

Great Ming 671

Chapter 671 How Many People Did Gao Family Village Start With?

Smoke rose from Wenshui County.

Not the gentle wisps of cooking fires—but thick, choking black smoke.

From more than a mile away, Chen Yuanbo could already see it. The county seat lay ahead like a corpse picked clean by crows. The city walls had collapsed entirely, reduced to jagged heaps of rubble. More than half the buildings had been burned to the ground, and even now, several of the remaining structures continued to belch dark smoke into the sky.

"Still burning?" Chen Yuanbo muttered, disbelief tightening his chest. "Zhang Xianzhong looted this place days ago. How could fires still be raging?"

Within him, a calm yet ancient presence stirred.

Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke quietly from within his chest.

"The fires set by Zhang Xianzhong would have died out long ago," the voice said. "What still burns... was ignited recently."

Chen Yuanbo's heart sank. "Then who else would be setting fires?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun let out a long sigh. "You already know the answer."

Chen Yuanbo's expression darkened.

He had guessed correctly.

And that was what made it unbearable.

"Move!" he barked suddenly. "Run!"

He broke into a sprint, the five hundred militia surging after him, boots pounding the ground as they raced toward the dying county.

Where the city gate once stood—

There was no gate.

Only a gaping hole in the ruins, like a mouth torn open by violence. Inside, the streets were clogged with charred beams and shattered tiles. Houses lined both sides, gutted, blackened, stretching endlessly inward like a graveyard of homes.

They charged deeper, toward the only district not yet fully engulfed. Smoke had only just begun to rise there. If they arrived even a moment later, this last pocket of the town would be lost.

Then they saw it.

A crowd.

Tattered, skeletal figures—common folk, unmistakably so—were brawling in front of the last surviving block.

There was no skill, no formation. Just desperation.

Sticks and broken boards clashed wildly.

Ping—pong—ping—pong.

Curses, screams, and sobbing tangled together, while behind them, houses continued to burn, flames crackling hungrily as if eager to devour the rest.

Chen Yuanbo felt his chest tighten.

So it wasn't bandits.

It was the townspeople themselves.

A theft. A handful of grain. A spark that ignited madness.

With no officials, no authority, no food—Wenshui County had fully regressed into the law of the jungle. Stripped bare, human nature revealed itself without restraint: arson, looting, violence, destruction. Everyone fighting everyone else.

Chen Yuanbo felt dizzy.

Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke again, steady as ever.

"Fire a warning shot. Order must be seized before it can exist."

Chen Yuanbo spun and pointed upward. "Fire!"

A militia soldier raised his rifle.

CRACK!

The gunshot tore through the chaos like thunder.

Instantly, the fighting stopped.

The townsfolk froze, eyes wide with terror, staring at the sight before them—hundreds of armored men, rifles leveled, faces cold and disciplined. Power radiated from the formation like an iron wall.

A heartbeat later, the crowd screamed and scattered, fleeing deeper into the district like startled birds.

"Halt!" Chen Yuanbo roared. "Stop running!"

They didn't stop.

So he changed tactics.

"I am Chen Yuanbo," he thundered, voice ringing across the ruins, "the newly appointed Magistrate of Wenshui County! Disobey me, and you'll each receive twenty strokes of the heavy staff!"

That did it.

As if struck by lightning, the fleeing figures froze mid-step.

Fear of officials was carved into the bones of commoners in this era.

Order—thin, fragile order—returned.

Chen Yuanbo waved his hand. Militia squads immediately rushed to extinguish the fires, while others rounded up the scattered townsfolk and herded them forward.

"Why were you fighting?" Chen Yuanbo demanded.

A middle-aged man shouted, "They stole our rice!"

"They stole our flour first!" another yelled back.

The argument reignited instantly.

"Enough!" Chen Yuanbo barked, raising his hand. "Reconcile. Each group gets three catties of flour. Anyone who keeps arguing gets nothing—not a single ounce."

Silence.

Then smiles.

In the blink of an eye, sworn enemies became brothers-in-arms.

Chen Yuanbo exhaled slowly. Fortunately... my time as a strategist in Puzhou taught me how to deal with people. Otherwise, this would have been hell.

"How many people are left in the city?" he asked. "Speak plainly."

The middle-aged man swallowed. "Reporting to the Esteemed Magistrate... nine-tenths of the population is gone. Fewer than... fewer than seven hundred remain."

A collective intake of breath followed.

Even Dao Xuan Tianzun stirred.

This level of slaughter... excessive, even by chaos' standards.

"And the countryside?" Chen Yuanbo pressed. "What of the villages outside the walls?"

The man shook his head helplessly. "We don't know. No one has dared leave."

Chen Yuanbo understood. Survival alone had consumed them. There had been no room for curiosity—only hunger and fear.

He immediately dispatched scouts in three directions: north, east, and west. They were to assess the countryside and track any remaining bandit movements.

Standing amid the ruins, staring at the hollow-eyed survivors, Chen Yuanbo felt a flicker of panic.

No wonder the court couldn't find a single official willing to take this post.

This was a hell-difficulty start.

Then Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke again, firm and unyielding.

"Chen Yuanbo. Steady yourself. Tell me—how many people did Gao Family Village begin with?"

Chen Yuanbo froze.

Then his eyes lit up.

"Forty-two," he said. "Gao Family Village started with only forty-two people."

"And now?" Dao Xuan Tianzun continued. "You have seven hundred civilians. Five hundred militia. And students trained in the Heavenly Book. What is there to fear?"

Chen Yuanbo lowered his head. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun speaks true. I was small-minded."

He slapped his cheeks sharply, once, twice, forcing clarity back into his thoughts.

Then he turned to the crowd and declared loudly, "My name is Chen Yuanbo! I am the Magistrate of Wenshui County! From this day forward, I will protect you!"

The townsfolk stared at him, hollow-eyed, disbelief etched into every face.

Chen Yuanbo didn't wait for faith.

"Distribute the grain."

Carts rolled forward. Two thousand catties of grain—enough for three catties per person—were handed out with near-perfect precision.

The effect was immediate.

With food in hand, backs straightened. Eyes regained light.

"Thank you, Esteemed Magistrate!" the crowd cried, bowing deeply.

Chen Yuanbo surveyed the ruined county.

With only seven hundred people, total restoration was impossible. He needed priorities.

Gao Family Village had supplies. Productivity could wait.

Security could not.

"Listen carefully," he announced. "After you eat, every able-bodied person will rebuild the city walls. They don't need to be tall—but they must surround the town. Two meters high. And the city gate must be restored."

His gaze hardened.

"Only behind walls can order survive."

Chapter 672 Huaqing Palace Is Rebuilt!

By late October, winter had already arrived.

Cold rain drifted down endlessly, soaking the earth and chilling the air.

And winter, of course, was the best season for soaking in hot springs.

A carriage escorted by a large contingent of guards slowly entered Xi'an and headed straight toward the rear courtyard of the fertilizer shop. Inside sat Gao Yiye.

Dao Xuan Tianzun, carrying a birdcage, had already been waiting for her for quite some time.

A playful smile appeared on Gao Yiye's face as she looked him up and down.

"Oh my. This Heavenly Lord statue isn't as finely made as the one at Xiaolangdi."

Li Daoxuan laughed.

"This is just the first prototype. Of course it can't compare to the upgraded version."

Gao Yiye laughed softly and reached out to gesture at his body.

"The build is exactly the same, though. I even made a set of knightly robes for the prototype while I was on the road."

As she spoke, she stepped closer and personally helped Li Daoxuan remove his old clothes and change into the new outfit. The knight's robes were exquisitely tailored, resembling the youthful princely attire worn by Michael Miu's Yang Kang during the martial arts contest for a spouse.

Handsome beyond compare.

The most handsome Yang Kang there ever was.

Li Daoxuan admired himself in the mirror, clearly pleased.

"Yiye, your tailoring skills really are superb."

Just then, the fertilizer shop suddenly grew noisy. Voices rose from outside as a crowd gathered at the entrance, merchants talking over one another in excitement.

Gao Yiye tilted her head.

"What's going on out there?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"Today's the grand opening of the hot spring resort. I never told them where it was, so they've all grown restless. They want to follow us today and check in on the very first day."

Gao Yiye laughed.

"Then I arrived at the perfect time. I can enjoy the hot springs too."

"Mhm. Let's go."

Still carrying the birdcage, Li Daoxuan took his wife's hand, and the two walked out side by side. Outside, the street was packed solid with merchants and officials, so crowded that it was difficult to move.

Only one person was conspicuously absent from the throng.

Zhu Cunji, heir to the Prince of Qin, waited on a different street in his carriage. As the heir to the most powerful princely domain in the realm, he found it beneath his dignity to squeeze together with merchants and minor officials.

He would go, but he would not jostle.

This was his line of separation from the ordinary wealthy class.

"Li Yuanwai, please lead the way!"

"My entire family is here, elders and children alike. We're all going to see the resort together!"

"Hah, I plan to write a few good poems this time."

Li Daoxuan and his wife boarded their carriage.

His carriage was custom-made, far sturdier than ordinary ones. The wheels were wrapped in rubber, and it was drawn by eight powerful horses.

This was not for show.

He was simply too heavy. Without such reinforcement, a normal carriage would have collapsed on the spot.

To outsiders, however, it looked like blatant extravagance.

Many merchants quietly thought to themselves, Li Yuanwai's carriage is a bit too grand for his status.

Then they shrugged. Not our business.

A massive procession formed, carriages stretching as far as the eye could see, accompanied by servants and guards. It was a truly astonishing sight.

Leaving Xi'an, the group traveled dozens of miles eastward.

Li Daoxuan still did not reveal the destination. The dignitaries, all people of restraint, did not ask and simply followed.

As they went on, Wu Shen frowned slightly.

"This road," he said, "isn't it close to the Huaqing Palace ruins? We even came here for a spring outing this year."

Shi Kefa suddenly remembered as well.

"That's right. The Huaqing Palace ruins. When we visited in spring, there were only broken walls and weeds everywhere. A truly desolate sight. Comparing the splendor of the Han and Tang dynasties to the present... this humble official cannot help but feel sorrow."

The two sank into melancholy reflections.

Meanwhile, Zhu Cunji, deliberately staying at the back, spoke quietly with his consort inside his spacious carriage.

"It seems we're nearing Huaqing Palace. This hot spring resort Li Yuanwai mentioned... it can't possibly be built there, can it? That place is nothing but ruins."

His consort whispered,

"Could he be playing a trick on everyone? Leading so many people this far, only to make fools of us all?"

Zhu Cunji frowned.

"Li Yuanwai may lack refinement, but he is a man of substance. He wouldn't dare play such a joke. Still, this feels strange. If we pass the Huaqing Palace ruins and he still doesn't say where we're going, we shouldn't continue. It wouldn't be safe to go too far."

No sooner had he finished speaking than loud shouts erupted from the very front of the procession.

"Wow!"

"Wow!"

"Huaqing Palace!"

"Huaqing Palace has been rebuilt!"

Zhu Cunji exclaimed,

"What?!"

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa froze as well.

"What did they say?"

Everyone hurried forward. After rounding a patch of woodland, their view suddenly opened up.

Ahead stood a vast and magnificent complex. Black tiles and red pillars gleamed in the rain. Railings were carved with exquisite detail, and the layered eaves flowed elegantly, radiating refined beauty.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa were completely dumbstruck.

"This spring... this spring it was still nothing but wasteland!"

Zhu Cunji pulled aside his carriage curtain and stared from afar, a startled sound escaping him.

"The Huaqing Palace ruins... became this?"

His own Qinwang Mansion was beautiful, but he lived there every day and had long grown accustomed to it. Seeing a newly risen palace of such splendor stirred him deeply.

Zhu Cunji immediately mounted his horse, galloped forward, and drew level with Li Daoxuan's carriage.

"Li Yuanwai," he asked cautiously, "isn't this resort built a little... beyond your station?"

"Not at all," Li Daoxuan laughed.

"It only looks like a palace. In truth, it's just an inn, albeit a very beautiful one. There are no imperial yellow robes inside, no dragons, no phoenixes. Absolutely none."

Zhu Cunji finally let out a long breath of relief.

He had truly been worried. For commoners, it might not matter, but as a prince, he had to be careful. Sitting on something resembling an imperial dragon bed or wearing imperial yellow embroidered with dragons could bring the Embroidered Uniform Guard knocking on his door the very next day.

The group arrived at the entrance.

Neatly dressed attendants stepped forward at once, taking Zhu Cunji's horse and guiding Li Daoxuan, Zhu Cunji, and the others inside.

From the outside, the resort already seemed luxurious. Once inside, however, the sense of awe deepened even further.

Palace-like buildings stood throughout the grounds. Towers rose here and there. Pavilions dotted the front, gardens stretched behind. Covered bridges wound through drifting mist and rain.

It looked like a living painting.

Chapter 673 Seventeen Thousand Taels

At the very heart of the resort lay an expansive complex of hot spring pools.

Scattered across the lakeside and nestled among gentle slopes and winding paths were no fewer than fifty or sixty individual pools, each one subtly distinct, each surrounded by carefully arranged stonework, shrubs, and drifting steam. Beside every pool stood a stone tablet, neatly carved with its name and the specific benefits attributed to its waters.

There was the Eye-Cleansing Spring.

The Body-Invigorating Spring.

The Skin-Smoothing Spring.

And many others besides.

The Heir Apparent's Consort stopped in her tracks the moment she reached the Skin-Smoothing Spring.

She leaned closer, reading the inscription word by word. According to the tablet, the spring water was infused with dozens of rare medicinal ingredients, its formula said to originate from Zhang Zhongjing himself, the famed physician of antiquity. The description praised its effects without restraint, claiming that a single soak could slow the passage of time, preserve youth, and keep one's skin smooth and radiant for years to come.

Having never endured the relentless assault of exaggerated advertisements that plagued later generations, the Consort's defenses were nonexistent. The mere mention of Zhang Zhongjing, ancient prescriptions, and miraculous effects was more than enough to convince her.

She almost believed every word.

Her heart itched with the desire to step straight into the pool and soak at once, but reason restrained her. It was still broad daylight. A woman of her status could not possibly bathe in a public hot spring under the open sky.

She would have to wait until nightfall, when the crowds thinned, then instruct her maids to erect privacy screens around the pool before she could finally indulge.

Many of the noblewomen shared the same thoughts.

They gathered quietly nearby, whispering among themselves, making plans to block off the pool after dark and enjoy a collective soak together.

As for the men, naturally, they could be sent far away to the Body-Invigorating Spring.

The tour continued.

Leaving the hot spring area, the group entered the interior of the hotel.

Strictly speaking, the architectural style, created by modern designers drawing inspiration from antiquity, still fell somewhat short of genuine ancient palaces in terms of traditional artistic refinement.

Yet the integration of contemporary concepts gave rise to a style that was utterly unfamiliar to the visitors of this era, striking them as both bold and astonishing.

The moment they stepped inside, they were greeted by furnishings of overwhelming luxury.

Gold, silver, and jade ornaments were everywhere. Glass appeared so frequently that it seemed almost worthless, forming entire windows. There were even enormous floor-to-ceiling glass panes that flooded the halls with natural light, offering uninterrupted views of the scenery beyond.

Standing before such windows, one felt as though the boundary between interior and exterior had dissolved, as if one were sitting directly amid mountains, mist, and rain.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa immediately claimed seats at a tea table beside one such window. As they sipped their tea and gazed at the drizzle tracing paths down the glass, their faces lit up with joy.

"Sitting here like this," Wu Shen said excitedly, "drinking tea and watching the rain beyond the glass, I could write ten poems at once."

"No," he corrected himself with a laugh, "twenty!"

Nearby, the wealthy merchants were calculating silently. Bringing business partners here to talk matters over would be infinitely more refined than any tavern in the city.

Next came the tour of the guest rooms.

The butler led everyone first to the most extravagant accommodation of all, the Royal Suite.

The price was immediately announced.

One hundred taels of silver per night.

The room itself lived up to the cost. Every furnishing was of the highest quality, and the bed alone stretched a full three meters across, clearly designed with the lavish households of the wealthy in mind, accommodating wives and concubines without the slightest sense of crowding.

The service philosophy of later generations was far more advanced than anything the Ming Dynasty had ever known.

Everything one could possibly need had already been prepared. Bathrobes, slippers, toothpicks, oil-paper umbrellas, all neatly arranged, giving guests the feeling of having returned home rather than merely lodging for the night.

Li Daoxuan had also made deliberate adjustments to suit ancient customs. The outer room contained small beds for maids. Beyond the private courtyard, several guard rooms were prepared for escorts.

The entire layout aligned perfectly with how people of this era traveled.

Yet none of these features truly astonished the group.

The Prince of Qin's residence possessed similar arrangements, and even finer ones.

What truly captured everyone's attention was the small courtyard behind the Royal Suite.

There, astonishingly, lay a private hot spring pool.

The Heir Apparent's Consort's eyes shone the instant she saw it.

A private pool.

Exclusive to the occupants of the suite. Completely closed off to outsiders.

If I book this room, she thought delightedly, I won't need to wait until night at all.

The butler seized the moment and turned to Zhu Cunji.

"Every room in the resort comes with a private bath. Noblewomen may soak in their own courtyards without mingling in public pools, ensuring absolute privacy. Your Heir Apparent and Consort may enjoy themselves here without the slightest concern."

Zhu Cunji was equally pleased.

Isn't this the perfect place for unrestrained indulgence?

He cast a knowing glance at his Consort.

She returned it with a soft smile, her gaze rich with meaning.

Behind them, the secondary wives and concubines smiled as well, their expressions gentle, alluring, and expectant.

Zhu Cunji felt so delighted he thought he might float into the air.

"This place is excellent," he declared. "Absolutely excellent. I'll take it. I want to book this suite for half a year."

The butler bowed slightly.

"Half a year amounts to one hundred and seventy-seven days. At the original rate, the total would be seventeen thousand seven hundred taels. However, for your Heir Apparent, we will round it down. Seventeen thousand taels of silver."

The number stabbed Zhu Cunji straight in the chest.

Even for him, a sum exceeding ten thousand taels was painful.

But then he glanced at his Consort's hopeful expression, imagined the future days of indulgence with his concubines in the private pool, and decided the pain was worth it.

"I'll take it," he said firmly.

And just like that, the Royal Suite was booked.

The other guests withdrew politely and continued touring the remaining room types.

There were business executive rooms, family rooms, standard rooms, and single rooms.

Everyone eventually found something suitable to their financial standing.

A few merchants were less affluent, and their hearts ached as they looked at the prices. Yet seeing everyone else make reservations, they knew retreating now would mean irreparable loss of face. Business in Xi'an would become impossible.

So even while wincing, they booked the cheapest rooms at twenty taels per night.

At the very least, they had to show they could afford it.

In the blink of an eye, nearly every top wealthy figure in Xi'an had a noticeable chunk carved out of their silver reserves.

For most of them, a few tens or even hundreds of taels was still manageable. Paying that much for lodging was tolerable.

However...

When they opened the price list placed on the tables in their rooms, the true depth of the knife was finally revealed.

Within the resort, a single serving of egg-fried rice cost two taels of silver.

A cup of tea cost two taels.

Happy Fat Water cost two taels.

Chocolate was one tael per mace.

A small packet of Want-Want Snow Crackers cost one tael.

A small bag of potato chips also cost one tael.

And those were not even the most outrageous charges.

At the very bottom of the list, in neat, unmistakable script, was a line stating that all purchases were subject to an additional twenty percent service charge.

No hidden fees.

Everything was written plainly, shamelessly extracting silver in full view.

It was exploitation in broad daylight.

Yet every official and noble present weighed the matter carefully and, in the end, willingly offered up their necks to the blade.

Chapter 674 Next to Me

Dusk descended.

Within the Huaqing Palace Hot Spring Resort, the restaurant blazed with life. Merchants raised wine cups, shouted drinking commands, and laughed loudly as deals were struck mid-toast. Contracts were sealed not with seals, but with flushed faces and spilled liquor.

Nearby, Wu Shen and Shi Kefa avoided the noise. They settled beneath covered bridges and in open pavilions, laying out tea sets. Steam curled gently upward as rain pattered against tiled roofs. They sipped, discussed affairs of the realm, and when inspiration struck, casually composed a poem or two.

The hot spring grounds were already occupied.

Men soaked in clusters—some murmuring about trade routes and prices, others arguing policy and troop movements as if the steam itself sharpened their political insight.

Yet—

Not a single woman could be seen.

Almost every noblewoman had retreated to the private baths attached to their guest rooms.

In this era, asking women to don swimsuits and bathe publicly was pure fantasy.

Deep within the resort stood a secluded structure hidden by a dense bamboo grove. Inside was a small, private hot spring, shielded from sight and sound.

Li Daoxuan and Gao Yiye soaked there alone.

The pool was not large. They sat facing one another, steam drifting lazily between them. Beneath the water, their feet brushed by accident.

At first, Gao Yiye withdrew her foot instantly, startled.

Then it happened again.

And again.

Eventually, she stopped pulling away.

Their feet came to rest together.

Gao Yiye's cheeks were flushed—whether from the heat of the spring or something else, Li Daoxuan couldn't tell.

"Ti..Tianzun," she asked hesitantly, "if you soak like this... won't you rust?"

"Probably," Li Daoxuan replied with a laugh. "This body wasn't designed to be waterproof. The water's already seeped in."

Her eyes widened. "Oh no! Then what will you do?"

"I'll build a new one."

"...Huh?"

Only then did she realize her worry had momentarily erased something fundamental.

"This body is just Prototype One," Li Daoxuan explained casually. "A basic framework for testing. Prototype Two will have far more... interesting features. As for Prototype Three—"

Her curiosity flared. "Prototype Three?"

Li Daoxuan grinned. "Both arms will be cannons. Thick as my forearms. Ammunition loaded at the elbows. Remove the palms, and the muzzles are right there."

Gao Yiye gasped softly.

"And my feet will house wheels. Pop off the soles and I can rollerblade. I'm very good at it. Practiced a lot."

She covered her face with both hands, half laughing, half exasperated. "Tianzun... you can move mountains, fill seas, and fly through the heavens. Why would you still need cannons and rollerblades?"

"Life needs variety," Li Daoxuan said easily. "Take Sun Wukong. Every time he dealt with a demon, he used a different method. If he always crawled into their stomachs and tore them apart from the inside, no matter the opponent—where would the fun be?"

Gao Yiye thought about it.

...He wasn't wrong.

Silence followed.

The sky darkened further. A night breeze drifted across the water's surface.

They searched for another topic, but none came. The quiet grew slightly awkward.

Just as Li Daoxuan was about to force conversation—

Gao Yiye suddenly leaned forward and threw herself into his arms.

He stiffened in surprise.

"Th-That... forgive me," she said softly, her voice trembling. "I just... really want someone close to me."

He understood instantly.

Her position isolated her from the world. Surrounded by reverence and distance, she lived alone even among crowds. Perhaps only here, with him, could she experience something as ordinary as closeness.

And wasn't he the same?

Li Daoxuan wrapped his arms around her gently.

They said nothing more.

Nothing else happened.

Yet in that quiet pool, pressed together as steam drifted upward, a rare peace settled into their hearts.

Far away—

Huaiqing Prefecture burned in blood.

The rebel army, once marching toward Henan, had been blocked at the river by Li Daoxuan. With no path forward, they turned back like a flood diverted—and poured straight into Huaiqing.

At their current strength, ordinary counties stood no chance.

Only prefectural capitals could still resist.

Huaiqing's towering walls held—for now.

Corpses piled beneath the ramparts. Government soldiers fell atop the walls. Common folk hauled stones and poured boiling water, screaming as arrows struck them down mid-motion.

Roars, screams, and agony merged into a single deafening howl.

Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng led three thousand garrison troops, hoping to relieve the siege from outside.

It was hopeless.

Henan soldiers were infamous for their weakness. Against two hundred thousand rebels, they were ants before a tide.

Unable to help, Fan Shangzheng circled the outskirts, desperately searching for a place to rest—even a temporary camp.

At last, a hundred li south of Huaiqing, a scout rode up.

"Governor! Wen County lies ahead."

"Wen County?" Fan Shangzheng frowned. "Sima Yi's hometown... The Eight Great Kings of the West Camp slaughtered it not long ago. Nine out of ten residents dead. The court appointed a magistrate, but no one dared take the post. In the end, Qiu Qianfan recommended a young man."

He shook his head. "It must be ruins by now."

The scout hesitated. "The city walls have been rebuilt. They look... usable."

"What?"

Fan Shangzheng stared. "That magistrate is truly capable?"

The scout nodded.

"Then move," Fan Shangzheng ordered. "At once."

When they reached Wen County, disbelief overtook him.

The shattered walls had been rebuilt. Though only two meters high, they stood firm again. Civilians were still at work atop them, hauling stones and baskets of earth.

Fan Shangzheng laughed aloud in relief. "There are walls! We can rest here!"

Just then, a head popped up over the battlements.

Fan Shangzheng blinked.

He recognized him.

"Ah?" he exclaimed. "Hero Xiao Qiushui?"

The figure on the wall—none other than Dao Xuan Tianzun, Test Model Two—smiled brightly.

"Governor! Long time no see! What have you been busy with lately?" he called out cheerfully. "Have you eaten yet?"

Fan Shangzheng froze.

The string of absurdly casual greetings left his mind blank.

After a long pause, he managed a wry smile. "Hero Xiao... could you do me a favor and ask Wen County's magistrate to come out and meet me?"

Chapter 675: Fan Shangzheng Returns

Before long, Chen Yuanbo personally came out to receive them.

He was now dressed in the official robes of a seventh-rank county magistrate, sleeves wide and orderly, a black gauze cap resting neatly atop his head. The transformation was striking. Gone was the anxious scholar scrambling for survival. In his place stood a proper Ming official, refined in appearance and measured in bearing.

The city gates of Wenshui County were opened wide.

Chen Yuanbo stepped forward, bowed deeply, and spoke with practiced humility.

"Your humble servant, Chen Yuanbo, failed to welcome you earlier. I beg your forgiveness."

There was no need to waste time on endless formal courtesies.

Fan Shangzheng waved it off and led his troops straight into the county seat.

Only then did the truth reveal itself.

From the outside, Wenshui County appeared to have been restored. The city walls stood upright, newly patched in many places, their outlines intact. But once inside, the illusion shattered immediately.

More than half the buildings within the city had been burned black. Charred beams jugged out like broken ribs, and even from a distance, the lingering stench of burnt wood clawed at the nose. The surviving commoners crowded together inside the few remaining structures, all of them damaged to varying degrees.

Next to these ruined houses stood rows of tents.

What was strange was not the tents themselves, but their colors.

They were bright and vivid, splashes of red, blue, and yellow standing out starkly against the gray ruin, lending an odd and almost surreal beauty to the devastated city.

Fan Shangzheng did not ask about the tents.

Instead, he turned immediately to Chen Yuanbo and asked bluntly,

"Magistrate Chen, after taking office in Wenshui County, was repairing the city walls your first priority?"

"Yes," Chen Yuanbo answered without hesitation, nodding firmly. "Bandits still roam the surrounding areas, and Huaqing Prefecture to the north remains under siege. At any moment, the bandits could return. This humble servant therefore mobilized the people at once to repair the city walls. Should the bandits come again, walls will at least make defense easier."

Fan Shangzheng fell silent.

With only a few hundred laborers, he thought, even if the walls are rebuilt, how could they possibly stop the bandits? It is little more than a gesture.

But he kept the thought to himself.

There was no reason to crush the initiative of a young official who was, at the very least, trying to do something.

As they moved deeper into the city, Fan Shangzheng quietly observed the people of Wenshui County.

The city was in ruins, yet the expressions on the faces of its inhabitants were not those of despair, helplessness, or resignation to death.

Instead, he saw diligence.

Perseverance.

A stubborn will to survive.

There was a sense of order, of people busying themselves with tasks, of life stubbornly pushing forward amid the ashes.

It was a vigorous, almost stubborn vitality.

Fan Shangzheng felt genuine surprise.

Wenshui County was devastated this badly, yet the people still have such spirit? They are even willing to work under the magistrate's direction to repair the city walls? This is highly unusual.

Unable to hold back, he asked,

"Magistrate Chen, you have only just arrived here, yet you have organized the people remarkably well. They are actually willing to work. I have passed through several counties where the common folk were impossible to control."

Chen Yuanbo smiled calmly.

"What the common folk want is very simple. They want enough food to eat, and a way to stay alive. This humble servant provided them with sufficient provisions. Once they saw hope of survival, they naturally became willing to work. Since they want to live, repairing the city walls for their own protection is only reasonable."

Fan Shangzheng's attention snapped to a single word.

"Provisions?"

He turned sharply.

"There are still provisions left in the county treasury? The West Camp Eight Great Kings burned this place so thoroughly. How could any grain remain?"

Chen Yuanbo shook his head.

"There is no grain in the county treasury. All the food here was provided by Hero Xiao."

Fan Shangzheng immediately understood.

He turned and looked toward Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan met his gaze and gave a helpless chuckle.

Fan Shangzheng hurriedly cupped his hands in greeting.

"Hero Xiao truly possesses a compassionate heart. Mengjin County benefited from your aid, and now Wenshui County does as well. Wherever bandits appear, you arrive to help. If the Great Ming had more men like Hero Xiao, why would the realm ever fear unrest?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly and said nothing.

Inwardly, however, his thoughts drifted elsewhere.

If the Great Ming had more transmigrators like me, this feudal imperial system would have been torn apart long ago.

One would establish a theocracy. Another would push capitalism. Another socialism. Another communism. Someone would insist on republicanism.

Throw in people playing Civilization, Stellaris, or Mount and Blade, each seizing a province to experiment with their favorite mechanics.

The result would be utter chaos.

Fan Shangzheng continued observing.

Provisions were indeed the greatest weapon, but this Chen Yuanbo clearly had more than just food. His administrative ability and organizational skill were obvious. The surviving residents of Wenshui County had been arranged with impressive clarity and efficiency.

The elderly, women, and children handled cooking and miscellaneous tasks. Able-bodied young men hauled stones and earth, steadily raising and reinforcing the walls. Each group worked within its own area, without confusion or obstruction.

Fan Shangzheng asked,

"Magistrate Chen, have you done this kind of work before?"

Chen Yuanbo replied,

"This humble servant previously served in Puzhou as chief strategist under the Prefect. My appointment to Wenshui County also came through the Prefect's recommendation."

Fan Shangzheng nodded inwardly.

So that is how it is.

No one in court was willing to come here, so they pushed you forward.

Tsk. A capable young man. I only hope he does not die here.

The word die brought his thoughts back to reality.

His brow furrowed deeply.

Li Daoxuan stepped closer and asked quietly,

"How is the situation at Huaqing Prefecture?"

Fan Shangzheng sighed heavily.

"Over two hundred thousand bandits have surrounded it. They are laying siege. I command only three thousand men. Just the ones you see behind me. There is no way we can relieve Huaqing Prefecture."

Chen Yuanbo asked in confusion,

"Did not the Governor of Shanxi, Xu Dingchen, lead a large force in pursuit of the bandits? Why is it that once the bandits reached Huaqing Prefecture, no government troops were still chasing them?"

Li Daoxuan answered calmly,

"You forgot again. Government troops cannot cross provincial borders."

Chen Yuanbo froze, then understanding dawned on his face.

Once the bandits entered Henan, the Governor of Shanxi lost all jurisdiction. Only the Governor of Henan could act. Even if the bandits stood one step across the border, mocking the Shanxi troops, those soldiers could do nothing but watch.

The situation was absurdly rigid.

Fan Shangzheng spoke again, his voice heavy.

"This humble servant has already submitted a memorial to the court, requesting immediate reinforcements. Otherwise, how can I alone contend with such numbers? Alas."

As he spoke, the Henan troops had already entered the city.

These three thousand soldiers were utterly exhausted. They needed rest badly, yet with burned houses everywhere, there was scarcely any place suitable for recuperation.

The multicolored tents remained in the distance. Not knowing their origin, the soldiers did not dare approach them.

The Henan troops had low morale and irregular pay. As they sat down, some pulled out half a rice cake. Others had nothing at all and could only swallow dry saliva.

Fan Shangzheng's expression twisted in pain.

"Even here, I cannot pay them their wages in full. Alas. How can we suppress bandits when we cannot even properly feed our own men?"

Chen Yuanbo glanced at Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan gave a slight nod.

Only then did Chen Yuanbo turn back and say,

"Hero Xiao has provided abundant grain. This humble servant will immediately arrange for the soldiers to have a proper meal."

Chapter 676 I'm Off to Wenshui County to Scrounge for Supplies

Huaiqing Prefecture stood firm.

Its towering walls loomed beneath the sky, battered yet unbroken, stubbornly resisting the prolonged siege. No matter how many days passed, the city refused to fall.

Outside the walls, however, patience was wearing thin.

Inside the main rebel camp, the Eight Great King of the Southern Camp pushed aside the tent flap and ducked in. The air inside was heavy with oil smoke and sweat. At the center of the tent, the Dashing General was crouched over a rough map scratched into a wooden board, his brow tightly furrowed, eyes sharp and restless.

The Southern Camp King dropped down beside him with a heavy thud.

"Dashing General," he said loudly, "my brothers and I owe you a great debt. If you hadn't carved a path for us into Henan, we'd have been cornered by the Yellow River and beaten to death by government troops."

The Dashing General merely nodded, his gaze never leaving the map.

Not far away, the Eight Great King of the West Camp sat in silence, arms folded, expression unreadable.

The Southern Camp King shot him a resentful glance and quickly looked away. The memory of their Yellow River crossing still burned in his chest. That bastard had sworn not to compete for boats—then shoved the hardest enemies onto his men. The betrayal still tasted bitter.

He turned back to the Dashing General.

"Dashing General," he said grimly, "if we don't take Huaiqing soon, we're finished. Our army's grain won't last much longer."

The Dashing General finally looked up.

"Indeed," he said. "With more than two hundred thousand mouths to feed, our consumption is terrifying. Plundering small towns and petty counties is no longer enough. Only by taking a major prefectural city like Huaiqing can we stockpile grain to survive."

The Southern Camp King frowned.

"But judging by things now, I don't see us taking it anytime soon."

The Dashing General exhaled slowly.

"A prefectural city isn't like a county seat," he admitted. "Our men are mostly new recruits. Their siege discipline is poor, coordination worse. They need time—training we simply don't have."

He paused, fingers tapping the map.

"At this stage," he continued, his voice lower, more cautious, "keeping everyone gathered together may not be the wisest choice. If we split up and advance along several routes, we can secure food more easily. At the same time, we'll force the Ming forces to scatter. They won't be able to concentrate their strength against us."

His tone lacked its usual arrogance. There was even a faint trace of self-blame.

The Southern Camp King frowned.

"You're saying... we should break up the army?"

"Not disband," the Dashing General replied. "But two hundred thousand men marching as one is too conspicuous—and too expensive. For now, splitting up is the only viable option."

Silence fell inside the tent.

Zijing Liang, Chuǎng Wang, Lao Huihui, Cao Cao, and the other rebel leaders all wore dark expressions. No one liked the idea—but no one could refute it.

The Eight Great King of the Southern Camp abruptly stood up.

"Fine. Fine!" he barked. "If that's the case, I'll be the first to leave. Damn it all, you people still have food, but my men are already starving! I was counting on taking Huaiqing so I could distribute grain. Since that won't happen anytime soon, I'll head out myself and scrounge up supplies."

Zijing Liang sneered.

"Scrounge? Every village, town, and county nearby has been plundered by us over and over. Where do you think you'll find food?"

The Southern Camp King only smirked, offering no answer. He turned and strode out of the tent without another word.

In truth, he already had a target.

His scouts had secretly delivered him crucial intelligence: Fan Shangzheng, Governor of Henan, had brought three thousand garrison troops and stationed them in Wenshui County, just to the south.

The moment he heard this, a vicious grin had crept across his face.

Three thousand garrison soldiers?

That's not an army—that's a gift.

There were no civilians left to plunder anyway. So why not rob the imperial soldiers instead?

Even if those soldiers were poor, they would certainly be carrying rations. Grain, weapons, armor—take it all, and it would still be a profitable haul.

After all, the fighting strength of garrison troops was barely better than that of peasants.

The Eight Great King of the Southern Camp wasted no time.

He left the main camp, gathered ten thousand men, and marched south in force, heading straight for Wenshui County.

The Henan garrison troops had never imagined that, while the imperial court left them half-starved and forgotten, this strange little county town would somehow produce both a great hero and a newly appointed magistrate capable of feeding them properly.

Rice cakes—warm, solid, real.

As Chen Yuanbo's men distributed food, the three thousand imperial soldiers clutched the rice cakes in their hands, many of them on the verge of tears.

This was no exaggeration.

Throughout the Great Ming, aside from the hardened northern frontier armies, southern garrison troops had spent more than two centuries farming. In practice, they had long become indistinguishable from common peasants.

In peacetime, they received no training. Their entire existence revolved around military farms. Yet even those lands were frequently seized by officers, civil officials, and even imperial princes. Countless military households were crushed under unbearable hardship.

As a result, desertion became rampant throughout the southern garrisons.

Military officers didn't stop it—why would they? Every deserter meant one more "phantom soldier" whose wages could be pocketed. It was a perfect arrangement.

Under such a system, these garrison troops had no will to fight. They fled at the first clash. In truth, their resolve was even weaker than that of local militias—for militias knew that defeat meant losing their homes.

Fan Shangzheng, commanding such troops, would have needed a miracle to ever win a battle.

Watching the soldiers devour their food like starving wolves, Fan Shangzheng felt a strange sensation stir in his chest.

Then—

A scout came sprinting in, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Rebels! The rebels are here again!"

Fan Shangzheng's heart lurched violently.

At the same moment, Chen Yuanbo let out a soft, surprised "Ah," and turned his head toward Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan met his gaze and gave a small, calm nod.

Absolute confidence.

Chen Yuanbo's anxiety instantly faded. If Dao Xuan Tianzun showed such composure, it meant that Gao Family Village's naval forces were undoubtedly nearby. There was nothing to fear.

On the other side, Fan Shangzheng was already panicking.

He grabbed the scout by the collar.

"Which rebel force? How many men?"

"It's the Eight Great King of the Southern Camp," the scout replied breathlessly. "About ten thousand men!"

"Him again?" Fan Shangzheng muttered. "Wasn't that man routed by Bai Yuan at the Yellow River, suffering catastrophic losses? How does he suddenly have ten thousand troops again?"

It was a question no one could answer.

"Prepare for battle!" Fan Shangzheng roared, leaping to his feet.

Orders rippled through the ranks.

The garrison troops hastily swallowed the last bites of their rice cakes, grabbed their weapons, and rushed toward the city walls.

Strangely enough, though they were cowardly garrison soldiers, they didn't appear especially afraid.

In their memories, imperial troops had always been the hunters, rebels the prey. Surely these bandits didn't know that imperial soldiers were stationed in Wenshui County. Once they saw the banners and the walls, they would retreat in panic.

A mere display of force would scatter them.

This belief was shared not only by the soldiers, but by their officers—and even by Fan Shangzheng himself.

Along the city walls, banners unfurled in dazzling profusion.

Governor Fan Shangzheng of Henan.

Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Henan.

Brigadier General of Henan.

With so many flags flying, even a fool could tell that thousands of imperial soldiers were garrisoned here. Ordinary rebel bands would never dare approach.

However—

Reality struck swiftly and mercilessly.

The ten thousand men of the Eight Great King of the Southern Camp did not scatter. They did not retreat. They did not hesitate.

As though blind to the banners and deaf to imperial authority, they surged toward Wenshui County like a rolling black tide, pressing forward with unstoppable momentum.

Only then did the imperial soldiers realize—

Something was terribly wrong.

Chapter 677 Don't You Squawk at Me—Am I Afraid of You?

Fan Shangzheng suddenly realized something was terribly wrong.

These rebels felt... different.

"They're not planning to flee."

"They're advancing—deliberately."

"What does this mean?"

"Do these rebels actually intend to fight us head-on?"

The realization struck like a hammer.

Panic spread through the Ming soldiers in an instant, raw and uncontrollable. Fear gripped them by the throat before anyone could think to stop it.

Below the walls, the Eight Great King of the Southern Camp raised one hand.

Five hundred hecklers immediately surged forward, spreading out in formation. Then, as one—

They roared.

"Fan Shangzheng, Governor of Henan!

Your grandpa, the Eight Great King of the Southern Camp, has come today to demand grain!"

Fan Shangzheng stared down in disbelief.

He had never—never—seen rebels this brazen.

The hecklers continued, voices booming like thunder.

"Order your soldiers to surrender all military provisions—grain, weapons, armor, bows, arrows, carts—everything!"

"Hand them over obediently, and perhaps your grandpa will spare your worthless life!"

"But if you refuse—when this city falls, we will slaughter every last one of you!"

"Not even chickens or dogs will be left alive!"

Five hundred voices shouted in perfect unison.

The sound slammed into the city walls like a physical force.

Faces drained of color. Even veteran officers felt their scalps go cold.

Fan Shangzheng shrieked, his voice cracking with fury.

"Waugh! This official is enraged! How dare these bandits be so insolent!"

The Eight Great King of the Southern Camp threw his head back and laughed.

"Don't you squawk at me!" he shouted. "Do you think I'm afraid of a paltry governor like you?"

Fan Shangzheng, a civil official through and through, still hadn't grasped the true gravity of the situation.

But the military officers had.

They understood one brutal truth: war was fought with morale.

In the past, rebels fled at the sight of government troops because their morale collapsed first. But now?

The rebels were burning with fighting spirit—while the imperial soldiers' resolve was crumbling before their eyes.

At least Chen Yuanbo had prepared in advance, ordering laborers to reinforce the city walls. Otherwise, Wenshui County would have been completely undefended, and morale would have shattered even faster.

Still—

The walls were barely two meters high.

Any officer with even the most basic understanding of warfare felt a chill crawl up his spine the moment he stood atop them.

How could anyone defend a wall this low?

The rebels could stack corpses and climb straight over.

Fear spread—silent, cold, and infectious.

Many officers, long accustomed to embezzling military funds to keep private household guards, quietly pulled those guards close, forming tight protective circles. If things went south, they would carve a path through the chaos and flee.

Fan Shangzheng's own guards instinctively closed ranks around him.

This lord is impossible, they thought bitterly. Disaster is upon us, and he's still raging and cursing instead of understanding reality.

Below, the Eight Great King of the Southern Camp watched with cold satisfaction as the hesitation rippled along the walls.

Excellent, he thought. The Henan garrisons are still as easy to scare as ever.

"In the past," he mused, "the imperial troops chased us."

"Now—it's our turn to chase them."

He raised his arm.

"Prepare the assault!"

At his command, the rebel army stirred.

Ten thousand men began advancing—slowly, steadily—toward Wenshui County.

Fan Shangzheng fumed, stamping his foot.

"Outrageous! Utterly outrageous! Everyone, prepare to engage the enemy—"

He froze.

On the far right of the city wall, five hundred government soldiers suddenly turned around and ran.

Fan Shangzheng stared, stunned.

It took him a moment to react.

"Commander Guan!" he shouted. "How—how dare you abandon your post and flee the battlefield while I, the Governor, am still here?!"

Commander Guan didn't even look back.

He ran.

Fan Shangzheng was a governor, but he was still only a civil official. He had no immediate power to stop a military commander. At worst, a report would be filed later. With Commander Guan's connections at court, execution was unlikely—perhaps just a demotion.

But if he stayed?

He would die today.

The choice was obvious.

Commander Guan and his five hundred men moved with astonishing speed, like ghosts skimming water. They reached the South Gate, threw it open, and vanished.

That single act shattered the dam.

Another five hundred on the left fled.

Then five hundred from the front.

Then another five hundred.

When an army collapses, even the smallest crack becomes an avalanche.

In moments, all three thousand men Fan Shangzheng had brought were in full retreat.

Fan Shangzheng had originally stood at the rear, trying to maintain order. But the fleeing soldiers surged past him like a raging river. He and his household guards were stones in the current—forced apart as the flood rushed around them.

"How can you all be so craven?!" Fan Shangzheng bellowed.

No one listened.

Everyone was running.

In the blink of an eye, Fan Shangzheng and his guards found themselves standing at the very front of the battlefield.

His hands trembled. His mouth opened—but no sound came out.

Seeing this, the rebels erupted in wild cheers.

"Hahaha! The government troops are running!"

"Weren't you arrogant just now?"

"Chasing us day after day—now it's your turn to flee!"

"Hahahaha! Storm Wenshui County! Chop off those corrupt officials' heads!"

The rebels advanced even more boldly, their laughter echoing across the fields.

Fan Shangzheng did not flee.

Instead, he staggered forward and climbed onto the city wall. Staring at the dark tide of rebels pressing closer, despair swallowed him whole.

His guards screamed beside him.

"Master, run!"

"Master, abandon the city!"

"Master, they're almost here—run!"

Fan Shangzheng said nothing.

He stood there, utterly dazed.

Then—

A solemn, unfamiliar song drifted across the wall, sung by a young man:

"Let our weak selves learn cruelty," "Let our weak selves learn cruelty,

To fiercely face life's every chill..."

Fan Shangzheng turned his head in a daze.

Standing even closer to the edge of the wall than himself was Great Hero Xiao Qiushui.

Somehow, Li Daoxuan now held a curved saber in his hand. No one knew where it had come from.

He raised it, alone, facing tens of thousands of rebels.

Fan Shangzheng asked foolishly,

"Great Hero Xiao... what are you doing?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly,

"I'm reenacting a scene."

"A man stands alone, facing an army of thousands charging at him. He raises his saber."

"So cool."

Fan Shangzheng was speechless.

Li Daoxuan glanced back.

"Was I cool just now?"

Fan Shangzheng remained speechless.

At that exact moment—

Hundreds of arquebusiers suddenly appeared behind Li Daoxuan, swiftly filling the gaps left by the fleeing soldiers.

The city wall—only two meters high—was pitiful for cold steel combat.

But for firearms?

It was perfect.

Infinitely better than sandbags.

Their morale soared, standing in stark contrast to the scattered imperial troops.

Fan Shangzheng gasped.

"Huh? These are militia? Where did they come from?"

One of his guards whispered urgently,

"Master, they came from those colorful tents. It seems those strange tents were their encampment."

Fan Shangzheng's eyes widened.

Li Daoxuan, radiating inexplicable confidence, pointed his saber forward and opened his mouth—

Then suddenly turned around.

"You take command," he said to the actual unit captain.

Chapter 678 I'll Scout Ahead

A fragile spark of hope flickered back to life in Fan Shangzheng's hollow eyes when Great Hero Xiao Qishui appeared with five hundred flintlock soldiers.

Yet the hope felt unbearably thin.

Firearms were powerful, yes—but they were slow to reload, prone to misfires, and notorious for bursting barrels. Against ten thousand rebels, what could five hundred guns really do?

Even with firearms... the numbers are too lopsided, he thought bleakly.

Then—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The flintlock soldiers opened fire.

"Huh?" Fan Shangzheng froze. "That's... not right."

The weapons in their hands were nothing like the bird guns he remembered.

The firing rate was terrifyingly fast.

A soldier discharged his weapon, tilted it slightly, and swiftly cleared the barrel. His hand darted to his pouch, pulling out a paper cartridge. In one fluid motion, he loaded, primed, and raised the gun again—smooth, practiced, effortless.

There was barely any need to aim.

The rebels were everywhere.

Thwack!

Another shot.

Another rebel collapsed outside the city walls.

Fan Shangzheng stammered,

"Ah... ah ah ah? This is..."

His personal guards gasped.

"So fast! These guns are too fast!"

Outside the walls, even the rebels were shouting in disbelief.

"Such fast guns!"

"No—wait!"

The Eight Great King of the Southern Camp suddenly remembered something, his face darkening.

"Those soldiers on the boats... when we crossed the Yellow River at Mengjin County... they used these exact firearms!"

"Damn it—these aren't government troops!"

"It's those people again!"

"The ones who took Xiaolangdi!"

"Who in the hell are they?!"

The Eight Great King of the Southern Camp knew all too well what followed whenever these people appeared.

A few volleys.

Then—

Morale collapse.

He had personally experienced, several times over, how to rout one's own army in the shortest possible time.

"Retreat!" he roared. "Fall back!"

The order was decisive.

The rebel army withdrew rapidly, abandoning hundreds of corpses where they fell. In the blink of an eye, the Southern Camp's presence evaporated.

Fan Shangzheng gaped.

"What? They retreated... just like that?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"When things turn unfavorable, retreating swiftly is the height of wisdom."

Then he added lightly,

"But... this doesn't look like a real retreat."

Fan Shangzheng blinked.

"Oh?"

Li Daoxuan lowered his telescope.

In the distance, the rebels had withdrawn far enough to be safe—but not far enough to leave. Figures lurked among the trees, peeking cautiously toward Wenshui County.

"They haven't given up," Li Daoxuan said calmly.

"They're watching us."

"They'll come back."

Chen Yuanbo and the militia captain arrived, nodding in agreement.

"They're unwilling to accept defeat," Chen Yuanbo said. "They'll likely organize another assault."

By now, Fan Shangzheng's mind had finally cleared.

"If they attack again," he said slowly, "it won't be during the day. With Great Hero Xiao's flintlock formation here, they'd be slaughtered."

He drew a breath.

"So if they come... it will be at night."

Li Daoxuan nodded approvingly.

"Correct. Everyone, rest up. Prepare for a night raid."

The county gradually quieted.

Soldiers rotated shifts on the walls. Those resting carefully wiped down their flintlocks, cleaning barrels, checking mechanisms, ensuring nothing would hinder the next volley.

The seven hundred-plus villagers slowly emerged from their homes.

When the rebel army had surged earlier, they had been certain Wenshui County was doomed again. None of them had believed those five hundred soldiers brought by the new magistrate could repel such a force.

Yet they had.

At last, peace returned to their hearts.

In this chaotic age, the common people wanted little—food, warm clothes, and safety.

With just those, even a shattered county could pulse with life.

Elders, women, and children lit fires and cooked for the militia. Able-bodied men returned to repairing the walls. Their renewed energy caught Fan Shangzheng's attention.

He had served as county magistrate, prefect, grand prefect—he had seen countless places.

Yet he had never seen such vitality bloom from the ruins of war.

"They truly see a future," Fan Shangzheng sighed softly. "That's why they possess such strength."

He found himself genuinely impressed with Chen Yuanbo.

Turning back, he clasped his hands and bowed slightly toward Li Daoxuan.

"Great Hero Xiao, we are once again deeply indebted to you. Last time, it was you who held the Yellow River and prevented the rebels from crossing. Today, it is your men again who have saved us."

He paused, bitterness creeping into his voice.

"As for those government troops... alas. I will deal with each and every one of them when I return."

Li Daoxuan thought to himself, So I've been upgraded to 'Great Hero' now. What'll it be next time?

Fan Shangzheng continued,

"I had heard of your deeds before, but only now do I understand. To possess such a flintlock militia... it commands true respect."

Li Daoxuan put on a troubled expression.

"Illegally manufacturing firearms is against the law, isn't it? Governor Fan, are you planning to arrest me?"

Fan Shangzheng laughed.

"In times of national crisis, expediency outweighs formality. Why argue over trivialities?"

He shook his head.

"Look at my officers—gone the moment battle appeared. Yet you provide money, grain, manpower, and risk everything to suppress the rebels. That alone is virtue enough."

"As for these firearms," he added meaningfully, "they are far better off in your hands."

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly.

This governor has truly been driven mad by his subordinates.

As dusk fell, the sky dimmed.

After dinner, the militia rested in the colorful tents. Fan Shangzheng and his retainers were invited inside as well.

In the fading light, Li Daoxuan could still see rebel scouts lurking at the edge of the distant forest, watching.

Chen Yuanbo stood beside him.

"There's a high chance of a night attack."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"At night, vision collapses. Our flintlocks' range drops from hundreds of meters to mere tens. The Southern Camp King understands this."

Chen Yuanbo said, "Then I'll order constant vigilance."

Li Daoxuan shook his head.

"Constant vigilance exhausts soldiers and frays morale. That's exactly what the enemy wants."

Chen Yuanbo hesitated.

"Then what should we do?"

Li Daoxuan calmly flipped open the panel on his chest.

A palm-sized cc-01 reconnaissance-type Dao Xuan Tianzun unit sprang out, hovering silently in the air.

"You all get proper rest," Li Daoxuan said lightly.

"I'll scout ahead."

Chapter 679 Dao Xuan Tianzun's Great Adventure

Reconnaissance-Type Dao Xuan Tianzun—deploy!

Li Daoxuan was ready to make a dramatic leap, jumping down from the city wall.

Standing at the edge and looking down—holy cow.

The city wall was only two meters tall, but in the eyes of the Reconnaissance-Type Dao Xuan Tianzun, it looked like a towering skyscraper, dozens of meters high.

It was simply too high.

Li Daoxuan hesitated.

Just one glance made him dizzy.

...Forget it.

He couldn't die from the fall anyway.

He closed his eyes.

"Heave—ho!"

With a small heroic cry, the Reconnaissance-Type Dao Xuan Tianzun leapt downward.

That feeling of plummeting like a meteor—

that brief moment of weightlessness—

Did you feel it?

Thump!

Li Daoxuan smashed into the ground.

Fortunately, he had deliberately not activated the detailed sensory feedback of his co-sensing ability. Otherwise, that landing would have hurt.

He brushed off his backside, stood up, and gave the dumbfounded Chen Yuanbo on the city wall an "okay" gesture.

Then he strode toward the distant forest where the Eight Great Kings' army was hiding.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun was truly tiny.

Even slightly taller blades of grass loomed like giant trees over him. As he walked, he had to push the grass aside with both hands.

Ahead stood a dense cluster of ferns—

thick, towering, intertwined like a miniature primeval forest.

He tried to squeeze between two of them.

Didn't fit.

He grabbed a stalk and tried to snap it—

...It wouldn't break.

Awkward.

His strength had shrunk along with his size.

Fine.

Then I'll just crash through.

Though palm-sized, his body was still forged from reinforced steel and iron. He backed up a few steps, then charged forward—

Bam!

The fern snapped and collapsed.

Li Daoxuan stood proudly atop the fallen stalk, flashed a V-sign, and declared:

"Oh yeah! That'll teach you to defy this Dao Xuan Tianzun! Snapped, didn't you?"

He paused.

"...Why am I so happy about beating a fern?"

Shaking his head, he continued onward.

What would have taken a human only a few minutes became a long march for a palm-sized Dao Xuan Tianzun.

He walked.

And walked.

The sky grew darker and darker, until it was so black he couldn't even see his own hands.

Which was actually good.

It made him harder to detect.

He continued forcing his way through the tall grass—

When suddenly—

Whoosh!

Something massive leapt out beside him.

Two red eyes locked onto him.

A mouse.

A scrawny, starving mouse.

It stared at the Dao Xuan Tianzun with clear intent to eat him.

Pressure hit instantly.

The mouse's gaze was full of murderous hunger.

Don't panic.

Li Daoxuan pried open a section of his forearm. The silicone skin peeled back, and a small blade sprang out—about the length of a fruit knife.

This was an auxiliary function of the Reconnaissance-Type Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Originally designed for times when Dao Xuan Tianzun wanted to peel fruit but had no knife.

He raised the blade, assumed the opening stance of the Fruit Peeling Blade Technique, and said solemnly:

"Do not come closer. I am a master of the Fruit Peeling Blade Technique. No fruit under heaven can resist me. Think carefully."

The mouse screeched.

"Squeak! Squeak!"

"Come on!" Li Daoxuan shouted. "Come!"

The mouse lunged.

"Fruit Blade Technique—Secret Move: Apple Halver!"

The mouse bit directly onto the Dao Xuan Tianzun's head.

"Aaaargh!"

Crunch!

The mouse's teeth nearly shattered.

Terrified by whatever unholy thing it had bitten, the mouse fled in complete panic.

Li Daoxuan wiped the saliva from his head and snorted.

"A mere mouse demon. As expected, no match for this Dao Xuan Tianzun."

He turned to continue—

And immediately slipped.

Splash!

He fell straight into an irrigation ditch.

After struggling out and standing upright, he looked around—

More than a dozen pairs of red eyes stared back at him.

"...Don't you dare come closer!"

"AAAAAH!"

"Secret Move—Apple Halver!"

"Finishing Technique—Pear Peeler Blade!"

"Ultimate Art—Orange Eight-Section Slice!"

Several minutes later...

The Dao Xuan Tianzun crawled out of the ditch, looking utterly miserable.

Large sections of his silicone outer layer had been gnawed away, exposing metal framework beneath. Only the silicone on his face remained intact.

Carefully protected.

After all—

A man must protect his face.

If his face couldn't pass as a Dao Xuan Tianzun statue, co-sensing wouldn't work.

After enduring countless trials, the battered Dao Xuan Tianzun finally reached the edge of the forest.

No more mice.

Because there were people.

Many people.

Inside the forest, some lay down, some sat, some leaned against trees.

A massive rebel army lay concealed.

The Eight Great Kings had indeed not withdrawn.

Li Daoxuan crawled quietly into their midst and soon spotted the Eight Great Kings himself—his face twisted with ferocity, surrounded by trusted lieutenants.

They were discussing tactics.

"It's completely dark now," the Eight Great Kings said. "But this isn't the best time to attack. When night first falls, their morale will still be high. We'll wait until after midnight."

The lieutenants replied in unison, "As you command."

"When we advance," the Eight Great Kings continued, "absolute silence. Once we get close, those firearms become useless. In close combat—who do we fear?"

One lieutenant hesitated.

"Boss... you know our men. It's hard to keep them quiet."

"Have them hold copper coins in their mouths," the Eight Great Kings said coldly.

"If anyone drops one, court-martial them."

The lieutenants gasped.

"Boss is truly brilliant!"

"I learned it from Romance of the Three Kingdoms," the Eight Great Kings said smugly.

"I told you to read more books."

He laughed.

"And don't attack the north wall. They'll guard it heavily. We'll strike from the east."

"Boss is Zhuge Liang reborn!"

"No—even Zhuge Liang can't compare to Boss!"

The Eight Great Kings laughed loudly.

"Hahaha! Zhuge Liang only knew schemes. I can scheme and fight. Civil and martial mastery!"

"Zhuge Liang is at most half the man I am!"

The Dao Xuan Tianzun spread his hands.

What a fool.

So easily inflated by flattery.

Completely unaware of how shallow his own abilities truly are.

Chapter 680 Grandmaster Xiao Is Dead

Fan Shangzheng wasn't sleeping deeply.

In fact, he hadn't truly fallen asleep at all.

As one aged, sleep inevitably deteriorated.

After tossing and turning for a long time, completely devoid of drowsiness, he finally slipped out of his brightly colored tent and wandered alone through Wenshui County in the dead of night.

The county town lay shrouded in darkness. Only a few braziers burned atop the city walls, their flames flickering weakly, barely holding back the black.

Fan Shangzheng looked left and right.

There were only a handful of guards on the walls. Most of the soldiers were inexplicably asleep.

The entire county looked no different from a peaceful town in peacetime—utterly undefended.

This discovery sent a jolt through his heart.

Alarmed, Fan Shangzheng hurried to Li Daoxuan's tent and yanked open the flap.

Inside, he saw Li Daoxuan sitting cross-legged in a corner, utterly still, eyes closed, silent as stone—as though cultivating some profound internal art.

Fan Shangzheng rushed forward and grabbed Li Daoxuan's shoulders, shaking him hard.

"Grandmaster Xiao! Master Xiao!" he cried.

"We were just discussing this afternoon that the bandits would likely launch a night raid! How could you make no arrangements at all? Nearly all the soldiers are asleep!"

He shook him again and again.

No response.

Not the slightest reaction.

Cold sweat broke out on Fan Shangzheng's back. His breathing grew erratic as he reached out, trembling, to check Li Daoxuan's breath.

Then—

His entire body froze.

No breath.

There was no breath at all.

"AHHH—!"

Fan Shangzheng let out a wail of despair.

"It's over! Grandmaster Xiao has passed away at such a critical moment! Why—why did this happen? Did he mismanage his qi cultivation? How could this be? You can't just leave now! The bandits are still outside! What will become of Wenshui County?!"

He stumbled out of the tent, utterly distraught, and charged straight into Chen Yuanbo's tent.

Without ceremony, he shook the sleeping man violently.

"It's over! Master Xiao is dead! Grandmaster Xiao is dead!"

Chen Yuanbo was shaken half-awake, nearly dislocated in the process. He sat up in confusion.

"Governor... what on earth has happened?"

Fan Shangzheng repeated frantically,

"Grandmaster Xiao is dead! He isn't breathing! His hands and feet are ice-cold!"

Chen Yuanbo nearly laughed out loud.

That's just one of Dao Xuan Tianzun's statues, he thought.

When Dao Xuan Tianzun isn't inhabiting it, how could it possibly breathe? And of course it's cold—it's not flesh and blood.

But such words absolutely could not be spoken aloud.

Maintaining a calm expression, Chen Yuanbo said steadily,

"Governor, please be at ease. Grandmaster Xiao is merely practicing a special martial art."

Fan Shangzheng stared.

"Practicing martial arts?"

"Yes," Chen Yuanbo said with a straight face.

"That art is called the Ice Soul Condensation Art. When cultivating it, one's body feels as though it has fallen into an ice cave. Naturally, the hands and feet become cold. As for breathing—it slows to the extreme, sometimes only one breath every hour or two."

Fan Shangzheng narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Are you trying to deceive this official?"

"This humble official would never dare," Chen Yuanbo replied.

"No matter how I look at it," Fan Shangzheng insisted, "Grandmaster Xiao looks very much like a dead man."

"Please don't worry," Chen Yuanbo reassured him.

"Once he completes a full circulation of his cultivation, he will awaken naturally."

Fan Shangzheng's heart still couldn't settle.

"Fine. Let's put Grandmaster Xiao aside for now," he said.

"What about your defenses? You clearly expected a night raid—so why are the defenses so lax?"

Chen Yuanbo answered calmly,

"Because the bandits won't attack in the first half of the night. They'll strike after midnight. Grandmaster Xiao instructed us to rest well now, so we'll be refreshed when the real fight begins."

Fan Shangzheng was stunned.

"You even know when they'll attack?"

"Of course," Chen Yuanbo said confidently.

"Grandmaster Xiao personally scouted the bandit camp earlier tonight and overheard their entire plan."

Fan Shangzheng sucked in a sharp breath.

It felt as though a thread of icy silk had slid straight into his lungs.

The supreme commander of one army, sneaking into the enemy camp during battle to eavesdrop on strategy?

That sounded like something straight out of a folk legend or a fantastical stage play.

To believe it immediately was impossible.

He was completely bewildered.

Just then—

"Oh?" a voice said behind them.

"What are you two doing up in the middle of the night instead of sleeping?"

Fan Shangzheng spun around.

Li Daoxuan was standing there, smiling casually, waving at him.

"Eh? Eh—eh—eh?" Fan Shangzheng stammered.

"He's... alive?!"

Li Daoxuan looked puzzled.

"Hm?"

Chen Yuanbo quickly winked at him.

"Grandmaster Xiao, while you were cultivating the Ice Soul Condensation Art just now, the Governor thought you had passed away."

"Ohhh, so that's what it was," Li Daoxuan laughed.

"Haha, thank you for your concern. That art is rather unorthodox—it does tend to make one look like a corpse."

Fan Shangzheng stepped forward and grabbed Li Daoxuan's hand.

"It's still so cold!"

Li Daoxuan waved it off.

"You get used to it. My hands are always cold in winter."

Fan Shangzheng was left utterly speechless.

"Governor," Li Daoxuan said kindly,

"you should get some rest. There'll be quite a spectacle later tonight. You wouldn't want to fall asleep during the excitement, would you?"

Fan Shangzheng sighed deeply.

"How could this official possibly sleep?"

"Even if you can't sleep, please don't make noise," Li Daoxuan said.

"Let the soldiers rest a little longer. I also need to continue my cultivation. And Governor—please don't announce that I'm dead again."

With that, he returned to the tent, sat cross-legged once more, and instantly became breathless again.

Fan Shangzheng felt a chill creep up his spine.

A good man... but far too strange.

Shaking his head, he returned to his tent, though sleep still refused to come.

He didn't know how much time passed before sudden movement erupted outside.

He rushed out and saw Grandmaster Xiao, Chen Yuanbo, and five hundred flintlock rifle soldiers already in motion.

The soldiers dressed with astonishing speed. In only a few dozen breaths, they had donned their uniforms, seized their weapons—and even folded their blankets into perfect, razor-edged rectangles.

Fan Shangzheng stared, dumbfounded.

Why... why would anyone fold blankets like that?

Grandmaster Xiao stood before the formation, smiling.

"In half an hour," he said,

"the bandits will begin their night raid. Everyone—take your positions."

The soldiers saluted in unison and turned to run toward the North Gate.

"No," Li Daoxuan said.

"Not the North Gate. They'll attack from the East Gate."

Fan Shangzheng's eyes widened.

"You even know which direction they'll attack from?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"I scouted the bandit camp earlier and heard their plan with crystal clarity."

Fan Shangzheng had nothing left to say.

The five hundred soldiers immediately turned toward the East Gate.

They didn't head for the walls—instead, they ran straight out of the city.

Engineers began digging furiously in the open ground outside the gate, doing things utterly incomprehensible to onlookers.

The rest of the soldiers split into small teams and melted into the nearby woods. In the pitch-black night, even shallow ditches were enough to conceal them.

Fan Shangzheng could only stand there, completely at a loss.

Once all preparations were complete, the East Gate fell silent once more.

Only two sentries remained on the wall, pacing beneath the dim glow of the braziers.