

Great Ming 661

Chapter 661 Ammunition Must Keep Pace Too

No sooner had Bai Yuan finished speaking than the golden-thread-embroidered statue resting against his chest suddenly chimed.

Its voice was calm, confident, and carried a faint trace of amusement.

"Don't worry. You'll have enough flintlock rifles very soon."

Bai Yuan froze for a split second, then his eyes widened.

"Ah?" he exclaimed. "The Heavenly—no, Dao Xuan Tianzun—is back? What's happening in Mengjin County?"

Li Daoxuan did not waste time.

He quickly explained everything: how the Xiaolangdi water bandits had already thrown in their lot with the Shanxi rebels, how they had slipped into Mengjin County to scout troop deployments, and how they had attempted to kidnap him in order to gather intelligence.

"Brigadier General Qin Renhong's true strength has been completely exposed," Li Daoxuan said steadily. "The Shanxi rebels will no longer hesitate. They will definitely force a crossing now."

His tone sharpened slightly.

"You need to accelerate preparations on your side."

Bai Yuan's expression turned serious. He nodded without hesitation.

"At once."

"As for the flintlock rifles," Li Daoxuan continued, "ships carrying them are already on the way."

Almost as soon as he finished speaking, someone shouted from the riverside lookout.

"They're here!"

Five massive cargo ships slowly emerged from the mist on the river.

Even at a great distance, there was no mistaking them.

The hull shape, the reinforced structure, the faint electric hum of the propulsion system—these were unmistakably Gao Family Village cargo ships.

Bai Yuan's spirits soared.

Without another word, he led his men toward the dock at a brisk pace.

The five ships soon berthed smoothly.

As soon as the gangplank was lowered, a quartermaster soldier jumped down and jogged forward, giving a crisp salute.

"Instructor Bai!" he reported loudly. "By the command of Dao Xuan Tianzun, I am here to deliver supplies!"

"One ship of newly produced flintlock rifles!"

"One ship of ammunition!"

"And three ships of new recruits!"

Bai Yuan felt his heart leap.

"A whole ship of flintlock rifles?" he said in disbelief. "So many at once? How did Gao Family Village's rifle production suddenly become this fast?"

The golden-threaded statue chuckled softly.

"The coke production experiment was successful," Li Daoxuan explained. "The new smelting furnaces are also complete. The village has begun using casting techniques to manufacture flintlock rifles. Naturally, production speed has increased dramatically."

He paused deliberately.

"However..."

That single word made Bai Yuan instinctively straighten.

"In the end, cast flintlock rifles are not as durable as forged ones," Li Daoxuan continued. "They're more prone to damage under sustained use. Treat them as low-cost, mass-produced equipment."

"Distribute them to regular troops."

"Elite units will continue using the forged rifles."

Bai Yuan immediately understood.

"I see," he said. "I'll make the arrangements right away."

Before long, news spread like wildfire.

The three thousand members of the local Xiaolangdi militia were summoned to the docks.

They didn't understand the technical differences between casting and forging. They didn't care.

All they knew was this:

They were about to receive flintlock rifles.

The raw recruits buzzed with excitement, barely able to contain themselves.

Jiang Cheng stood at the side of the ship, his voice ringing out clearly over the noise.

"Form a line!"

"Step forward in order!"

"Each man will receive one flintlock rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition!"

The response was thunderous.

"Understood!"

Crates were opened.

Rifles were handed out.

"Yours!"

"Next—this one's yours!"

"Hold it properly!"

One by one, the militia members accepted their weapons.

Their faces glowed with pride.

To them, this was more than a firearm.

It was recognition.

It meant they were no longer just hastily assembled locals with spears and sabers—they were being treated the same as Gao Family Village's core militia.

They were now real soldiers.

Excited howls echoed along the dock.

Bai Yuan watched from the side, but his brows gradually knit together.

A new concern surfaced.

He leaned closer to the quartermaster and lowered his voice.

"Three thousand flintlock rifles..." he murmured. "That amount of firepower will burn through ammunition at a terrifying rate. Tens of thousands of rounds could be expended in moments. As for ammunition—what about resupply?"

The quartermaster also lowered his voice.

"Ammunition is still a major bottleneck," he admitted. "San Shier is working on a solution. He asked me to tell you—the front lines must conserve ammunition as much as possible."

Bai Yuan's eyes widened.

"Conserve?" he hissed. "Three thousand rifles firing at once! How exactly am I supposed to conserve?"

The quartermaster smiled faintly.

"That's the art of command," he said. "Command is 'Yu.' 'Yu' is one of the Six Arts of a gentleman. Master Bai, I'm sure you'll manage."

Bai Yuan glared at him.

"You ignorant fool!" he snapped. "'Yu' refers to driving chariots and horses!"

Meanwhile, far away—

Inside the Gao Family Village prison.

Zhong Gaoliang stood before a massive crowd.

Thirty thousand people.

Elderly men with bent backs. Women with tired eyes. Children clinging quietly to their mothers.

They were the elderly, the weak, the women, and the children whom Shi Kefa—acting under Wu Shen's orders—had sent all the way from Hequ County to Gao Family Village.

They had suffered greatly.

First, they had endured the pain of being "abandoned" by their own able-bodied men. Then came the long journey—thousands of li traveled under harsh conditions, lacking food, lacking warmth, lacking certainty.

While crossing the Dragon Gate Yellow River Bridge, many of them had personally witnessed Dao Xuan Tianzun descend from the heavens, manifesting a vast bridge of divine power across the raging waters.

They could not fully understand what they had seen.

But it had shaken them to their very bones.

Those who had endured hardship knew best how precious peace was.

After arriving at the prison, they had thrown themselves into labor reform. They worked diligently, afraid of being cast out again. Every day, they knelt and prostrated themselves before the image of Dao Xuan Tianzun painted on the prison walls.

And now—

It was time.

Zhong Gaoliang raised his voice.

"Everyone," he announced, "your labor reform is complete."

He paused, then declared clearly:

"You are free."

Silence.

Not cheers.

Not cries of joy.

Just blank stares.

These were not men of ambition. They were survivors.

Freedom meant uncertainty.

After living so long within the prison's structured routine, being told to leave felt more frightening than comforting.

Where would they go?

How would they live?

Zhong Gaoliang saw their fear and quickly reassured them.

"Don't worry," he said. "Your living arrangements and work will be handled properly. You'll take the train to Gao Family Village."

"You'll live in the staff dormitories of the Gao Family Village Ordnance Bureau."

"There, you'll receive new work."

He enunciated carefully.

"Packaging bullets."

The crowd stirred, but hesitation remained.

Zhong Gaoliang added one more sentence.

"From now on, your labor will be paid. Every month, you'll receive three taels of silver."

A soft wave of sound rippled through the crowd.

"Oh..."

Zhong Gaoliang couldn't help but laugh, half amused, half exasperated.

"You're free," he said. "You can live your own lives. You'll earn wages every month. Why are you still staring at me like this?"

An old man trembled forward, supported by a stick.

"Warden Zhong," he said haltingly, "outside... is there still fighting and killing?"

His voice cracked.

"When we were outside before, there was fighting everywhere. Even my own son... he left me behind to go fight."

Zhong Gaoliang let out a long sigh.

"Everyone, rest assured," he said solemnly. "When you leave here, there will be no fighting or killing."

"You'll live in the safe haven of Gao Family Village."

"You'll earn money through honest labor."

"And the bullets you package—our soldiers will use them to end this chaos."

"Help them," he said softly. "Help us build a world where everyone can live and work in peace."

At last, understanding dawned.

Scattered cheers broke out.

Not loud.

But sincere.

They exited the prison in orderly lines.

They boarded the train in orderly lines.

Only when they arrived at Gao Family Village did they truly relax.

Images of Dao Xuan Tianzun were everywhere.

Paintings. Dolls. Clay statues. Puppets. Straw figures.

Even unbelievably bouncy silicone Heavenly Lords waved cheerfully at them.

At last, their hearts settled.

The Gao Family Village Ordnance Bureau gained thirty thousand new workers overnight.

At first, they were clumsy.

Each person could only package fifty paper cartridges a day.

But gradually, their hands grew steady.

The fastest could package a hundred rounds daily.

The slower ones managed seventy or eighty.

Thirty thousand people working together.

At last—

Ammunition production could finally keep pace with the mass production of cast flintlock rifles.

Chapter 662 The Rebels Cross the River

North of Mengjin County, along the banks of the Yellow River, at the easternmost edge of Xiaolangdi.

Dawn had only just begun to break.

The sky was still dim, the line between night and morning blurred and indistinct, when a vast shadow slowly emerged on the northern bank of the Yellow River.

Boat after boat.

At first, they were only silhouettes.

Then the silhouettes multiplied.

Small sampans, fishing boats, merchant vessels, commandeered transports—packed so tightly together that they seemed to fuse into one dark, crawling mass upon the water.

The rebel army had begun to cross.

At the very front were the remnants of Xu Chenglong's Xiaolangdi water bandits. These men knew the river best. They piloted small, nimble boats, weaving through the current with practiced ease, serving as guides and pathfinders.

Close behind them came the true vanguard.

The forces of the South Camp Eight Great Kings and Zhang Xianzhong of the West Camp Eight Great Kings.

These were no longer mere river bandits. They were hardened rebel elites—men who had fought, killed, and survived countless engagements. They commandeered everything that could float: merchant ships seized from the docks, fishing boats stripped bare, and even government warships looted from the riverbanks of Shanxi.

Further back came the true bulk of the army.

The main forces of Chuǎng Wang and Zijing Liang.

Their numbers were overwhelming, an endless stream of bodies and hulls pouring toward the southern bank like a flood that could not be stopped.

And still, not all of them moved.

A large portion of the army remained behind on the northern shore.

That force was under the command of the Dashing General.

His task was clear: to guard the rear. If Xu Dingchen, the Governor of Shanxi, attempted pursuit, the Dashing General would intercept him—buying time at any cost.

The rebels had deliberately chosen this hour.

The moment when night had not fully retreated and dawn had not yet claimed the world.

Visibility was poor. The river was shrouded in mist and half-light. They hoped to slip past the government scouts unnoticed.

But they had badly misjudged their enemy.

The instant the rebel flotilla stirred, intelligence had already reached Qin Renhong, Regional Commander of Henan.

Government warships surged out from Cangbing Bay within Heqing Bay, cutting across the river with full speed, heading straight toward the center channel.

There was no probing.

No warning.

The naval battle erupted almost immediately.

"Loose arrows!"

"Loose arrows!"

"Kill those damned government dogs!"

"We have no retreat—break through their blockade!"

"Board them! Board them!"

Shouts and curses overlapped chaotically.

The river ignited.

Flaming arrows streaked across the dim sky, hissing as they struck decks and sails. Burning oil splashed across wooden hulls, fire spreading in violent blooms. The surface of the Yellow River reflected the flames, turning the water itself into a writhing sheet of fire.

On the southern bank, some distance away, Dao Xuan Tianzun lay prone in the tall grass, Gao Yiye beside him.

They peered through a telescope, silently observing the chaos unfolding on the river.

Gao Yiye rarely witnessed war.

Aside from the earliest battles of Gao Family Village, and the campaign when the Guyuan rebels attacked Chengcheng County, she had almost never been present on a battlefield.

Now, through the telescope, she saw a small wooden boat engulfed in flames. Burning oil clung to its hull and crew alike. Screaming men leapt into the river in desperation—only to be shot down by arrows from neighboring boats while struggling in the water.

Her stomach churned.

She lowered her voice unconsciously. "What a fierce battle..."

She swallowed. "Can the government forces win?"

"They won't."

Li Daoxuan's answer was calm, almost detached.

He had read the historical records. In this battle, the rebels would succeed in entering Henan.

Of course—that was assuming he did nothing.

With Gao Family Village now acting as a butterfly's wing, history was already trembling.

They continued watching.

The rebel warships surged forward in waves, colliding with the government vessels. Hooks flew. Ropes tightened. Ships crashed together.

The government forces were quickly overwhelmed.

They were simply too few.

The troops under Qin Renhong were only Henan garrison soldiers. Their combat strength could not compare to famous frontier generals like Cao Wenzhao, He Renlong, or Ma Xianglin, who were suppressing bandits in Shaanxi and Shanxi.

They were even inferior to Zuo Liangyu.

How could Qin Renhong possibly withstand such enemies?

At the height of the chaos, a harsh scraping sound rang out.

Grappling hooks slammed into the side of Qin Renhong's flagship.

He spun around.

A ferocious bandit had already vaulted aboard.

The man's eyes burned with savage excitement. He grinned broadly and roared with laughter.

"The South Camp Eight Great Kings has arrived!"

He pointed his saber forward.

"Qin Renhong! Hand over your dog's head!"

The name struck like thunder.

Qin Renhong's face went pale.

The South Camp Eight Great Kings—this was a bandit among bandits. Even official gazettes spoke of him with dread, describing him as brutally bloodthirsty, ruthless, and monstrously strong.

Now that the man stood before him in the flesh, Qin Renhong's legs trembled uncontrollably.

He didn't even dare to fight personally.

"Men!" he bellowed. "Quickly—throw him off the ship!"

Government soldiers rushed forward in a cluster.

The South Camp Eight Great Kings wielded his waist-saber with terrifying speed. He parried, slashed, thrust—several government soldiers fell back, wounded or killed, unable to gain the upper hand.

He planted himself by the ship's rail, holding the position alone.

Behind him, more grappling hooks flew.

One by one, fierce bandits scrambled aboard.

Qin Renhong's heart sank.

He turned and ran toward the stern, desperately searching for an escape skiff.

But before he reached it—

Hooks slammed down again.

Another group of bandits leapt aboard.

Their leader grinned widely, eyes glittering with madness.

"My name is Zhang Xianzhong," he announced loudly.

"The West Camp Eight Great Kings!"

He raised his saber.

"Remember it well. When you report to the King of Hell, don't misstate my name."

He pointed toward the other bandit.

"I am Zhang Xianzhong of the West Camp. The one before me is the South Camp Eight Great Kings."

Qin Renhong's heart thudded violently.

Damn it.

He'd remembered it wrong.

The official gazettes had described Zhang Xianzhong—the West Camp Eight Great Kings—as the truly brutal and vicious one.

And now—

Zhang Xianzhong charged.

Qin Renhong raised his weapon clumsily, barely managing to parry.

Three moves.

Less than three.

Zhang Xianzhong's saber flashed.

It hacked cleanly into Qin Renhong's neck.

Blood sprayed in a wide arc across the deck.

On the southern bank, Gao Yiye lowered her telescope.

Her voice was quiet.

"Heavenly Lord... the government forces have lost."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Yes. They're about to rout."

As if on cue, the government line collapsed.

The remaining warships turned and fled toward the southern bank. In their panic, several ran aground on sandbars. Soldiers scrambled ashore, abandoning ships entirely.

As they fled inland, they tore off helmets and armor, discarding anything that slowed them down.

On the riverbank, the Magistrate of Mengjin County was organizing local militia.

He was immediately swept up by the fleeing soldiers.

Panic spread.

The militia wavered.

"So many bandits!"

"The river is covered in their ships!"

"We can't stop this!"

"Should we retreat to the county seat and defend there?"

The magistrate felt numb.

He wasn't skilled in warfare, but military treatises all said the same thing: defending a riverbank was easier than defending a city.

Just then—

He saw two figures emerge calmly from the tall grass nearby.

The young hero Xiao Qiushui.

And his wife, Tang Fang.

They walked forward unhurriedly, utterly unfazed by the chaos.

The magistrate stared, dumbfounded.

Li Daoxuan asked evenly, "Why aren't you fleeing? What are you still standing here for?"

The magistrate trembled.

"The military texts say..." he stammered, "to strike them mid-crossing... is the best tactic. I was waiting until half their army crossed, then I would attack."

Li Daoxuan countered calmly, "The rebel army numbers two hundred thousand. Are you planning to wait until one hundred thousand have crossed?"

He looked at the militia.

"Can your handful of men defeat one hundred thousand bandits?"

The magistrate fell silent.

After a brief moment, understanding struck him like cold water.

He cried out, "Retreat! Fall back to defend the county seat!"

The militia vanished almost instantly.

Li Daoxuan spread his hands.

"Good," he said lightly. "All obstacles are gone."

He turned his gaze forward.

"Now it's our people's turn to enter."

At his words—

Three thousand local militiamen surged forward from behind.

They carried cast-iron versions of Chassepot rifles.

They rushed into the position abandoned by the Mengjin magistrate and immediately began working.

Sandbags were dumped.

Stacked.

Pressed together.

In mere moments, low sandbag walls took shape along the riverbank.

Riflemen crouched behind them.

A defensive line was born.

Jiang Cheng, commander of the new Henan militia, shouted loudly:

"Everyone—load your bullets!"

In truth, Jiang Cheng himself was new.

He had never commanded rifle troops before.

His soldiers were new.

The entire unit was painfully green.

The militia hurriedly began loading their first paper cartridges.

Hands trembled.

Some dropped bullets into the sand and scrambled desperately to find them.

Others inserted cartridges backward, sensed something wrong, yanked them out, and tried again.

Chaos reigned.

But the line held.

For now.

Chapter 663 Striking Mid-Crossing

The New People's Militia instantly fell into chaos, putting on a flawless demonstration of what raw recruits looked like when they tasted real battle for the first time.

Jiang Cheng, commander of the militia, felt sweat bead along his temples. He roared at the top of his lungs,

"What are you panicking for? Pull yourselves together! You're defending your own homes! If even you collapse like this, once the marauders enter Henan, every one of your elders and kin will be slaughtered!"

Unfortunately, his words had the exact opposite effect.

The new recruits only grew more frantic, their formation loosening further, shouts overlapping into pure noise.

Jiang Cheng fell silent.

"...."

Even Gao Yiye could not help but feel uneasy.

"Oh no. Can they really hold the brigands back?"

Up ahead, on the riverbank, the enemy had already begun landing.

Countless small skiffs surged toward the shore. The Xiaolangdi water bandits, acting as collaborators, were the first to jump off. Behind them came the vanguard forces of both the South Camp Eight Great Kings and the West Camp Eight Great Kings, flooding onto land in a rush.

The small boats rammed together as their occupants leapt ashore, cheering wildly. Their feet touched solid ground, and they whooped and hollered like men who believed victory was already in their hands.

Ahead of them stood rows of sandbags, with figures crouched behind them. But the marauders did not take these so-called militia seriously at all.

Xu Chenglong, charging at the front, raised his blade and roared,

"Break through! Take Xiaolangdi back and reclaim our stronghold!"

"Ooo-ah!" the water bandits shouted in response.

That roar alone was enough to send another wave of panic rippling through the militia ranks.

At that very moment, one hundred of Gao Yiye's personal guards suddenly stepped forward as one. In a single smooth motion, they raised their Chassepot rifles and aimed at the freshly landed bandits.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A hundred rifle shots erupted in near unison.

As the saying went, the bird that sticks its head out first gets shot.

And so it was.

Xu Chenglong's... bird... vanished on the spot.

He stared down at his lower abdomen in disbelief, his face draining of color, before letting out a shrill scream that tore through the air. Before the sound had even faded, two more bullets slammed into his chest.

The wretched collaborator collapsed onto the riverbank with a dull thud.

The Xiaolangdi water bandits around him dropped as well, casualties piling up in an instant.

"They have firearms!"

"What's there to fear about firearms?" one of the South Camp Eight Great Kings' subordinates bellowed. "After one volley they take forever to reload! Don't be scared, charge!"

The bandits who had already landed roared and surged forward, charging straight at the militia positions.

But after witnessing the decisive strike by Gao Yiye's guards, the militia's morale finally stabilized. With veterans leading the way, the recruits no longer felt completely helpless.

They steadied their breathing, reloaded their weapons, raised their guns again, and took aim.

They had trained for several months. As long as they did not panic, they were perfectly capable of using firearms.

Bang!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The New People's Militia finally returned fire.

Bandits who had been screaming moments ago fell in droves, bodies dropping across the riverbank.

Still, the brigands were simply too numerous.

More boats docked behind them. More figures scrambled ashore, laughing and shouting as if they were attending a festival rather than a battlefield.

The militia kept firing, cutting down yet another wave of newly landed enemies.

Li Daoxuan watched the scene unfold, eyes lighting up.

"Huh? Beach Landing Battle 1632. Damn it, now I really want to play."

Gao Yiye turned his head slowly.

"???"

Li Daoxuan waved to a nearby recruit.

"Lend me your firearm."

The young soldier dared not refuse and quickly handed it over.

Li Daoxuan took the gun and struck what he clearly believed was an impressively cool shooting pose.

"Hmph. Back when I played Beach Landing Battle, I was a top-tier marksman. Hitting misses was my specialty. Today, I'll show you what true skill looks like."

He aimed at the bandit charging at the very front and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The bandit remained completely unharmed and kept running.

Li Daoxuan froze.

"...."

"Must be that I'm not used to this mouse and keyboard yet. One more time."

He aimed again.

Bang!

The bandit still did not fall.

Without another word, Li Daoxuan handed the firearm back, saying casually,

"Weapons of the mortal realm really are troublesome. They're nothing compared to magical artifacts."

The recruit nodded respectfully.

"Of course. Someone accustomed to celestial artifacts would naturally find mortal weapons beneath your notice."

After flattering him, the recruit swiftly reloaded, raised his rifle, aimed at the same bandit Li Daoxuan had failed to hit, and fired.

Bang!

The bandit dropped instantly.

The corner of Li Daoxuan's mouth twitched uncontrollably.

Damn it.

At that moment, the tide of battle shifted once again.

Gao Family Village's fleet had arrived.

Ten flat-bottomed cargo ships advanced side by side, slicing across the river and charging directly into the marauders' river force from the flank.

Some of the brigands at the front had already landed and were busy playing Beach Landing Battle 1632 with Li Daoxuan. Those behind them were still paddling across the river, their small boats stretched out in a long, disordered line.

Bai Yuan's eyes lit up.

This was the perfect chance for a true strike mid-crossing.

The electric motors roared at full power. The ten massive flat-bottomed ships surged forward like monstrous fish, parting the muddy river as they charged.

Zijing Liang stared in shock.

"Huh? What are those strange ships?"

Chuǎng Wang, Gao Yingxiang, standing beside him, narrowed his eyes.

"They're moving fast. No sails. No oars."

"They don't look like official government vessels," someone muttered. "More like private merchant ships."

"And they're heading straight at us!"

Both men shouted at once,

"Send men to intercept them!"

But the moment the orders left their mouths, they realized something was terribly wrong.

Their commands were not being transmitted at all.

Orderlies could only move within their own boats. They could not reach others, nor did they understand the naval flag signals used by proper fleets.

Once on the water, the brigands' command structure had completely collapsed.

Zijing Liang cursed under his breath.

"Damn it."

With no unified command, each boat could only act on its own judgment.

The brigands were used to fighting independently anyway. Coordination had never been their strong point.

One group continued charging toward the opposite bank, while another turned to face Gao Family Village's incoming ships.

The South Camp Eight Great Kings laughed loudly as he moved to intercept.

"Let's seize those ten strange boats! They look like they can carry a lot!"

Beside him, the West Camp Eight Great Kings, Zhang Xianzhong, hesitated.

He glanced toward the far bank, listening to the dense crackle of gunfire and the occasional explosion of a hand grenade. A memory stirred.

Long ago, he had once attacked the Longmen Yellow River Bridge. At the bridgehead, he had seen the same sandbags, the same rows of riflemen firing from behind cover, forcing him to flee in complete disarray.

That experience had left a circular shadow five centimeters in diameter etched deep into his young mind.

Please calculate the area of this psychological trauma.

Now, hearing those familiar gunshots again, it all felt terrifyingly familiar.

The South Camp Eight Great Kings chuckled.

"Old Xi, want to grab a few of those flat-bottomed ships with me?"

Zhang Xianzhong forced a laugh.

"I'll leave them to you. If I took some myself, you'd probably be unhappy."

Chapter 664 The Ships Were Seized

The South Camp Eight Great Kings failed to notice the faint tremor buried in Zhang Xianzhong's voice.

He only heard one thing:

The ships are yours.

His eyes lit up instantly.

"Good!" he roared with laughter. "Excellent! Then those strange boats belong to me!"

He swung his arm forward.

"Men! After me! Seize those ships!"

His flagship turned sharply, charging straight toward Gao Family Village's flat-bottomed cargo ships.

Zhang Xianzhong, meanwhile, had already hopped back onto his own flagship.

He gave a cold snort.

His gaze drifted once more toward the opposite riverbank—where Beach Landing Battle 1632 was still unfolding—and then to the massive flat-bottomed ships slicing through the water like iron beasts.

That familiar unease crept up his spine.

He leaned close to a trusted subordinate and murmured, "Go. Disable the rudder."

The subordinate stiffened—then nodded without hesitation.

Moments later, he rushed to the stern, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Commander! Disaster! Disaster! The rudder's broken! We can't steer!"

The crew instantly caught on.

"It's broken!"

"We can't control the ship!"

"Oh heavens—we're drifting!"

And just like that, Zhang Xianzhong's flagship obediently surrendered itself to the current.

With the commander's banner still fluttering proudly atop the mast, his entire contingent—seeing their leader's ship retreat—followed without question.

No orders were needed.

The West Camp Eight Great Kings quietly exited the battlefield, drifting farther and farther downstream.

On the other side of the river, South Camp Eight Great Kings charged headlong into disaster.

Dozens—no, hundreds—of small boats swarmed Gao Family Village's cargo ships like ants around a carcass, so densely packed it made one's skin crawl.

"Fire!"

At Bai Yuan's command, the core Gao Family Village Militia unleashed hell.

This was not the New People's Militia from the shore.

These men had trained for years.

Their rifles were forged, not cast.

And the moment they opened fire—

"CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!"

Dense rifle volleys tore through the air.

Small boats shattered under impact. Bandits pitched backward into the river one after another, arms flailing, screams swallowed by the Yellow River.

Bai Yuan burst into laughter.

"These fellows are worse on water than the Xiaolangdi bandits!"

At least the Xiaolangdi bandits knew how to launch rockets, lie flat to evade fire, or weave their boats erratically.

These ones?

They were just targets.

It was simple.

Southern men grew up with boats.

Northern men grew up with horses.

Most of these bandits came from Shaanxi and Shanxi. Many had learned to row only days ago. Swimming was a luxury skill.

Rifle fire didn't stop.

Grenades followed.

One grenade per boat.

Boom.

Fish received their meals early.

From the moment contact was made, the outcome had never been in doubt.

South Camp Eight Great Kings finally sensed something was terribly wrong.

Earlier, when they had swarmed government warships, it had been effortless.

So why—

Why were these merchant-looking ships turning his men into floating corpses?

"Damn it!" he roared. "That bastard Old West wasn't giving me spoils—he was throwing me into a pit!"

Only then did he turn his head.

Only then did he realize—

Zhang Xianzhong's fleet was already gone.

Retreating.

Drifting.

Escaped.

South Camp Eight Great Kings nearly spat blood.

Eight of Gao Family Village's cargo ships rampaged freely across the river, crushing resistance wherever they went.

Bandits screamed for their parents.

For their ancestors.

For anyone who might be listening.

South Camp Eight Great Kings looked back toward the riverbank—

And his heart sank.

The vanguard troops who had landed earlier were almost completely wiped out.

Only now did he truly understand.

Riflemen defending a riverbank... are monsters.

There was no cover. No maneuvering.

The shore was a shooting range.

No matter how many men you sent, they would only die faster.

"Retreat!" he roared. "RETREAT!"

But once again, the river swallowed his voice.

Orders meant nothing here.

Desperate, he beat the gong on his ship with all his strength.

Clang—clang—clang!

The signal for withdrawal.

With his retreat, both vanguard generals were effectively gone.

The rebel assault collapsed.

Zijing Liang and Chuǎng Wang's main fleets finally arrived.

Merchant ships.

Tower ships looted from government forces.

At a glance, they looked imposing.

But before they could even stabilize—

South Camp Eight Great Kings' men fled past them, screaming.

"We can't win!"

"Their firearms are terrifying!"

"Run!"

Panic spread like fire through dry grass.

In the age of cold weapons, once morale broke, defeat followed swiftly.

Gao Family Village's cargo ships surged forward again.

Black spheres landed on rebel decks.

BOOM.

Men flew.

Rifles cracked.

Bodies fell.

Boats jammed together—some trying to flee, others trying to advance.

Northern soldiers, already poor sailors, now completely lost control.

The congestion became fatal.

Then—

Impact.

The flat-bottomed ships plowed straight through the mass of small boats, capsizing them one after another.

Men fell into the river.

Bubbles rose.

Then nothing.

Zijing Liang and Chuǎng Wang could only stare in horror.

They no longer dared to fight on water.

"Retreat!" they shouted.

Their forces fled back to the north bank in complete disarray.

Silence slowly returned to the river.

The rebels abandoned every boat they had.

They stood far from the shore, staring helplessly.

Bai Yuan waved his hand calmly.

"Take them."

Gao Family Village soldiers boarded the abandoned boats and rowed them away—one after another.

The bandits watched, eyes red with fury, but could do nothing.

Only when the last boat was claimed did Bai Yuan give the order.

"Withdraw."

The cargo ships turned back toward Xiaolangdi—now accompanied by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of captured vessels.

On the opposite bank, the landing battle had ended in total annihilation.

The New People's Militia also began to withdraw.

On the Yellow River's edge, only Zijing Liang, Chuǎng Wang, and the remnants of South Camp Eight Great Kings remained.

They stared at the river.

At the empty water.

At nothing.

After a long time, Zijing Liang finally sighed.

"So... the other side has aquatic monsters."

"All our ships are gone."

"There is no way to cross the river."

He looked at the others.

"Gentlemen... what should we do now?"

No one answered.

Behind them lay Shanxi.

Ahead of them—the Yellow River.

And somewhere behind them, Xu Dingchen's pursuing army was closing in.

The situation was no longer dire.

It was grim beyond words.

Chapter 665 The Dashing General's Choice

Mengjin County Town.

From the ramparts, the county magistrate, the local gentry, and countless common folk all stood shoulder to shoulder, their eyes fixed unblinking toward the north.

Fear pressed down on them like a physical weight.

Although Li Daoxuan had personally promised to help them hold back the rebels, the enemy force was simply too vast. Vice General Qin Renhong's regular army—trained soldiers, proper troops—had already been annihilated on the river.

If even the imperial army had failed, how could the people of a small county dare to believe that salvation would truly come?

Yet belief or not, there was no choice.

They could only wait.

And wait.

After an unknowable stretch of time, a lone rider appeared on the northern horizon.

A yamen runner on a fast horse galloped desperately across the Yellow River floodplain. The hooves struck the hardened, mud-crusting earth, sending plumes of yellow dust billowing into the air.

The runner's face was glowing.

Not with relief.

Not with hope.

But with pure, unrestrained joy.

Before he even reached the city gates, he tore his throat raw, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Benevolent Master Bai won!

Benevolent Master Bai won!"

For a heartbeat, Mengjin County froze.

Then—

"They won?!"

"They really stopped the rebels?"

"Is it true?!"

"Benevolent Master Bai is mighty!"

A thunderous cheer erupted from the city walls, surging like a wave.

The runner burst through the gates, still shouting, "Benevolent Master Bai had so many firearms—"

Before he could finish, Magistrate's Aide Liu Bawan lunged forward and slapped a hand firmly over the man's mouth.

"If you don't know how to speak," Liu Bawan hissed, "then don't speak at all!"

He lowered his voice urgently. "If word reaches the imperial court that Benevolent Master Bai privately forged firearms, and they decide to punish him, then who will dare help us ever again?"

The runner instantly understood.

His expression stiffened, and he immediately corrected himself.

"Benevolent Master Bai deployed thousands of archers by the river," he shouted instead, "their arrows falling like a swarm of locusts! The rebels couldn't land at all!"

Liu Bawan nodded with satisfaction.

"That's more like it."

This was how news traveled in those days.

There were no eyewitness recordings.

No clarifying reports.

No inconvenient truths uploaded afterward.

However the first messenger spoke—that version became reality.

If he said arrows, then arrows it was.

Firearms?

What firearms?

No one had ever heard of such a thing.

Not long after, the knightly couple—"Xiao Qiushui" and "Tang Fang"—arrived at the city gates with their hundred guards.

The county magistrate hurried forward, bowing deeply.

"Great Knight Xiao," he asked nervously, "did... did we truly hold them back?"

Yesterday, he had called him Young Knight.

Today, he'd upgraded the title to Great Knight.

Li Daoxuan silently mused, Win another battle and I'll probably be promoted to 'Grand Knight,' won't I?

Gao Yiye stepped forward before he could speak.

"Rest assured, everyone," she said calmly.

Her voice was steady, her posture dignified. She had grown astonishingly adept at addressing crowds—what once felt intimidating now seemed natural to her. The larger the gathering, the more composed and authoritative she became.

"The rebels have been repelled."

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

"Not only that," Gao Yiye continued, "we seized all of their boats. They cannot cross the Yellow River again anytime soon."

A wave of stunned silence followed.

"And Governor Xu Dingchen of Shanxi is even now leading a large army southward," she added, "to encircle them. As long as the rebels cannot cross the river, they are trapped on its banks."

The townsfolk might not have understood military theory.

But this they understood immediately.

Cornered.

Surrounded.

No escape.

The Mengjin County Magistrate let out a long sigh.

"I truly hope," he said softly, "that this time, the imperial court will seize the opportunity and eradicate the rebels completely."

Li Daoxuan, however, felt unease stirring beneath the victory.

I hope so too, he thought. But something feels off.

Zhang Xianzhong escaped with a handful of boats.

And more importantly...

The Dashing General, Li Zicheng, never appeared.

Where did he go?

The magistrate clapped his hands briskly.

"Great Knight Xiao, Lady Knight Tang," he said warmly, "you must be exhausted. Come, come—this official will prepare a proper feast for you."

Gao Yiye's eyes sparkled instantly.

"What delicious dishes does Mengjin have?"

The magistrate laughed.

"Our local specialty—Yellow River carp. Absolutely unmissable."

Li Daoxuan nearly drooled.

No—wait.

The silicone puppet didn't have saliva glands.

Then why did it feel like drool?

Ah.

Co-sensing.

His real self, outside the box, was probably already salivating.

Damn it.

That evening, a grand banquet was held.

A massive platter of Yellow River carp dominated the table.

The Puppet Heavenly Lord, eyes gleaming, picked up a fish.

Crunch. Crunch.

The metallic framework of his jaw pulverized the fish into splinters.

Then—poof—it vanished into the nearby trash bin.

The fish never reached his stomach.

But his taste buds had fully registered the flavor.

Bliss.

Pure bliss.

Meanwhile—

Jiyuan County.

The rebels were in anything but a blissful mood.

All their boats had been seized.

The Yellow River had become an impassable barrier.

Governor Xu Dingchen's army could descend upon them at any moment.

They were cornered, trapped, and increasingly desperate.

Zijing Liang spoke grimly.

"Gentlemen... what options remain to us?"

Chuǎng Wang surveyed the situation with a dark expression.

"To the south—the Yellow River. Impassable."

"To the north—Xu Dingchen."

"To the west—Hedong's Xing Honglang."

"To the east—Xiuwu County, heavily defended by Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng."

He exhaled slowly.

"At this point... I see no way out."

A heavy silence fell over the tent.

Then—

A rebel messenger burst in.

"Report!" he shouted. "The Dashing General has bypassed Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng's main force, stormed Xiuwu County, killed Magistrate Liu Fengxiang, and opened a passage into Henan!"

Everyone froze.

Then gasped.

Only then did they remember—

When preparing to cross the river, they had left the Dashing General behind near Zezhou, ordering him to cover their rear.

Instead—

He had gone completely off-script.

He had marched straight into Henan.

And captured Xiuwu County.

Even Chuǎng Wang was stunned.

"How... how did he manage that?"

The messenger explained rapidly.

"While you, my lords, were attempting to cross the Yellow River, Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng panicked upon receiving word. He led his army out of Xiuwu County toward the Yellow River, intending to intercept you at Mengjin."

"Our Dashing General seized that very moment—while Xiuwu was undefended—and took the city in one swift strike!"

The tent fell deathly silent.

The messenger continued urgently.

"Fan Shangzheng likely hasn't received the news yet. He may still be rushing toward Mengjin. My lords, we must move immediately—push through Xiuwu County and escape the imperial encirclement!"

The rebels erupted in cheers.

Zijing Liang stood abruptly.

"Move! Inform everyone—we depart at once!"

The rebel army surged into motion, racing toward Xiuwu County with all possible speed.

Meanwhile—

The West Camp Eight Great Kings drifted downstream along the Yellow River.

They landed in Wenshui County—Sima Yi's ancestral home.

They looted it clean.

Then joined forces with the Dashing General.

Together, they burned and pillaged Wushe and Huixian, before laying siege to Huaiqing Prefecture.

If Sima Yi ever learned of this—

Who knew whether he'd claw his way out of his grave to beat Zhang Xianzhong senseless?

Li Daoxuan had successfully blocked the rebels at the Yellow River.

He had saved the people south of the river.

But north of it—

The vast lands of Henan could not escape the storm.

The flames of chaos would still spread.

History, after all, never bent for just one battle.

Chapter 666 The Governor Just Passing Through

Early morning arrived quietly in Mengjin County.

The town stirred awake beneath a pale sky, ushering in what seemed to promise another day of peace and calm.

Outside the county walls, villagers streamed out in steady lines. Some shouldered hoes, others carried shovels, baskets, or wooden poles. Their destination was the same—the vast floodplain left behind by the Yellow River.

The river's rampage had deposited thick, hardened layers of mud across the land.

These crusts had to be dug away completely.

Only by removing them could the original soil be exposed, allowing crops to be planted once more and life to return to its familiar rhythm.

This was no easy labor.

The excavated mud and sand couldn't simply be dumped wherever one pleased. It had to be transported back toward the riverbank, carted away bit by bit.

Digging required people.

Transporting required people.

The scale of the operation was enormous, and it was clear that this work would continue for a very, very long time.

The mud itself, baked rock-hard by the sun, resisted every swing of the hoe. After only a short while, villagers were left panting, sweat soaking their clothes. They would straighten their aching backs, drink some water, rest briefly—then grit their teeth and continue.

Just as the outskirts of the county bustled with this determined activity—

A large army appeared from the east.

At the head of the troops rode Fan Shangzheng, Governor of Henan.

His face was dark, his brows tightly furrowed. He urged his men forward relentlessly, marching at a pace that seemed intent on breaking legs.

Fan Shangzheng had originally been stationed in Xiuwu County. But when news reached him that the rebels had assembled a massive fleet of boats, intending to cross the Yellow River and attack Mengjin County, he had been utterly terrified.

Without hesitation, he led his army out and rushed toward Mengjin.

Midway through the march, another report struck him like a thunderbolt—

Commander Qin Renhong had been defeated and killed.

The Yellow River, once thought an unbreakable natural barrier, had fallen.

In that instant, Fan Shangzheng felt completely numb.

There was nothing left to do but continue running toward Mengjin, as if sheer speed might somehow undo fate.

After charging another few dozen li, a group from the Prince of Fu's household suddenly rushed out to intercept him.

They complained bitterly, claiming they had been bullied by a man named Bai Yuan.

They prattled endlessly about how Bai Yuan had forcibly occupied Xiaolangdi, refused to pay rent to the Prince of Fu, and demanded that the Governor intervene immediately.

It was a pile of utter nonsense.

Fan Shangzheng's temples throbbed.

At that moment, he felt like a firefighter sprinting from one blaze to the next, utterly overwhelmed. How could he possibly spare attention for such trivial squabbles?

Yet he couldn't simply dismiss the Prince of Fu's household outright.

Suppressing his irritation, he replied perfunctorily,

"Very well. I've noted the matter concerning Bai Yuan. This official will provide the Prince of Fu's household with an explanation."

With that, he waved them away and continued his frantic march toward Mengjin County.

In his heart, he was already resigned.

He was certain that by the time he arrived, Mengjin would be nothing more than a smoking ruin.

But when Fan Shangzheng reached the city walls—

He froze.

Mengjin County stood intact.

The walls were unbroken.

The houses were unburned.

The streets showed no sign of slaughter.

The common folk were even out in the open, carrying tools and diligently digging away the mud crusts left by the Yellow River.

The scene was one of calm order.

"What... is going on here?"

Fan Shangzheng burst into the county town, seized the county magistrate by the sleeve, and demanded sharply,

"What exactly happened? Where are the rebels? This official clearly received word that they were coming!"

The magistrate could only repeat a name that had already been spoken countless times:

"The one who saved Mengjin County... was a local gentry, Mr. Bai Yuan."

"What?" Fan Shangzheng stiffened. "Bai Yuan?"

The very same name he had just heard from the Prince of Fu's people now surfaced again, instantly piquing his interest.

The magistrate continued, recounting the events with growing animation.

"Mr. Bai deployed a large militia force along the riverbank. Arrows fell like rain, blocking the rebels from landing. He then used boats seized from the Xiaolangdi pirates to engage them in a fierce water battle, finally driving them back toward Shanxi."

Hearing this, Fan Shangzheng finally released a long, heavy sigh.

"Amazing," he said. "This gentry named Bai Yuan truly understands strategy. He has helped this official enormously."

He immediately asked,

"Is he here? I would like to meet him."

The magistrate shook his head.

"Mr. Bai is not present. However, his close friend—the great hero Xiao Qiushui—and his wife are both in the city. They led the militia on land and prevented the rebels from landing. Mr. Bai himself commanded the water battle."

Fan Shangzheng's interest deepened.

"Oh? Where is this heroic couple now?"

They were at a small roadside stall.

The couple sat comfortably, enjoying Mengjin Bufan, a peculiar local snack made from mung beans—something unavailable anywhere else.

Li Daoxuan's mechanical mouth crunched relentlessly.

One bite after another.

Completely unstoppable.

Gao Yiye laughed softly.

"Oh? Heavenly Lord, you have something on your lip."

She quickly took out a handkerchief and gently wiped the corner of his mouth.

To fully enjoy the snack, Li Daoxuan had maximized his co-sensing, engaging all five senses at once.

The soft brush of Gao Yiye's fingers was transmitted clearly to his real body outside the box.

Hmm?

That... felt rather nice.

He was just about to savor the sensation a little longer—

When a yamen runner hurried over, panting.

"Great Hero Xiao Qiushui!" he called. "We finally found you! The Governor has arrived and wishes to see you."

Li Daoxuan clicked his tongue.

"Oh, what a spoilsport."

The yamen runner jumped in fright and immediately lowered his voice.

"Great Hero Xiao, you shouldn't say such things out loud. We can whisper them in private, but if someone overhears you on the street and reports it to the Governor, he'll surely be displeased."

Li Daoxuan smiled and patted the runner lightly on the shoulder.

"Thank you," he said. "You're quite thoughtful. I like that about you."

The runner grinned shyly.

Li Daoxuan stopped teasing, took Gao Yiye's hand, and together they headed toward the county magistrate's office.

Before long, they stood face to face with Fan Shangzheng.

The Governor was in his fifties, yet his appearance made him seem closer to seventy. The strain of recent months had carved deep lines into his face.

Upon seeing Li Daoxuan and Gao Yiye, his expression softened.

"My two heroes," he said warmly, "this official has heard that Mengjin County was defended by your militia. We are deeply indebted to you both."

Gao Yiye replied modestly,

"You're too kind, Governor. You greatly exaggerate our efforts."

Fan Shangzheng was just about to speak further—to offer encouragement and inquire about Xiaolangdi—

When—

A mounted messenger galloped up to the county office.

He tumbled from his saddle, scrambled inside, and shouted,

"Governor! Terrible news—terrible news!"

Fan Shangzheng's heart leapt.

"What is it?!"

The messenger gasped for breath.

"The rebels—the Chuǎng Wang has broken through Xiuwu County, killed Magistrate Liu Fengxiang, burned and plundered Wushe and Hui County, and is now besieging Huaiqing Prefecture!"

He continued desperately,

"The West Camp Eight Great Kings have ravaged Wenshui County! Magistrate Xu Zhaoyuan was killed by the rebels—only seven days after taking office!"

"What?!"

Fan Shangzheng sprang to his feet.

The sudden movement drained his strength, and he collapsed back into his chair. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself upright again.

"Move!" he shouted. "We must relieve the siege of Huaiqing Prefecture immediately!"

The soldiers who had accompanied him mobilized at once.

They had barely arrived in Mengjin, their legs still trembling from the forced march—yet now they had to turn around and rush out again.

Truly, wretched luck.

Fan Shangzheng ran several steps toward the exit, then suddenly turned back.

He grasped Li Daoxuan's forearm firmly, shaking it twice.

"Hero Xiao Qiushui," he said hurriedly, "this official wished to speak with you more, but there is no time... Mengjin County—I entrust it to you."

Li Daoxuan answered calmly,

"Rest assured."

Fan Shangzheng nodded once, then turned and ran.

In the blink of an eye, he vanished from sight.

Chapter 667 Taking Office in Wenshui County

In the ninth month of the fifth year of Chongzhen's reign, Magistrate Xu Zhaoji had held office for barely seven days before he was slain by rebels.

Zhu Youjian stared at the memorial laid before him, his emotions plunging violently—as if he had just stepped onto a drop tower and been hurled straight down.

Rage surged.

Grief followed close behind.

A county magistrate.

Seven days in office.

Even within the cold, ruthless confines of the imperial household, a flicker of human compassion could not help but surface.

Zhu Youjian spoke in a low, heavy voice,

"Ensure Xu Zhaoji's family is properly comforted. Grant them generous funds."

The Chief Eunuch, Cao Huachun, bowed deeply.

"This servant obeys Your Majesty's command."

After a brief pause, Cao Huachun's tone shifted slightly.

"Your Majesty... there is also a minor issue."

"Oh?" Zhu Youjian responded.

Cao Huachun lowered his voice.

"Court officials are no longer willing to serve in Shaanxi and Shanxi. In the past, whenever a prefectural or magistrate position opened, civil officials would immediately form cliques, fiercely recommending their own people, eager to secure such posts. But recently, several vacancies have appeared in Shaanxi and Shanxi, and no one volunteers. Everyone shirks responsibility. Even officials explicitly named by the Ministry of Personnel are pulling strings, offering bribes, begging for someone else to be sent in their place."

Zhu Youjian's expression darkened.

His mood, which had just barely recovered, plummeted once again.

He had thought he'd already reached the bottom—but it turned out he was merely standing on the twenty-second floor of the Kui Xing Tower, with far more room left to fall.

"These accursed officials!" Zhu Youjian roared, slamming his hand down.

"When benefits are to be had, their hands stretch out endlessly. But the moment I need them to share my burdens, every last one of them scuttles away to hide in the shadows!"

Cao Huachun murmured softly,

"Barely seven days into office and... ah... given the circumstances... it is understandable that they are unwilling."

Zhu Youjian let out a long, weary sigh.

"Is there truly no good news at all?"

Cao Huachun replied carefully,

"There is, in fact, some good news. After the rebels breached Zezhou, they gathered a large fleet of boats, intending to cross the Yellow River southward into Mengjin County..."

At this, Zhu Youjian gasped in alarm.

"Heavens! Isn't that right next to Luoyang?"

Cao Huachun quickly reassured him.

"Please calm yourself, Your Majesty. The rebels' attempt to cross the river failed. A local gentry member named Bai Yuan organized a militia force to garrison the Yellow River banks. According to local reports, Bai Yuan mobilized a hundred thousand archers, with endless arrows. On the riverbank, arrows fell like a storm, and the rebels were unable to land. They were forced to retreat back into Shanxi."

"A hundred thousand archers?"

Zhu Youjian's face twisted—not in astonishment, but in fury.

"Are they feeding me false numbers again?"

Cao Huachun nodded faintly.

"This old servant agrees. A hundred thousand is clearly exaggerated. Most likely it was only several thousand archers, aided by the Yellow River's treacherous currents, which prevented the brigands from landing."

Only then did Zhu Youjian nod slowly.

"To stop the rebels from crossing the Yellow River..." he said, "that is truly commendable. Truly commendable indeed!"

His spirits surged upward, as if he had been launched skyward by a jet engine.

A sudden realization struck him.

"A ruler's success," he said thoughtfully, "lies in having worthy men to assist him. Let officials seek out and recommend individuals of virtue and talent—even those living in obscurity. I shall appoint them and usher in an era of enlightened governance."

"Your Majesty is truly wise," Cao Huachun praised.

Zhu Youjian slapped the table decisively.

"So officials refuse to go to Shaanxi and Shanxi? Very well! Then we shall appoint capable individuals from among the common folk. Let officials from all regions submit recommendations. Any outstanding talent—like Bai Yuan—willing to share my burdens shall be appointed to official posts in Shaanxi and Shanxi!"

Autumn winds arrived, carrying ever-cooler rains.

Golden October descended upon the land.

Li Daoxuan and Gao Yiye rode together aboard a pleasure boat, gliding gracefully over the autumn waters of the Yellow River.

This pleasure boat, however, was anything but ordinary.

It was a plastic pleasure craft, manufactured by Cai Xinzhi, powered by an electric motor. Its cabin featured carved railings and painted pillars, elegant to the point of extravagance.

Inside, an assortment of modern snacks was neatly arranged.

Naturally, the two were not alone.

Gao Yiye's personal guards were present—and so was another notable figure:

Chen Yuanbo, the most outstanding student from the first graduating class of Gao Family Village's middle school.

After graduating, Chen Yuanbo had traveled to Puzhou, where he served as Prefect Qiu Qianfan's chief strategist. The experience transformed him. Classroom theory met real-world governance, and abstract knowledge was tempered into practical ability.

Now, Chen Yuanbo was capable, grounded, and ready to shoulder responsibility on his own.

Several days earlier, Zhu Youjian had issued an imperial edict: the magistrate of Wenshui County had been murdered by rebels after only seven days in office, and a replacement was urgently needed.

He called upon all officials to recommend suitable candidates.

The court, however, fell into an eerie silence.

This time, no one was willing to send their protégés into such a deadly post.

Thus, Qiu Qianfan, Prefect of Puzhou, submitted a memorial, strongly recommending his chief strategist, Chen Yuanbo, as an exceptional civilian talent, perfectly suited for Wenshui County.

Since no one else was willing to go, Zhu Youjian gave his approval with a decisive stroke of the brush.

Chen Yuanbo relinquished his strategist role, donned scholar-blue robes, assembled a group of middle school graduates from Gao Family Village as his aides, and—escorted by five hundred Gao Family Village militia—set out to take office.

Departing from Yongji Ferry, Chen Yuanbo led his contingent of over five hundred people aboard transport ships toward Wenshui County.

As they passed Xiaolangdi, they encountered the Heavenly Lord's pleasure boat.

Chen Yuanbo understood immediately—this meeting was intentional.

He ordered his ship to draw alongside, then boarded the Dao Xuan Tianzun vessel.

"Greetings, Tianzun!" Chen Yuanbo said, bowing deeply.

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"So, you're going to be a magistrate now," he said. "How do you feel about it?"

Chen Yuanbo answered honestly,

"To be truthful, Tianzun, I've heard that Governor Fan Shangzheng attempted to relieve Huaiqing Prefecture, but was defeated and forced to retreat in chaos. The rebels are still active near Huaiqing. I... am quite apprehensive."

Li Daoxuan chuckled lightly.

"No need to fear. With five hundred flintlock militia accompanying you, as long as you hold the county town and do not venture out recklessly, it will be extremely difficult for the rebels to breach your defenses."

He then pointed to the silver-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun emblem embroidered on Chen Yuanbo's chest.

"And I will come to check on you from time to time. If brigands attack, you only need to hold out. I will personally bring reinforcements. Wenshui lies directly on the Yellow River—our troops can travel by boat and arrive quickly."

Chen Yuanbo felt a wave of relief.

"However," he hesitated, "if we must remain within the county town, developing Gao Family Village's larger industries will be difficult."

Large factories required space and could not be confined within city walls. If built outside, they would be impossible to defend should rebels arrive.

Li Daoxuan had already considered this.

He waved his hand dismissively.

"Don't start too big. Establish small workshops inside the city for now. When the rebels withdraw, then expand. Be flexible."

"Understood!" Chen Yuanbo replied firmly.

With official matters concluded, Gao Yiye—who had been quietly listening—finally spoke up.

"I heard Wenshui County is named after its two hot springs," she said, her eyes sparkling. "I really want to soak in one."

Chapter 668 The Huaqing Palace Hot Spring

The Saintess puffed out her cheeks slightly and looked toward Dao Xuan Tianzun, her tone carrying a hint of grievance.

She wanted to soak in a hot spring.

The moment Chen Yuanbo heard those words, his soul practically left his body.

Without a second thought, he retreated several steps back—far, far away.

A hot spring?

The Saintess?

Bathing?

Such thoughts were things he wouldn't dare allow into his mind—not even for a fleeting instant. To even imagine it would be an unforgivable act of blasphemy.

Blaspheming the Saintess didn't just mean losing one's qualification for Labor Reform.

It meant immediate execution.

On the spot.

By comparison, Li Daoxuan merely laughed and turned to look at Gao Yiye.

"Wenxian County is a complete mess right now," he said calmly. "Zhang Xianzhong's Eight Great Kings just swept through the county seat. The bandit forces are still besieging Huaiqing Prefecture, and that place is practically next door to Wenxian."

He continued, tone relaxed but realistic.

"Even the imperial court couldn't find officials willing to take office there. We only managed to place Chen Yuanbo through sheer luck."

Then he added casually, "If you run off to Wenxian for a hot spring bath and bandits suddenly storm in halfway through... you might not even have time to get dressed."

Gao Yiye gasped.

"Huh?!"

She wasn't worried about her safety—after all, Dao Xuan Tianzun was watching over them.

But not having time to get dressed?

That was serious.

Very serious.

She pouted again, visibly troubled.

"Then... what should I do?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly.

This girl is becoming cuter by the day, he thought. Now she even knows how to act coquettish.

He had never liked excessive reverence. He preferred natural conversation—give and take, relaxed and lively. Gao Yiye's current demeanor suited his taste perfectly.

He tapped his fingers lightly and pretended to think.

"Let me see... Is there anywhere safe enough for a hot spring?"

He pondered for a while.

Then—suddenly—his eyes lit up.

In his future life, when he had traveled to Xi'an to see the Terracotta Army, he had stayed at a hot spring hotel in Lintong County.

And there was also a famous place there—

Huaqing Palace Hot Spring.

Perfect.

"I'll go take a look," he said aloud.

"Yiye, wait here for a moment. I'm going on a divine journey."

With that, Li Daoxuan severed the co-sensing connection, his consciousness withdrawing from the golden-threaded statue and returning to his physical body outside the box.

He reached out and tapped the "Lintong County" button along the outer rim of the box.

In an instant, his perspective shifted.

Shaanxi.

Lintong County.

Previously, the farthest his vision could extend was Yanliang District, roughly a hundred li northeast of Xi'an. But after his extensive rescue efforts in Henan—saving people in all kinds of ingenious ways, assisting the suffering masses of Mengjin County—

Although the reputation of "savior to thousands" belonged to Bai Yuan...

All the Salvation Index points had gone straight into Li Daoxuan's pocket.

As a result, his Field of View expanded once again.

Now, it fully encompassed Lintong County.

Lintong County was vast.

Li Daoxuan began searching, tapping the north, south, east, and west buttons repeatedly, sweeping the land inch by inch.

He searched for the Huaqing Palace Hot Spring.

And yet—

Nothing.

No matter how he looked, he couldn't find it.

Only then did he remember—

Huaqing Palace had flourished during the Tang Dynasty, but it was later destroyed by war. Rebuilt once in the Song Dynasty, it was then ruined again by conflict.

By the late Ming Dynasty...

It had essentially vanished.

Li Daoxuan sighed and pulled out a modern map, then compared it carefully with a Ming-era map, cross-referencing the terrain again and again.

Only then did he finally pinpoint the approximate location.

He focused his view.

At last, he saw it.

Broken walls.

Collapsed foundations.

Ruins swallowed by tangled trees and wild weeds.

If one merely glanced from above without careful inspection, there would be no hint that a palace had ever stood there.

"...Where's the hot spring?" Li Daoxuan muttered.

He searched among the ruins carefully.

Nothing.

That was when it dawned on him.

The hot spring was underground.

In this era—without artificial development—how could a hot spring simply appear on the surface?

But Gao Yiye wanted to soak.

Which meant—

He'd have to dig one out himself.

Li Daoxuan ducked into the kitchen and grabbed a slender stainless steel chopstick.

Choosing a random spot among the Huaqing Palace ruins, he plunged the chopstick straight down.

Stab.

Thrust.

Deep.

The chopstick was only twenty centimeters long.

Yet when he applied force, it sank downward—over thirty meters.

He pulled it out.

A narrow hole remained, but no water emerged.

He tried another spot.

Nothing.

Another.

Still nothing.

He kept going.

After five or six attempts, the moment the chopstick pierced downward again, Li Daoxuan felt a distinct sensation—

As if he had punctured something soft and pressurized.

He withdrew the chopstick instantly.

A jet of water erupted from underground.

Li Daoxuan reached into the box and felt it.

Warm.

About fifty degrees Celsius.

The hot spring.

Found.

Li Daoxuan was delighted.

He immediately re-established the co-sensing connection, and with a whoosh, his consciousness returned to the Dao Xuan Tianzun avatar.

"Yiye," he announced, "the hot spring is ready. It's in Lintong County, near Xi'an."

Gao Yiye's eyes lit up.

"Near Xi'an? I've always wanted to see Xi'an! This is perfect!"

Li Daoxuan laughed.

"Don't rush. Take your time sailing back. I'll go ahead and arrange for people to clean the place up—it's a bit too wild right now."

And so, Gao Yiye began making preparations for her return journey to Xi'an.

Meanwhile—

Chen Yuanbo disembarked from the pleasure boat and boarded a troop transport, continuing onward toward Wenxian County, to officially assume his post.

At the same time, in the back room of the Xi'an Prefectural Fertilizer Shop—

The Test-001 Dao Xuan Tianzun, who had been sitting motionless for an uncomfortably long time, suddenly sprang to his feet.

The mynah bird perched on the nearby table was so startled it nearly flipped its cage.

For days now, it hadn't understood what was wrong with its "master."

Just recently, this man had been taking it out daily for walks.

Then suddenly—

He stopped moving.

Stopped eating.

Sat there without stirring.

Dust had settled on his body.

If not for Padi Tu, who came every day to feed the bird a little, it would have starved long ago.

The mynah shrieked,

"Caw! He's alive! He's alive!"

Li Daoxuan shushed it and picked up the cage.

"Come on," he said, "let's go find some people. We need to arrange the hot spring."

The mynah tilted its head.

"What's the point? He's not stiff anymore!"

Li Daoxuan clenched his fist—

A fist as large as a begging bowl.

The mynah instantly shut up.

Li Daoxuan stepped out of the fertilizer shop.

The first person he encountered was Wang Tang, who hurriedly bowed.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"How are things in Xi'an lately?"

Wang Tang reported quickly, "All industries are progressing smoothly. Our Middle School graduates have entered various sectors. At first, their lack of real-world experience caused some losses, but they quickly combined theory with practice. Efficiency has increased significantly. Everything is now on track."

"Excellent," Li Daoxuan nodded. "Arrange for workers to go to the Huaqing Palace ruins in Lintong County. Clear the debris, repair the area, dig out a clean hot spring pool, and enclose it simply for privacy."

Wang Tang blinked.

"Oh?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"Yiye wants to soak in a hot spring."

Understanding dawned immediately.

"Ah! The Saintess's request!" Wang Tang exclaimed. "I'll arrange it at once!"

He turned and sprinted off.

So fast that he nearly collided with Padi Tu, who had just returned. The two brushed past each other.

Padi Tu grinned.

"Why the rush? Wang Tang, wait! I need to talk to you. The Prince of Qin's heir, Zhu Cunji, has more money than he knows what to do with. Any ideas how we can extract some of it and distribute it to the poor—"

"No time!" Wang Tang shouted without stopping.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is here and gave me an errand! I have to go!"

His voice echoed as he disappeared into the distance.

Chapter 669 Skimming from the Rich

When Flat Rabbit heard that Dao Xuan Tianzun had arrived, the swaggering confidence of the so-called "great hero" immediately reined itself in—just a little.

He stepped forward more cautiously than usual and cupped his hands.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"I just heard you talking about wanting to get your hands on the Prince of Qin's heir's money?"

"Exactly!" Flat Rabbit bristled at once, irritation spilling straight into his voice. "That Prince of Qin's heir is swimming in money. Absolutely swimming in it. What's more, after partnering with us, he takes a full forty percent cut of the profits—all thanks to our advanced technology. Not only did he do nothing, he's now even richer than before!"

Li Daoxuan tilted his head slightly.

"Seeing his wealth displeases you?"

"Yes! Extremely displeased!" Flat Rabbit grumbled. "If he earned his money honestly, I wouldn't say a word. But he did absolutely nothing—just lay there and watched silver roll in. Our advanced technology was never meant to line the pockets of idle rich."

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"So... you want to rob him?"

"I do!" Flat Rabbit snapped his ancestral sword halfway out of its sheath, steel flashing. "This rabbit has roamed the jianghu for over twenty years, specializing in robbing the rich to aid the poor. People like the Prince of Qin's heir? They're my favorite kind of target."

Li Daoxuan merely smiled and shook his head.

Truth be told, Flat Rabbit wasn't alone in harboring such thoughts. Li Daoxuan himself had entertained similar ideas more than once. However, forcibly redistributing wealth was something that could only be done after establishing a firm political foundation and broad popular support.

For now—

"Hm? Wait."

A mischievous spark suddenly flashed through Li Daoxuan's mind.

There was another way.

Another way to extract silver from the hands of the rich—cleanly, legally, and enthusiastically.

"Flat Rabbit," Li Daoxuan said, "go fetch Wang Tang back. My plan has changed slightly."

Flat Rabbit blinked.

"Huh? Alright!"

He bolted out the door. A rabbit sprinting at full speed was no joke—within the blink of an eye, he caught up to Wang Tang, who had only managed to walk half a street away, and dragged him back.

Wang Tang steadied himself and asked respectfully,

"What further instructions does Dao Xuan Tianzun have?"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Earlier, I only intended to set up a simple hot spring. But now I've changed my mind. I plan to completely transform Huaqing Palace—turn it into a massive entertainment complex. We'll call it the Huaqing Palace Hot Spring Resort."

"Huh?" Flat Rabbit looked utterly baffled. "What in the world is that supposed to be?"

Wang Tang, however, narrowed his eyes slightly, already catching the scent of opportunity.

Li Daoxuan continued calmly, "If we rely on mortal laborers, it would take far too long to build a truly luxurious hot spring resort. I don't have that kind of patience. So this time, I'll directly bestow a fully formed hot spring resort from the heavens."

He smiled faintly.

"We'll use it to skim a little silver from the rich—encouraging them to loosen their purse strings."

Flat Rabbit still didn't understand a thing.

But Wang Tang had basically grasped the idea.

"Then I, your subordinate, should begin advertising in advance. This is primarily aimed at the wealthy, correct?"

"Precisely," Li Daoxuan said with a sly chuckle. "The poor are already struggling just to survive. How would they have the time—or spare silver—to travel dozens of li outside the city just to soak in a hot spring?"

He gestured lightly as he spoke.

"This resort will specifically target the rich. The most luxurious suite—we'll call it the Imperial Suite—cough—Royal Suite. One hundred taels of silver per night."

Flat Rabbit's eyes widened.

"The next tier will be Deluxe Executive Suites, fifty taels per night. Then we'll arrange family suites, single rooms, standard rooms... all starting at ten taels and going up."

Flat Rabbit sucked in a sharp breath.

"What?! That expensive? Would the rich really pay that much for just one night? They're wealthy, sure—but they're not fools!"

Li Daoxuan simply smiled, offering no explanation.

Wang Tang, on the other hand, chuckled knowingly.

"Master Flat Rabbit, don't try to understand the rich using a poor man's mindset. For places like this, the more expensive it is, the more attractive it becomes to the wealthy. If it were cheap, they wouldn't even spare it a glance."

Flat Rabbit stared blankly.

He truly did not understand.

"Are rich people idiots?" he asked sincerely.

Wang Tang shook his head.

"No. They aren't foolish at all. They simply don't want to live in the same houses or use the same goods as the poor."

He continued patiently,

"If something is cheap—so cheap that even the poor can afford it—then buying it won't distinguish the rich in any way. They lose interest immediately. But for items that clearly exceed their intrinsic value, with prices inflated beyond reason—things the poor would never even dream of paying for—those are exactly what the rich are eager to buy."

At this point, Wang Tang sighed softly.

"These goods don't offer proportional utility. What they offer is social distinction. The rich pay for that distinction—and to them, it's money well spent."

Flat Rabbit declared stubbornly,

"I don't get it. Not at all."

Wang Tang smiled gently.

"Not understanding is a good thing. It means Master Flat Rabbit is still pure-hearted and hasn't sought to separate himself from the poor. People like you are rare."

He paused, then added,

"Most people criticize the wealthy while secretly dreaming of becoming one of them. Those who curse the rich the loudest—once they get money themselves—will spend even faster than those born rich. They rush to drape themselves in gold and silver, fill their homes with coral and jade, all to shout to the world: I've joined the wealthy class. I only associate with the rich now."

He gave a shy smile.

"I almost fell into that trap myself. It was Master Flat Rabbit who pulled me back."

Flat Rabbit froze.

"Huh? Huh? When did I ever pull you back?"

Wang Tang replied earnestly,

"Just a little while ago."

Flat Rabbit scoffed.

"Nonsense! I don't even know what you're talking about. I didn't pull you back from anything! You're just spouting convoluted nonsense."

"Master Flat Rabbit is my guiding light," Wang Tang said sincerely.

Flat Rabbit shuddered violently.

"Ugh! Stop that! You're giving me goosebumps. Get away from me—don't you dare come any closer!"

Li Daoxuan listened quietly as Wang Tang finished.

While he didn't agree with everything, Li Daoxuan still gave Wang Tang an approving nod in his heart. To be able to think this deeply—and articulate it so clearly—was no small feat.

After praising Master Flat Rabbit, Wang Tang returned to business.

"Xi'an Prefecture is overflowing with rich households. We won't exploit the poor—we'll specifically target the wealthy. This approach will extract a large amount of idle silver, preventing it from being buried uselessly in backyards. Money that doesn't circulate brings no benefit to the economy."

Li Daoxuan laughed.

"Oh? Little Tang, your economics are quite solid."

Wang Tang flushed with excitement, energy surging through him.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, I'm bursting with inspiration! I'll go write advertising copy immediately. Coincidentally, tonight our Stars Performing Arts Agency is hosting a grand concert. Nearly all the wealthy families of Xi'an Prefecture will attend. We can announce the hot spring resort there—give them a proper preview and build anticipation."

Li Daoxuan waved his hand.

"Good. Get it done as quickly as possible."

Ba Ge suddenly piped up,

"How can we 'get it done' if it's not 'hard'?"

Everyone: "..."

Wang Tang said flatly,

"I've always wanted to roast him."

Flat Rabbit stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Sounds quite delicious."

Li Daoxuan added calmly,

"Spicy bird wings wouldn't be bad either."

Ba Ge: "..."

Chapter 670 The Hot Spring Resort

Five minutes later, Li Daoxuan picked up his phone and dialed a familiar number.

"Old Cai," he said without preamble, "I need a large architectural model. Custom built. Urgent. Three to five days, at most."

On the other end, Cai Xinzhi laughed lightly. "That urgent? What are you planning to make this time?"

"A 1:200 scale model of the Huaqing Palace Hot Spring Resort," Li Daoxuan replied calmly. "No cheap plastic. I want high end materials. Grand. Luxurious. I want anyone who looks at it to immediately understand one thing. This place is expensive."

"Pfft!"

Cai Xinzhi nearly spat blood. If someone had been standing five meters away, they would have been in danger.

"I thought you'd finally stopped messing with me," she snapped. "Turns out I was too naive. Take your twisted hobbies and go very far away."

Li Daoxuan remained unfazed. "You should learn to embrace challenges."

"No," Cai Xinzhi replied flatly. "I hate challenges. I retreat the moment things get difficult."

"I'll pay extra."

"Still no."

"Double."

"Not doing it."

Li Daoxuan paused, then casually added, "I'll give you a one millimeter micro sculpture of Guanyin Bodhisattva. You sell it yourself. Keep all the profit. No split with me."

There was silence.

Then Cai Xinzhi's tone changed instantly, as if she had been possessed.

"My greatest joy in life," she said solemnly, "is to challenge difficulty. I would never touch an easy project. A 1:200 hot spring resort, you say? Five days. Only five days. Guaranteed completion."

The call ended.

Cai Xinzhi immediately entered full subcontracting frenzy mode.

"XX Studio? I need a 1:200 scale classical garden, rush order."

"Hello, XXX Studio? I need a 1:200 scale hotel complex."

"XXX Studio, listen carefully. Pavilions, towers, lakeside covered bridges. Miniature. Immediately."

In an instant, dozens of model studios across the city were mobilized, each assigned a specific section. Cai Xinzhi herself paced back and forth, restless with anticipation, already planning the final assembly in her mind.

That same night, on Xi'an's busiest street, the Stars Performing Arts Agency had just concluded a grand concert.

The venue was packed to suffocation. Nearly every notable figure in Xi'an was present. Even Wu Shen and Shi Kefa sat among the VIPs, laughing and chatting with ease.

The final song ended, yet the crowd showed no sign of dispersing.

At that moment, the most popular female singer stepped back onto the stage.

She spoke at length, a torrent of pleasantries and gratitude flowing endlessly. Then her expression shifted, and her voice sharpened.

"My employer, Master Li," she announced, "has secretly invested an enormous sum to build a luxury hot spring resort unlike anything this city has ever seen. It will offer all of you the most noble enjoyment imaginable."

The wealthy elites frowned in confusion.

"A hot spring resort?"

The singer smiled. "Naturally. A place for distinguished guests to travel, rest, and take their leisure. Rooms designed like celestial grottoes for repose. Hot springs worthy of a royal concubine. Pre Qingming Dragon Well tea of the highest grade. Meals prepared by the top chefs of Xi'an's finest restaurants. Our own artists will provide music and dance. Everything will be perfect."

To modern ears, such exaggeration would sound hollow. But to the people of this era, listening carefully, it was bewildering.

Yet undeniably tempting.

Still, none of that was the real point.

The real point was the price.

With dramatic flair, the singer unfurled a printed image.

"This room type," she declared loudly, "is called the Royal Suite. One night costs one hundred taels of silver."

The venue erupted.

"One hundred taels?"

Even officials felt their scalps go numb. That price was daylight robbery.

Then a calm voice cut through the noise.

Zhu Cunji, heir to the Prince of Qin, stood up with a smile. "This room sounds rather interesting. Is it not designed precisely for someone like me?"

The crowd fell silent.

After a moment, they nodded inwardly. A room called the Royal Suite was naturally meant for princes and commandery lords. How could ordinary people dare to occupy it?

Yet among the merchants who had struck it rich, different thoughts stirred.

Once the Prince of Qin's heir stays there, I will go myself for two days. Living like a prince, even briefly, will be worth it.

More images followed.

Prices descended in order. Fifty taels. Thirty. Twenty. Finally, ten.

The common folk shook their heads. Ten taels for one night was not impossible, but it felt unbearable. Reluctance and inability often looked exactly the same.

Those with money, however, had already begun matching themselves to room tiers in their minds.

The hot spring resort became the talk of Xi'an overnight.

The wealthy waited eagerly for its opening.

While mansions overflowed with wine and meat, frozen corpses lay scattered by the roadside.

As Xi'an drowned itself in music and anticipation, Chen Yuanbo led a group of middle school students and five hundred Gao Family Village militia onto the banks of the Yellow River in Wenshui County.

The moment they disembarked, they saw bodies everywhere.

Many had already decomposed, white bones exposed to the air.

Chen Yuanbo's expression hardened. "As expected. These must be refugees. Fleeing bandits from the north, they tried to cross the river. The West Camp Eight Great Kings landed here and slaughtered them all."

The students were struck dumb by the scene.

Fortunately, they were not fragile scholars raised in sheltered academies. Most had wandered with their families through famine and chaos before reaching Gao Family Village. Scenes like this, though horrific, were not unfamiliar.

Otherwise, they would have been retching on the spot.

The militia moved immediately, digging graves and burying the dead.

After a long time, the group resumed their march northward.

From the riverbank to the county town was nearly twenty li.

They walked for half a day.

Along the road, they saw only burned villages, abandoned fields, and endless silence.

Chen Yuanbo sighed deeply. "I grew up in Gao Family Village and later worked in Puzhou. I never realized how desolate the world beyond had become."

The students shared his grief.

The soldiers said nothing. They were uneducated men, skilled only in labor and killing. They did not know how to save such a world.

So they entrusted their strength to those who could think.

They believed that these youths, who had studied the Heavenly Book, would one day lead them to sweep away the demons and monsters of this age.

A scout hurried forward. "Sir Chen. The county town is ahead."

Chen Yuanbo straightened. "Good. From this moment on, I am the Wenshui County Magistrate, specially appointed by the court. You are my household guards from home. Do not reveal the ruse."