Time to work."

Though Cao Cao had never risen to the rank of major rebel king, his strength among bandit leaders was solid. He commanded over five thousand followers. Even after excluding the old, the weak, women, and children, he still had more than two thousand able-bodied fighters.

They moved quickly.

Several hundred hid inside the village, slipping into ruined houses. Outside the village, men disappeared into earthen ditches, woods, and behind low hillocks.

In an instant—

The nameless village fell deathly silent.

Tie Niaofei and his group approached from the south.

More than fifty large carts stretched along the official road, winding forward like a slow-moving dragon.

Zheng Daniu grinned.

"Look—there's a village ahead. Wonder if they've got any local specialties."

Zao Ying replied calmly,

"No. There's no one left in that village."

"Huh?" Zheng Daniu's face fell.

"In northwest Shanxi, you can walk dozens of li without seeing a soul. These people really have it rough."

Then—

Zao Ying spoke again, her tone changing.

"You'll be seeing people very soon."

Zheng Daniu blinked.

"Huh? Really?"

Zao Ying continued riding at the same leisurely pace, eyes forward, expression relaxed.

But her voice dropped.

"There are ambushes in the village. Every house."

"Outside the village—in the ditches, the woods, behind the hills. They're everywhere."

She paused.

"These aren't ordinary rebels. Whoever's leading them knows formations. Knows how to hunt."

Zheng Daniu sucked in a breath.

"How can you tell?"

Zao Ying smiled faintly.

"Don't underestimate horse bandits."

"Every creature has its specialty. When it comes to hiding and ambushing merchant convoys—"

She glanced ahead.

"—we're the experts."

Tie Niaofei asked quietly,

"Boss Zao. How do we fight this?"

Zao Ying lowered her voice further.

"First," she said,

"we pull the convoy together—without alerting them."

Chapter 647 Are You Kidding Me?

A long, stretched-out convoy was, by its very nature, a nightmare to defend.

Yet if they panicked and hastily compressed their formation, bunching all the carts together at once, that single action would be tantamount to hanging a sign for the enemy that read: We've noticed you.

Once that happened, the ambushers would strike immediately, and the convoy would be caught in an even worse predicament, unable to properly defend either its front or its rear, pulled apart under pressure from both sides.

Zao Ying lowered her voice, her gaze sweeping over the distant village ahead. "If they plan to ambush us, they'll wait until we're right next to the village before making their move. We need to pull the convoy together into a defensive formation while we're still some distance away."

Tie Niaofei curled his lips into a grin. "Heh. I might have an idea."

He turned his head toward Zheng Daniu and said, "Pretend you're starving. Go to the front cart, rummage around looking for food, and then 'accidentally' knock it over."

Zheng Daniu was not known for his sharp mind, but this time, understanding dawned quickly on his face. "Huh? If the first cart tips over, the ones behind will rush up to see what happened, and they'll all bunch together!"

Zao Ying let out a quiet laugh. "Exactly, Daniu. Go on, hurry up. Pretend you're hungry and search for something to eat."

Zheng Daniu rubbed his stomach and grinned broadly. "No need to pretend. I really am hungry."

Before long, Zheng Daniu shuffled toward the lead cart, one hand constantly pressed against his rumbling belly. Saliva dribbled from the corner of his mouth, his expression the very picture of a man driven half-mad by hunger.

There was, indeed, no acting required.

He rummaged loudly through the cart for a good while, making a great show of searching, then grabbed hold of a large sack and gave it a forceful yank. The sudden shift in weight threw the load off balance, and with a violent lurch, the cart tipped over, crashing heavily to the ground.

The horses pulling it reared and neighed in alarm.

The second cart, which had been following close behind, failed to stop in time and slammed straight into the overturned vehicle. The third cart collided with the second, then the fourth with the third, one after another in rapid succession.

In the blink of an eye, the gaps between the carts vanished entirely.

Fifty carts were pressed together nose to tail, their long formation collapsing inward like a massive caterpillar curling into itself.

Just as they had predicted, the bandits hiding in ambush within the village remained perfectly still, not making a sound.

That was the moment Tie Niaofei and Zao Ying shouted almost simultaneously, their voices ringing out across the convoy. "Convoy leaders, link the front and rear! Form a circular defensive array!"

Zheng Daniu let out a ferocious howl, gripping the overturned cart with both hands. With a single explosive exertion of strength, he hauled the massive vehicle upright, slamming it back onto its wheels as if it weighed nothing at all.

The sheer display of brute force stunned the bandits watching from afar, leaving them momentarily speechless.

At the same time, the lead cart and the final cart began to move, circling inward and closing the gap between them at remarkable speed.

In that instant, the bandits finally understood.

They had been played from the very beginning.

Cao Cao burst from his hiding place, shouting at the top of his lungs, "The ambush has failed! Prepare for a frontal assault!"

His trusted lieutenant, Dongshan Hu, leapt out from one of the village houses, rallying his men as he charged straight toward Tie Niaofei.

Another fierce bandit leader, Chuang Tatian, erupted from the small woods outside the village, likewise leading his own group as they surged forward to join the attack.

But their timing was already fatally late.

The first and last carts of the convoy had completed their maneuver, linking together in a seamless loop. In the span of a few breaths, the entire convoy transformed into a massive defensive ring.

The draft horses were quickly led into the center of the circle, while the infantry assigned to guard the carts withdrew into the protected interior as well.

Tie Niaofei and Zheng Daniu retreated inside the ring, taking their positions.

The towering carts, arranged wheel to wheel, now formed a makeshift wall, a solid barrier shielding everyone within.

Zao Ying, however, did not lead her three hundred cavalry into the circle. Instead, she raised a hand and let out a sharp, piercing whistle. "We charge. No need to crowd the infantry here."

"All right!"

"Let's ride!"

The cavalry picked a direction at random and surged forward as one.

By a twist of ironic fate, that direction led straight toward Chuang Tatian, who had only just emerged from the treeline.

Chuang Tatian, Cao Cao's second-in-command, was infamous for his ferocity and near-suicidal courage on the battlefield. Yet after charging only a few steps, he saw the enemy cavalry deliberately adjust their course, thundering directly toward him.

A chill shot through his spine, freezing him in place for a heartbeat.

No matter how brave he was, he was still infantry. How could flesh and bone stand against a cavalry charge?

To be trampled head-on by warhorses was certain death.

"Halt!" Chuang Tatian roared desperately. "Halt! Raise your spears!"

His men skidded to a stop. Those wielding short swords instinctively recoiled, while the spearmen surged forward, hundreds of long spears lifting in unison to form a dense, bristling wall, like the spines of a giant hedgehog.

Zao Ying nodded faintly to herself. These bandits really have improved after years of rebellion, she thought. The speed at which they formed that spear wall is nothing like the rabble they once were.

Unfortunately for them, it changed nothing.

After a single session of instruction under Lao Nanfeng, every rider in Zao Ying's cavalry had mastered the tactics of the border light cavalry. Their foremost command was simple.

Shoot.

Rather than crashing directly into the spear wall, the cavalry reined in their mounts and began to circle, bows and hand crossbows raised. Arrows flew in a dense volley, cutting through the air as the riders maintained their momentum.

Screams rang out immediately as several of Chuang Tatian's men were struck down, collapsing where they stood.

Chuang Tatian cursed loudly. "Damn it! Dongshan Hu, while I keep these riders busy, you useless bastard, go attack their convoy!"

Meanwhile, Dongshan Hu was already charging toward the circular formation of carts.

Fifty carts, each guarded by only two or three men, amounted to barely over a hundred defenders. Compared to the three hundred cavalry, their fighting strength seemed laughably weak.

Dongshan Hu did not even spare these supposed "Jin merchants" a second glance. In his mind, as long as he could close the distance, victory was assured.

Zheng Daniu bellowed from within the circle, his voice booming like thunder. "Don't let them get close!"

As his shout faded, Zheng Daniu swung his arm, hurling a hand grenade with a burning fuse toward the charging bandits.

This was Zheng Daniu, after all.

The silver medalist in the throwing events of the Gao Family Village militia competitions, and one of the earliest grenadiers of Gao Family Village.

The grenade arced through the air, flying both far and high, covering a staggering distance of eighty meters.

The dark iron sphere dropped squarely into the midst of Dongshan Hu's men.

Boom!

The explosion ripped through their ranks, and several bandits collapsed simultaneously, bodies flung aside like broken dolls.

The entire bandit force froze, staring in disbelief. "What in the devil was that?"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Musket fire erupted in a deafening chorus. The hundred-plus "cart drivers" were revealed for what they truly were, seasoned musketeers to a man.

Worse still, every single one carried the superior, rapid-firing Chassepot rifle.

Once those weapons began to roar, it was no longer a battle but a bonfire fueled by silver, with bullets burning through the air.

And with every shot, lives were extinguished.

Dongshan Hu's men fell in swathes, the devastation instant and horrifying. Compared to arrows, the killing power of musket fire was overwhelming. Those struck down died on the spot, and even the lucky few who survived were left grievously wounded.

Dongshan Hu stood rooted to the ground, his mind reeling, utterly unable to tell which way was up, much less which direction he should flee.

After a brief moment of stunned paralysis, one of his trusted subordinates lunged from behind and tackled him to the ground. "Third Master!" he shouted desperately. "Don't just stand there staring! Get down! Get down!"

Dongshan Hu finally came to his senses enough to press himself flat against the earth, not daring to lift his head. His voice shook as he blurted out in disbelief, "Are you kidding me? With this kind of firepower, why are they pretending to be Jin merchants? Wouldn't it be better if they just revolted outright?"

Chapter 648 We Meet Again

The flintlock rifles roared without pause.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

There were barely more than a hundred shooters, yet the sound was so dense, so relentless, that it felt as if a thousand men were firing in unison—no gaps, no rhythm breaks, just a continuous wall of thunder.

Dongshan Hu's men froze.

Charging forward was no longer bravery—it was suicide.

On the other flank, Chuang Tatian's troops fared no better. Zao Ying's cavalry refused to close in. They circled, reined, loosed arrows, then circled again—never giving the infantry a single clean chance to counterattack.

Arrows fell like rain.

Men screamed.

Unable to advance, unable to flee, Chuang Tatian's men instinctively collapsed inward, forming a miserable clump. Shields came up. Pot lids came up. Even doors ripped from village houses were hoisted overhead.

They had only wanted to rob a caravan.

No one had signed up to die like this.

From the rear, Cao Cao watched in silence.

He hadn't charged yet—he had been waiting, measuring the fight.

Now, he exhaled slowly.

He looked at Dongshan Hu, pinned flat against the ground.

Then at Chuang Tatian, trapped beneath a sky full of arrows.

That was enough.

"The wind's against us," Cao Cao shouted. "Pull back!"

The rebels immediately obeyed.

But this wasn't a normal retreat.

With rifles and arrows dominating the battlefield, they couldn't simply turn and run. Chuang Tatian's men had to keep their shields raised, inching backward step by step.

Dongshan Hu's situation was worse.

His men crawled.

They pressed their bodies flat against the dirt and dragged themselves backward like worms, terrified that the moment they stood up, a bullet would punch through their backs.

The sight was absurd.

Pitiful.

Almost laughable.

Fortunately for them, the Gao Family Village forces had no intention of chasing.

Bullets cost money.

Arrows cost money.

Killing was exciting—but resupplying ammunition felt like attending your own funeral.

They were deep in northwestern Shanxi. Supply lines were long. Bullets were precious.

Tie Niaofei lifted a hand. "That's enough. Stop."

Almost simultaneously, Zao Ying's cavalry loosed their final volley. Quivers were empty; the lesson had been delivered.

The battlefield fell silent.

Rifles lowered. Horses slowed.

Only then did Dongshan Hu's and Chuang Tatian's men dare to stand, turn, and flee.

They ran.

They ran like their souls were on fire, retreating several hundred meters in one mad rush, convinced that if they slowed even a little, the thunder would start again.

Tie Niaofei laughed softly.

"That should be enough. After this, when they hear the name Tie Niaofei, they'll think twice before robbing caravans."

Zao Ying smiled faintly. "Arrows can be picked up. Bullets can't. How many paper cartridges do you have left?"

Tie Niaofei pointed toward the central wagon and grinned.

"That cart is nothing but ammunition. We could fight four more battles like this."

Zao Ying nodded. "Good."

Cao Cao's forces did not return.

Zao Ying's riders dismounted briefly, collecting arrows embedded in the dirt and bodies alike, sliding them back into their quivers with practiced efficiency.

Then the convoy resumed its march north.

Not far down the road, they found the remains of another Jin merchant caravan.

Overtaken wagons.

Scattered blood.

Not a single sack of grain left behind.

Tie Niaofei stared at the scene for a long moment.

"If we'd lost back there," he said quietly, "this would be us."

Zao Ying's expression darkened. "There are black sheep among the Jin merchants—but most of them are decent folk. For centuries, they've supplied the border armies. No glory, no thanks—just duty."

She looked toward the north.

"Now the rebels block the roads. Small merchants can't reach Datong anymore. The border army's supplies..."

Her voice trailed off.

The Datong Border Command governed thirteen garrisons, eight hundred twenty-three fortified villages, and over three hundred signal towers.

It was the shield of the Ming heartland.

And it was starving.

The soldiers lived year-round in frozen winds, crumbling forts, and broken fields that yielded almost nothing. They faced Mongol cavalry that could appear overnight and erase entire outposts before dawn.

Hunger.

Cold.

Fear.

And now—

Grain shortages.

Zhang Zongheng listened to the reports, his face dark as iron.

"We have grain for three days," a subordinate said stiffly.

"The smaller Jin merchants can't get through. Their convoys are intercepted, and many are too frightened to even try."

Silence fell.

Sun Chuanting slammed his fist down. "Let me take my household guards! I'll hunt those rebels myself!"

Zhang Zongheng shook his head. "Useless. Even with Xu Dingchen and me setting traps across the region, we can't wipe them out."

Sun Chuanting said nothing.

Zhang Zongheng sighed deeply. "The rebels won't be cleared in a day. But soldiers must eat every day. What are we supposed to do?"

He paused.

"Those powerful Jin merchants—what's their situation?"

A deputy general leaned in and whispered.

"Half a month ago, Tian Shenglan delivered fifty shi of grain and five shi of salt. Then he pretended to return home—but actually circled south, then northeast."

"Our scouts followed him. At a border fort near Hongshaba Town, we saw him trading directly with the Mongols. The garrison there had already been bought. He delivered a hundred shi of grain, ten shi of salt, one shi of tea, and dozens of iron pots."

Sun Chuanting exploded.

"Fifty shi for us—but double that for the Mongols?! He deserves death!"

Zhang Zongheng replied quietly, "They pay better."

Sun Chuanting clenched his teeth. "We're starving—and the only merchants who can break through the rebels sell even more to the enemy!"

The deputy general whispered again.

"If we execute him, we lose even the fifty shi. If we let him live, at least he still delivers that much."

No one spoke.

The room tightened like a drawn bowstring.

Suddenly—

A soldier burst in, shouting, "Commander-in-Chief! Good news! A major Jin merchant has arrived! Fifty wagons of grain!"

"Fifty wagons?!" Zhang Zongheng exclaimed.

Sun Chuanting's eyes lit up.

Everyone surged toward the South Gate.

There, a long convoy rolled into Datong.

Fifty wagons.

Each piled high.

Tie Niaofei rode at the head. He dismounted, clasped his hands, and smiled.

"Commander-in-Chief. Master Sun."

He bowed.

"We meet again."

Chapter 649 Wanted to Squeeze It Out for Him

The first time Zhang Zongheng met Tie Niaofei, he had not paid the merchant much attention at all.

At the time, Tie Niaofei had merely been one more wealthy trader passing through, nothing particularly noteworthy. Yet now, as Zhang Zongheng looked again at Tie Niaofei, or rather, as his gaze slid past the man himself and settled on the fifty heavily laden carts of grain lined up behind him, his feelings changed completely. In that instant, Tie Niaofei became the most agreeable person Zhang Zongheng had encountered in the past year, perhaps even longer.

"Master Tie," Sun Chuanting said sincerely, stepping forward, "you have truly delivered aid at the most critical moment."

Zhang Zongheng followed up at once, his tone calm but probing. "Master Tie, on your journey north, did you encounter any attacks by rebel forces?"

Tie Niaofei laughed, waving his hand dismissively. "Oh, there were a few small bands along the way, nothing worth mentioning. I travel with three hundred guards, so we drove them off easily. There were no real problems."

He had no intention of inviting trouble for himself. Naturally, he made no mention of having defeated a major rebel leader like Cao Cao, instead brushing it off as skirmishes with insignificant rabble.

Just as he expected, neither Zhang Zongheng nor Sun Chuanting showed the slightest suspicion.

Zhang Zongheng glanced toward the three hundred cavalymen stationed behind Tie Niaofei, his thoughts turning quietly. With that many cavalry, even several small rebel bands would pose no threat at all. Still, this merchant is unusually well equipped. How does an ordinary trader command three hundred mounted troops?

Sensing the faint trace of doubt, Tie Niaofei smiled and explained smoothly, "I come from the Hedong Circuit, and I have some connections with Xing Honglang of Yongji. As you both know, she was once a rebel herself, so... well, I borrowed some cavalry from her."

At once, realization dawned on both Zhang Zongheng and Sun Chuanting.

They were well aware of Xing Honglang's background. She had begun as a salt smuggler, risen to become a rebel leader, then later accepted pacification under Yang He, the Supreme Commander of the three border regions of Shaanxi. She was now garrisoned in Puzhou, and only days earlier she had rendered great service and been promoted to Military Preparations Commissioner of Hedong. For someone like her, whose forces far exceeded those of many regular Ming officers, lending out three hundred cavalry was hardly surprising.

And yet...

Now that she had been pacified, her troops were technically part of the official forces of the Great Ming.

How could official troops be lent out to escort a merchant caravan?

The situation was absurd beyond words.

Only someone with the recklessness of a former rebel would dare act this way. A proper, orthodox military officer would never.

Zhang Zongheng and Sun Chuanting both felt a surge of helpless exasperation. The Datong border army had run out of grain because of rebels, and now it had grain because of rebels. Who could possibly make sense of such a twisted reality?

Still, there was no point dwelling on it. Grain had arrived, and that alone was cause for celebration.

With supplies finally secured, Zhang Zongheng no longer felt any need to tolerate traitors lurking in the shadows. He lowered his voice and spoke to his adjutant. "We can deal with Tian Shenglan now. Take the border fortress he bribed as well."

The adjutant clasped his fists in acknowledgment and turned to leave.

Just then, Tie Niaofei let out a soft chuckle. "Your Excellency the Governor-General, I have a small request. It may be somewhat impolite."

Zhang Zongheng raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Speak."

Tie Niaofei replied calmly, "There is a... rather old grudge between Tian Shenglan and myself."

Zhang Zongheng understood at once. "You wish to handle him personally?"

Tie Niaofei's grin widened. "Exactly."

Zhang Zongheng was no fool. In exchange for fifty carts of grain, granting such a minor favor cost him nothing. He nodded. "Very well. You may go with my men. If Tian Shenglan is captured alive, he will be handed over to you to deal with as you see fit."

Tie Niaofei was delighted.

—

Red Stone Dam took its name from a stretch of crimson-colored rocks that stained the earth like dried blood.

Upon those rocks stood a small border fortress, known as Red Stone Fort.

A detachment of Ming soldiers garrisoned the fort, and a solitary beacon tower rose above it, stark against the sky.

This was one of the Great Ming's eight hundred and twenty-three border forts, located more than one hundred and twenty li south of Datong Prefecture. To the north, only twenty li away, lay the grazing lands of the Mongol Chahar tribe.

In truth, it was closer to the Mongols than it was to Datong.

At this moment, the forty-five soldiers stationed at Red Stone Fort were gathered around several large cooking pots, eating their fill.

While other border garrisons were starving, freezing, and counting grains of rice to survive, these forty-five men feasted on rich, fragrant dishes, their faces flushed with satisfaction.

The reason was simple.

They had long since sold their loyalty.

Tian Shenglan had bribed the garrison of Red Stone Fort. At regular intervals, his caravans would arrive beneath the fortress, waiting for the Mongols of the Chahar tribe to appear. When both sides were present, the transaction would take place openly.

Money for goods, handed over directly.

The Mongols obtained grain, salt, tea, iron pots, and other necessities, while Tian Shenglan received vast quantities of gold, silver, and precious jewels, many of them still stained with blood.

Anyone with half a brain knew that Mongolia produced no gold, silver, or jewels. These treasures were spoils seized from Han people during raids inside the passes.

To plunder the Han, then use their blood-soaked wealth to buy goods from them again was a cruelty bordering on mockery.

Anyone with even the slightest sense of morality would recoil from such profit.

But Tian Shenglan possessed none.

To him, only money mattered. Its origin was irrelevant. Blood or no blood, he did not care.

Betray the country? As long as he did not betray money, he was willing to do anything.

At this moment, Tian Shenglan stood atop the beacon tower of Red Stone Fort, gazing northward.

Another hundred shi of grain had just been acquired and was stacked below the fort. He had already sent word to the Mongols of the Chahar tribe and was now waiting for them to arrive and complete the exchange.

The setting sun sank slowly behind the distant mountains.

The soldiers who had been eating and drinking now leaned back, bellies full, burping contentedly, smug expressions plastered across their faces.

On the northern grasslands, a large group of mounted figures appeared on the horizon.

The Mongols had arrived.

Seeing them, Tian Shenglan broke into a broad smile, waving enthusiastically as though greeting close relatives.

The Mongols waved back, both sides signaling to one another beneath the fading light of the sunset, like lovers eagerly rushing into each other's arms.

And meanwhile...

Hidden among the rocks of the northern grasslands, Tie Niaofei lay prone beside Bai An, a trusted general under Zhang Zongheng, both men peering toward the fortress.

Tie Niaofei held a telescope in his hand, chuckling softly as he observed the scene. "They're here. The Mongols have arrived. We'll strike once the transaction is underway and catch them red-handed with the goods."

Bai An's expression twisted awkwardly. "What kind of treasure is that thing? Let me see."

Still smiling, Tie Niaofei handed him the telescope.

Bai An took it and immediately exclaimed in amazement, "I can even see the pimples on their faces. I really want to squeeze them out for him."

Tie Niaofei cried out in alarm. "Hey!"

Bai An shot back without shame, "Don't you ever feel the urge to squeeze pimples when you see them?"

Tie Niaofei replied helplessly, "I only want to squeeze my own. I don't think about squeezing other people's. Wait, why are we even talking about this?"

Bai An coughed and hastily reined in his bizarre line of thought. "This thing is incredible, brother. Can you sell it to me?"

Tie Niaofei grinned instinctively. "Name your price."

The words had barely left his mouth before his heart jolted. No, no, no. This isn't my personal item. This is military equipment issued by Gao Family Village. Selling it privately would be a serious offense. I'd be finished when I got back.

He shook his head vigorously. "Not for sale. No matter the price."

Bai An frowned. "I was just about to make an offer. Are you playing games with me?"

Tie Niaofei wiped his forehead. "It's not mine. I spoke without thinking."

Bai An sighed deeply. "What a pity. I really wanted one."

Tie Niaofei looked at him in disbelief. "Can you please focus on what actually matters right now?"

Bai An straightened at once. "Ah, right. Focus. Let me look again... They're about to start trading. Good. Give the order. Our men can begin the encirclement."

Chapter 650 A National Grudge to Settle

Tian Shenglan and the Mongols met at last.

The two sides approached one another without the slightest hint of hostility. Instead, they exchanged the customary greetings of the steppe, raising their arms and calling out a rough "hooh-uh," then stepping forward to embrace, their gestures warm and familiar, as though they were old friends reunited rather than partners in treachery. Tian Shenglan's men brought forward one hundred shi of grain, the sacks stacked neatly on the ground, while the Mongols responded by producing a large handful of gold and silver ornaments, their surfaces dulled and darkened, still bearing unmistakable traces of dried blood.

Both sides were thoroughly immersed in the satisfaction of the exchange.

Then, without warning, the earth began to tremble.

A thunderous rumble of hooves rolled across the grasslands.

From the east, Brigade General Hu Dawei of Shanxi charged in at the head of a cavalry force, banners snapping violently in the wind. From the west, Brigade General Li Bei led another contingent, their formation tight and disciplined. From the south, Zuo Liangyu, Commander of the Right Flank Camp, swept forward with his own cavalry, sealing off the open ground.

The moment these forces appeared, the entire scene changed.

These were not ordinary horsemen. Every one of them was an elite frontier cavalryman, hardened by years of fighting along the borders, the kind of troops who could make even seasoned Mongol riders feel a chill in their spines.

The Mongol who had been trading with Tian Shenglan reacted instantly, drawing his saber as fury twisted his face. "Tian Shenglan," he roared, "have you betrayed us?"

Tian Shenglan's heart lurched violently. "No, no!" he cried, his voice shaking. "I arranged nothing of this. Our private dealings must have been exposed. We have no choice but to fight our way out together."

The Mongols mounted their horses in one fluid motion, movements swift and practiced.

Tian Shenglan, pale with fear, hurriedly ordered his own men to mount as well.

With enemy cavalry closing in from the east, west, and south, there was only one direction left.

"North!" someone shouted. "Ride north!"

The combined force of Mongols and Tian Shenglan's men spurred their horses and fled toward the open steppes.

Yet waiting for them there, concealed within the tall northern grass, were Bai Yuan and Tie Niaofei.

As the fleeing riders surged closer, Bai Yuan burst out from concealment and roared, "Fire!"

In an instant, countless heads rose from the grass. Elite frontier archers and crossbowmen revealed themselves, bows already drawn, strings pulled taut. A storm of arrows and bolts flew forth, aimed squarely at the leading Mongol riders.

Screams ripped through the air, mingling with the terrified neighing of wounded horses.

Even so, the Mongols pressed forward, driven by desperation. They had no path of retreat. If they could not break through the northern line, there would be no escape at all.

Just as they closed the distance, something even more terrifying emerged.

From within the tall grass, a dense formation of Three-Eyed Arquebuses was raised.

A deafening chorus of gunfire erupted.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

The shots rang out in rapid succession, and the charging Mongol cavalry collapsed almost instantly. Horses and riders fell together in tangled heaps, none managing to force their way through.

Not a single one escaped.

Tian Shenglan, who had lagged behind the Mongols, remained alive by sheer misfortune.

But as he looked around and saw elite frontier cavalry converging from every direction, he understood with chilling clarity that escape was impossible. Even if he had grown wings, he would not have made it out alive.

All strength drained from his body. He pulled hard on the reins, forcing his horse to halt, and then threw back his head and roared hoarsely, "You can't kill me. You can't kill me. If I die, who will supply you with goods? Small Jin merchants can't even reach Datong. The bandits block the roads. Only influential Jin merchants like me can make it through. You can't kill me. You can't kill me!"

His voice cracked as he shouted, desperation spilling out with every word.

At that moment, a figure stepped out from the tall grass ahead.

It was Tie Niaofei.

He laughed heartily as he walked forward. "Tian Shenglan, I've just delivered fifty cartloads of grain to Datong Prefecture. Fifty full carts."

Tian Shenglan froze, his face draining of all color.

Tie Niaofei's smile turned sharp. "Now then, say it with me. Can we kill you, or can't we?"

Tian Shenglan's eyes burned with hatred. "Tie Niaofei, you bastard. Even if I die, I'll drag you down with me."

With a furious cry, he spurred his horse and charged straight toward Tie Niaofei.

Tie Niaofei did not move.

The surrounding soldiers did not loose arrows, nor did they raise their arquebuses. They simply watched, their expressions cold and unmoved, as though observing a final, meaningless struggle.

Tian Shenglan closed the distance rapidly. When he was still five or six paces away, he drew his curved saber, planning to rush in a little closer before bringing it down in a killing arc.

But before he could take another stride, Tie Niaofei suddenly raised his hand.

A short pistol appeared in his grip, compact and refined, no longer than a man's forearm.

With a flick of his wrist, he fired.

Bang.

Tian Shenglan was thrown from his saddle.

His horse, freed of its rider, veered sharply and thundered past Tie Niaofei, hooves pounding the earth as it fled.

Tie Niaofei casually blew away the thin wisp of white smoke curling from the pistol's muzzle and snorted. "Times have changed."

He turned, intending to leave.

Then he noticed movement on the ground.

Tian Shenglan was still alive, writhing weakly.

"One shot wasn't enough?" Tie Niaofei muttered, surprised.

He walked closer and saw Tian Shenglan clutching his abdomen, blood pouring out between his fingers like a gushing spring. The bullet had struck his belly rather than his heart, leaving him to linger in agony rather than die at once.

Tie Niaofei hesitated for a brief moment. Should he finish the man quickly, or simply stand back and let him bleed out?

At that instant, the Dao Xuan Tianzun statue resting against his chest spoke calmly, "All men must die. Some merely need a little assistance. Tie Niaofei, light a hand grenade and stuff it into his mouth."

The hesitation vanished.

Under Tian Shenglan's terrified gaze, Tie Niaofei calmly lit the fuse of a hand grenade, then forced it into the man's mouth.

He dusted his hands together and turned away.

After walking several paces, he crouched down and covered his ears.

A thunderous boom echoed behind him.

Only then did Tie Niaofei rise, a strange, satisfied smile spreading across his face. "Brothers, half of our vengeance is settled. Kill Zhai Tang, and the blood feud will be fully repaid."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke again, its voice steady and grave. "Personal grudges may be settled, but there remains a national grudge. If all Jin merchants who collude with the enemy and betray the nation are not eradicated, this hatred will never truly be avenged."

Tie Niaofei nodded firmly. "That's right. There's still a national grudge to settle."

—

In the fifth year of the Chongzhen era, in the eighth month, the bandits attacked Xizhou.

Gao Yi, Commander of the Xizhou Garrison, opened the north gate and fled in panic. Yang Wei, the Prefect of Xizhou, held out stubbornly, personally wounding many bandits, but was ultimately struck by a stray arrow and fell from the east wall. Xizhou City was breached, and the bandits occupied it for three days.

Afterward, the bandits successively captured Qingshui, Yangcheng County, Gaoping, Lingchuan, Lu'an, Changzi, and other areas. In an instant, the situation in Shanxi deteriorated once again.

"Report!"

A lone rider galloped at full speed into Hedong City, reins slick with sweat, heading straight for Xing Honglang and Gao Chuwu. The messenger barely managed to catch his breath before blurting out, "The bandits have captured Shouyang, just outside Taiyuan City. Governor Xu Dingchen led his army to relieve it, but the bandits abandoned Shouyang, moved south at full speed, and breached Zezhou."

Upon hearing this report, Xing Honglang felt her heart tighten.

Shouyang lay extremely close to Taiyuan.

Xu Dingchen was stationed within Taiyuan City itself, yet the bandits had still managed to seize Shouyang before relief could arrive. That alone spoke volumes about the terrifying speed of their operations.

In the early years of the Chongzhen era, the bandits had merely harassed villages, attacked small towns, and raided minor counties. Now, they were capable of swiftly breaching satellite towns adjacent to Taiyuan, withdrawing before government forces could respond, then racing south to strike again.

They were no longer the crude rabble they once had been.

"Zezhou is only about two hundred li from Hedong City," Xing Honglang said grimly, her brow deeply furrowed. "At their current pace, two hundred li is only a matter of days. That means our position here is no longer safe."

The messenger nodded. "Yes. The Governor will soon lead his army south to pursue and annihilate the bandits. Before that, he commands you to hold Hedong City at all costs, to defend this vital salt-producing region, and under no circumstances allow it to fall."