

Great Ming 681

Chapter 681 I Have to Charge In

The forces of the South Camp Eight Great Kings finally stirred.

It was the dead of night—the hour when human vigilance hit its lowest ebb, when eyelids grew unbearably heavy and even the most disciplined minds dulled.

Even modern people, hardened veterans of sleepless nights and late scrolling, would struggle to stay alert at such an hour.

Choosing this precise moment for his night raid, the South Camp Eight Great Kings felt victory was already more than halfway within his grasp.

Ten thousand rebel soldiers advanced in silence, each clenching a copper coin between their teeth.

This, he believed, was a masterstroke he had learned from Romance of the Three Kingdoms—a brilliant tactic that would ensure absolute silence.

Yet the moment they began marching, he discovered a rather embarrassing truth.

They could still talk.

"Damn it all..." the South Camp Eight Great Kings muttered around the coin.

"That blasted Romance of the Three Kingdoms really led me astray!"

With the coin still lodged firmly between his teeth, he continued complaining, speech perfectly intelligible.

"This lying book! You can clearly speak with a coin in your mouth. Look at me—I'm talking just fine!"

A sharp-eyed subordinate immediately seized the opportunity to flatter.

"Those literati who write such books are useless scholars!" he declared indignantly.

"They've never fought a real battle in their lives!"

"Exactly, exactly!" another chimed in hastily.

"This has nothing to do with the General. It's the authors' fault!"

"Our General can speak so clearly with a coin in his mouth—this is practically a divine skill!" a third exclaimed.

"Only the General could do this! Truly peerless!"

The South Camp Eight Great Kings suddenly frowned.

"Wait," he said slowly.

"Can't... all of you do that too?"

The subordinate instantly fell silent.

Thus, amid hushed but utterly pointless whispering, the rebel army continued forward.

They first detoured east, circling around to the eastern side of Wenshui County, then crept closer step by cautious step.

Moonlight spilled thinly across the land, illuminating only a few dozen feet ahead. Beyond that limited reach lay nothing but shapeless, ink-black darkness.

In such conditions, arquebusiers were effectively blind.

There was nothing to fear.

Nothing at all.

As they advanced, one rebel soldier suddenly felt uneasy.

"General..." he whispered.

"The bushes beside us rustled twice just now. It felt like something strange was moving alongside us."

The South Camp Eight Great Kings scoffed.

"A strange thing? How strange could it be?"

"Palm-sized," the soldier replied softly.

"Very small. I only saw a fleeting black shadow before it vanished back into the grass."

"Palm-sized?" the South Camp Eight Great Kings snorted.

"A rat, then. What else could it be? Stop being so paranoid. This is exactly when rats come out."

Chastened, the soldier could only continue forward.

Hidden within the undergrowth, the Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatar—the tiny reconnaissance body Li Daoxuan controlled—quietly poked his head out from behind a massive fern leaf.

"Hmph," he snorted inwardly.

Moments later...

They entered Gao Family Village's carefully prepared ambush zone.

The trap had not been laid directly at the city gates.

The reasoning was simple: once rebels reached the walls, they would naturally tighten formation and brace for combat. Their alertness would spike.

But here—still some distance away—they were relaxed, careless, completely unprepared.

Never in their wildest dreams would they imagine that soldiers from inside the city would advance outward to strike here.

Li Daoxuan instantly shifted his consciousness, transferring it into the small silver-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun statue pinned discreetly to Chen Yuanbo's chest.

In a voice only Chen Yuanbo could hear, he said calmly:

"You may begin."

Chen Yuanbo's heart leapt with excitement. He straightened at once.

"Issue the command," he said firmly.

"Begin the operation. Code name: Eliminate South Camp Eight Great Kings—abbreviated as Gan-Nan."

Fan Shangzheng, standing beside him, was completely baffled.

"Begun?" he stammered.

"The rebels have already arrived?"

Chen Yuanbo nodded.

"They're here. Right within that deep darkness ahead."

Fan Shangzheng panicked.

"How can you be certain? This official hasn't seen a single torch, heard a sound, or spotted even one rebel! It's pitch-black out there!"

Chen Yuanbo smiled faintly.

"A secret military method—Night Cry Communication. Those bird calls you just heard were messages from our scouts."

Fan Shangzheng was thunderstruck. He bowed repeatedly.

"I have served as an official for many years and believed myself well-informed," he admitted.

"Never did I imagine such methods existed. Truly, my eyes have been opened! Though..."

He coughed lightly.

"That operation name—Gan-Nan—may offend some people from Gannan."

The order had already been carried out.

A soldier rushed to a shallow ditch outside the city walls, struck a fire starter, and tossed it inside.

BOOM!

A blinding flash erupted.

Fire surged through the trench like a living serpent, racing forward in an instant.

Only now did the truth reveal itself—the engineers had earlier dug this ditch, packed it with dry grass, and drenched it in lamp oil.

Once ignited, the flames roared ahead, splitting, branching, racing outward.

In mere moments, firelight flooded the battlefield.

And standing squarely at the center of that blazing inferno were the South Camp Eight Great Kings and his night raiding force.

The rebels froze.

One instant they were creeping through darkness.

The next—fire exploded beneath their feet, ahead of them, around them.

Night turned into blazing day.

The rebels screamed and scrambled backward, desperate to escape the fiery trenches.

The South Camp Eight Great Kings recoiled in shock.

"An ambush!" he roared.

"Our plan has been exposed!"

Before his shout even faded—

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

Arquebus fire erupted from the surrounding woods.

Illuminated by the flames, the rebels were exposed like figures on a stage. Meanwhile, the arquebusiers remained hidden in total darkness.

The rebels could see nothing.

The enemy saw everything.

Men fell in swathes.

Some rebels desperately loosed arrows into the dark—but how could they hit enemies they couldn't see?

Others charged blindly toward the woods, swords raised—only to run straight into gunfire and collapse mid-stride.

From afar, Fan Shangzheng watched as if witnessing a carefully staged performance.

Rebels screamed, stumbled, died—utterly disoriented, unable even to tell north from south.

"Utterly satisfying," Fan Shangzheng muttered, a grim smile tugging at his lips.

"To beat the rebels like this... truly refreshing."

At that moment, Hero Xiao—who had been seated nearby, motionless, cultivating his Ice Soul Condensing Qi Technique—suddenly rose to his feet.

Fan Shangzheng jumped.

"Oh! Hero Xiao—you're awake? You missed quite the spectacle!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly.

"No matter. What comes next will be even more exciting."

With a clean, ringing sound, he drew his sword.

"You all stay here," he said calmly.

"I have to charge in."

"Ah? Y-your Excellency?" Chen Yuanbo exclaimed.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"The South Camp Eight Great Kings is fleeing. Arquebusiers excel at distance, not pursuit. Charging out to capture someone alive is dangerous work..."

He stepped forward, sword in hand.

"So I'll do it myself."

And with that, he broke into a run, vanishing into the firelit chaos ahead.

Chapter 682 Miraculous Hero

Fan Shangzheng watched as the enigmatic warrior charged forward alone, and his heart nearly leapt out of his throat.

He spun around and grabbed Chen Yuanbo's sleeve.

"Why are you just standing there? Hurry up! Take your men and support him! How can one man charge straight into an enemy formation like that?"

Chen Yuanbo's expression was... complicated.

"Well," he said slowly, "our forces don't actually have any close-combat soldiers. Sending musketeers into melee would be extremely irrational. It would only cause meaningless casualties."

Fan Shangzheng was furious.

"Soldiers can't suffer meaningless casualties, but a commanding general can?!"

Chen Yuanbo laughed.

"Governor, please rest assured. That man won't suffer any casualties at all."

Fan Shangzheng stared at him.

"He is," Chen Yuanbo added calmly, "the foremost hero of the Divine Land."

Fan Shangzheng: "!!!"

Amid the chaos, the Eight Great Kings of the Southern Camp was already preparing to flee.

Bullets screamed in from the surrounding darkness without pause. One glance was enough for him to know—the battle was lost again.

So he ran.

Bandits learned many things in life, but the most important lesson was always how to escape. Among the countless rebel leaders roaming the land, the Eight Great Kings' escape skills ranked above average. Those who couldn't run had already been wiped out by government troops back in the early Chongzhen years.

With a sudden burst of speed, he dove into the nearby forest.

Ten loyal subordinates followed, crashing through dense grass and ferns, fleeing in complete disorder.

But the moment the Eight Great Kings plunged into the undergrowth, he heard a faint swish—as if something small, palm-sized, was slipping through the grass beside him.

"A rat?" he thought dismissively.

He didn't even slow down. Rats were nothing. All that mattered was running—running far away from this musket-filled death trap.

He took a long step forward.

His right foot extended. His left foot stayed planted, bearing his weight.

And at that exact moment—

A palm-sized little man burst out of the grass.

Only its face was intact. The flesh on its body was torn and ragged, exposing bare bones everywhere.

Steel bones.

From its steel arm, a tiny fruit knife flashed.

"Fruit Knife Technique—Ultimate Kill: Extract the Jackfruit!"

The little man roared and slashed downward with all its might.

"PFFT!"

Blood sprayed into the air.

A scream tore out of the Eight Great Kings' throat as agony exploded just above his heel. His left foot instantly went numb.

His Achilles tendon—severed.

His balance vanished. He slammed into the ground with a heavy thud.

Only then did he clearly see the steel little man. It grinned at him—a stiff, horrifying smile—then froze, becoming completely motionless.

"What... what the hell was that?"

The Eight Great Kings was paralyzed with fear, every hair on his body standing on end.

"What kind of demonic thing is this? What kind of terrifying contraption?!"

His subordinates rushed over.

"Boss! What happened? Boss—your foot!"

"That little man..." he stammered, eyes wide.

"That little man... a-a-ah... that little man—!"

The subordinates looked down.

It was just a motionless iron figurine.

It wasn't moving at all.

What was there to be afraid of?

They hadn't seen it move. They hadn't seen it attack. So fear hadn't reached them yet.

"Quick! Quick—help me walk!"

The Eight Great Kings roared in panic.

"Get me out of this cursed place! Away from that little monster!"

From afar, Fan Shangzheng was witnessing a scene he would remember for the rest of his life.

He saw the Miraculous Hero—no, the Miraculous Hero—charging alone with a single sword.

A bandit lunged and stabbed straight into the Miraculous Hero's abdomen.

Fan Shangzheng gasped.

From this distance, under flickering firelight, he couldn't tell whether the Miraculous Hero had been injured. All he saw was the sword flash—and the bandit fall.

Two more bandits rushed in, blades hacking into the Miraculous Hero's body.

Two flashes.

Two throats pierced.

Fan Shangzheng stared in disbelief.

The Miraculous Hero never slowed. Never staggered. Never fell. Even after being struck again and again, his movements were completely unaffected. Anyone who faced him couldn't survive more than two exchanges.

"Why?" Fan Shangzheng cried out.

"Why does the Miraculous Hero always take a hit before counterattacking? He's strong enough to avoid the blow and kill them first!"

Chen Yuanbo shrugged, saying nothing.

Under Fan Shangzheng's shocked and reverent gaze, the Miraculous Hero plunged deep into the forest.

The Eight Great Kings of the Southern Camp and his remaining men were still scrambling to escape.

But with one Achilles tendon severed, he was nothing but dead weight. They couldn't run fast.

Then a young man's voice sounded calmly from behind them:

"Eight Great Kings of the Southern Camp, stop running. Do you really think you can escape with a severed Achilles tendon?"

Everyone spun around.

A young man stood there.

His flesh was torn in several places, as though he had been slashed repeatedly. Yet there was no blood—only exposed steel bones beneath the damaged skin.

The Eight Great Kings recognized him instantly.

The little man.

Only... Big versions.

"You... you..." he shrieked.

"What kind of demon are you?! You're not human—what are you?!"

The young man smiled.

"I'm just a wanderer," he said lightly. "A hero by inclination."

The Eight Great Kings: "..."

"Kill him!" two bandits roared.

Their blades slammed into Li Daoxuan's body.

Clang! Clang!

Both swords bounced away uselessly.

At the same time, Li Daoxuan's sword pierced both men.

When you trade your body for a life, accuracy skyrockets.

Li Daoxuan bared his teeth in a stiff, terrifying grin and looked at the Eight Great Kings.

"We're old acquaintances, aren't we?"

"Do you remember Shi Jian and his two hundred musketeers in Pingyang Prefecture?"

The Eight Great Kings' heart nearly stopped.

"Th-those were your men?!"

"That's right," Li Daoxuan replied calmly.

"And the ambush at the Yellow River? Also mine."

The Eight Great Kings: "!!!"

"You can be lucky once. Maybe twice," Li Daoxuan continued.

"But never three times."

"You keep barging into my territory, wasting my bullets. Don't you find that annoying?"

"How about you stay here forever?"

"Kill him!"

Three more bandits charged.

Steel rang uselessly against Li Daoxuan's body.

His sword swept out.

One neck split open. Blood sprayed a full meter.

The other two froze, terror flooding their faces.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Gunshots rang out from the forest.

The last of the bandits fell.

With no one supporting him, the Eight Great Kings collapsed onto his back, staring at Li Daoxuan in utter despair.

Li Daoxuan walked over, sword in hand.

He knelt down.

Slowly, deliberately, he drove the blade into the Eight Great Kings' remaining uninjured foot.

"Let's see," he said softly,

"how fast you can run now."

Chapter 683 Preparations for the No. 3 Avatar

Zhang Xianzhong let out a hoarse, miserable shriek.

"You monster... you fiend—!"

Before he could finish the curse, Li Daoxuan calmly extended his left hand and clamped it over Zhang Xianzhong's mouth.

Zhang Xianzhong bit down with all his strength, desperate to take a piece of flesh with him.

Instead, a piercing pain exploded through his teeth, as if he had bitten into solid iron. Several teeth nearly shattered on the spot.

Li Daoxuan's hand didn't budge in the slightest.

With his mouth forcibly pried open, Zhang Xianzhong couldn't even close his jaws properly.

Then he watched, eyes wide with terror, as the blade in Li Daoxuan's right hand slowly entered his mouth—

—and with a single clean motion, severed his tongue.

"Mmph... mmph...!"

Now, he couldn't even curse.

Only then did Li Daoxuan grab him by the collar and drag him out of the forest like a sack of trash.

Outside, the battle was already drawing to a close.

Zhang Xianzhong's subordinates, their morale utterly shattered by the flintlock rifles, were fleeing in all directions like headless flies.

If the militia had enjoyed numerical superiority, they would have pursued the rebels relentlessly.

But with only five hundred men on hand, actively chasing ten thousand bandits was unrealistic. Driving them off was already a victory.

Thus, the militia simply fired a final volley into the rebels' retreating backs, killing whoever fate allowed.

As Li Daoxuan emerged from the woods, Chen Yuanbo hurried forward carrying a large cloak. He swiftly draped it over Li Daoxuan's body, concealing the severely damaged silicone outer layer beneath.

Li Daoxuan was quite satisfied with this arrangement. Dragging Zhang Xianzhong along, he continued walking until he came face-to-face with Fan Shangzheng.

Fan Shangzheng's face was glowing with exhilaration.

"Hero Xiao! I never imagined—truly never imagined—that we would win! And so easily at that!"

He paused, staring at the cloak. "Huh? Why are you wearing such a large garment?"

Li Daoxuan tilted his head back slightly and gazed at the sky at a perfect forty-five-degree angle.

"A lone shadow on a cold river," he recited solemnly.

"A familiar face in the martial world.

Why must we have known each other to meet again?"

Then he looked back at Fan Shangzheng.

"Is my cloak dashing?"

Fan Shangzheng was completely speechless.

Chen Yuanbo leaned in and whispered into Fan Shangzheng's ear, "Hero Xiao sustained a minor injury. He didn't wish to worry Your Excellency, nor alarm the common people, so he wrapped himself up."

Fan Shangzheng instantly understood.

"Ah! Hero Xiao's attire truly radiates elegance and dignity!"

Li Daoxuan casually tossed Zhang Xianzhong onto the ground at Fan Shangzheng's feet.

"This man," he said calmly, "I leave to the imperial court."

Fan Shangzheng was overjoyed.

"He actually captured Zhang Xianzhong alive!"

"I initially planned to kill him with a single stroke," Li Daoxuan said indifferently. "But after some thought, such a man shouldn't die so easily. The people should see him suffer a thousand cuts. Only then can their resentment be soothed."

Fan Shangzheng nodded emphatically.

"You're absolutely right! He must be escorted to the capital and publicly subjected to death by a thousand cuts!"

The aftermath involved clearing the battlefield and various mop-up operations.

Li Daoxuan did not participate. Wrapped in his cloak, he quietly slipped into a brightly colored tent.

Fan Shangzheng assumed he was tending to his wounds and did not dare disturb him. He ordered his guards to bind Zhang Xianzhong securely and prepare him for transport to the capital.

With that, Wenshui County's crisis was temporarily resolved.

Early the next morning, Fan Shangzheng went to visit Li Daoxuan—

only to find the tent empty.

Hero Xiao had already departed.

Fan Shangzheng sighed deeply, admiration written all over his face.

"To accomplish a great deed and then calmly depart, hiding one's achievements and fame... Hero Xiao is truly extraordinary."

The No. 2 Dao Xuan Tianzun Avatar had suffered severe damage. Its silicone outer layer was completely ruined, making it unsuitable for public appearance.

It was immediately shipped back to the vessel and transported all the way to Gao Family Village Advanced Vocational Technical School.

Coincidentally, Gao Yiye, who had just returned from Xi'an, also arrived at the school.

Song Yingxing, Young Master Bai, Wang Hui, Gao Yiyi, Li Da, numerous graduate students, and a large number of senior technical engineers gathered around a table, packing the room full.

Gao Yiye spoke first.

"Repairing the silicone layer of the No. 2 Avatar is a trivial matter. The real reason I called everyone here today is to announce the design requirements for the No. 3 Avatar."

Everyone straightened.

"We're listening."

Gao Yiye continued, "These requirements were personally proposed by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself."

"First," he said, "both arms must be equipped with cannons."

Song Yingxing felt his scalp go numb.

"Second," Gao Yiye added, "the feet must be fitted with wheels, so Dao Xuan Tianzun can enjoy roller skating."

Wang Hui's vision went dark.

"These," Gao Yiye said, "are Dao Xuan Tianzun's explicit requests. However, after observing the damage sustained by the No. 2 Avatar, I believe we must go further."

He sighed.

"The damage was... severe. Truly heartbreaking."

Young Master Bai raised his hand eagerly.

"I agree! Dao Xuan Tianzun enjoys experiencing mortal life. If we give him a body with more features and more entertainment, he'll surely be pleased."

Li Da raised his hand solemnly.

"If Dao Xuan Tianzun smiles, I could wake up laughing even from death."

There was no rebuttal to that.

Everyone present had received immense grace from Dao Xuan Tianzun. Repaying even a fraction of it felt impossible.

Young Master Bai continued, "In fact, designing Dao Xuan Tianzun's body is easier than building automobiles. Cars need steam engines for power, but Dao Xuan Tianzun needs no power source at all. Once the framework is complete, he can move it himself."

The room stirred.

"That means," Young Master Bai said, eyes shining, "many designs we once abandoned can now be realized."

"For example?" someone asked eagerly.

Young Master Bai pondered.

"I once considered mounting cannons on vehicles, but the power requirements were too high. However, mounting cannons on Dao Xuan Tianzun's arms poses no issue at all—and he personally requested it."

"We could go further," he added. "Install small flintlock rifles throughout the body. Elbows, shoulders—multiple firing ports."

Gao Yiyi raised her hand.

"What if we replaced all the ribs with blades? At critical moments, they could flip outward."

Her eyes sparkled.

"Just imagining it feels terrifying."

"Genius!"

"Absolutely genius!"

Wang Hui chimed in.

"Roller skating is fine, but upright posture creates wind resistance and balance issues. Instead, we could conceal two wheels at the waist. When needed, Dao Xuan Tianzun could lie prone and deploy a four-wheeled glider configuration for high-speed travel."

The room erupted.

"Genius!"

"Another genius!"

Ideas flew wildly—some practical, some insane, some probably lethal.

But the engineers of Gao Family Village had long embraced enlightened thinking.

They were not afraid of experimentation.

Whether something worked or not could only be determined by trying.

As for failure?

What was there to fear?

After ten thousand failures, there would surely be one success.

Be bold.

Move forward.

And build it.

Chapter 684 Royal Dignity Must Not Be Lost

The news that Wenshui County had withstood the assault of a massive rebel army spread like wildfire through the surrounding counties.

Huaiqing Prefecture and its neighboring regions were still mired in chaos. Hundreds of thousands of rebels roamed unchecked, and the common people had no idea where safety might be found.

The moment word spread that Wenshui County had survived—and not merely survived, but stood firm—those who had lost homes, families, and livelihoods began to move.

Frightened refugees who had been hiding in ravines, forests, and abandoned villages gathered up what little they had left and headed toward Wenshui County.

Entire families moved together.

Old men, women, children.

Once they arrived, they were stunned to discover something almost unbelievable—

The Governor of Henan himself was stationed in this tiny county town.

And more astonishing still—

This battered, half-ruined county town was feeding people.

Not soup kitchens or emergency porridge alone, but real work.

Real wages.

At that moment, everyone understood.

They hadn't just come to a safe place.

They had come to the right place.

People poured in even faster.

Five thousand.

Six thousand.

Seven thousand...

The population climbed daily.

When there were too few people, Chen Yuanbo could do very little. But once the numbers surged, Chen Yuanbo—and the group of middle-school students he had brought with him—finally had room to work.

Not speeches.

Not slogans.

Announcements.

"The county government is recruiting five hundred laborers.

Duties include clearing burned dwellings, hauling stone and earth, and disposing of waste.

Daily wage: three catties of flour."

"The county government urgently requires skilled construction workers for post-disaster rebuilding.

Monthly wage: three taels of silver."

"A cement factory will soon be established. Apprentices needed.

Once able to work independently, wages will match skilled labor."

"Cooks are needed to prepare meals for workers.

The elderly, weak, women, and children will be given priority."

Skilled or unskilled—everyone had a place.

The refugees were moved to tears.

They could live here.

Truly live.

Soldiers guarded them.

Work fed them.

Safety and survival were no longer separate choices.

What were they waiting for?

Roll up sleeves. Get to work.

Wenshui County erupted with vitality.

The ruined town didn't recover—it was reborn.

One day, the city wall was heightened and reinforced.

The next, a burned district was cleared.

The next, new houses stood where ashes had been.

The speed was terrifying.

Fan Shangzheng, the Governor of Henan, stared in disbelief.

He had served as county magistrate, prefectural magistrate, prefect—climbing step by step to governor. He had handled disasters, taxes, banditry, and famine.

But he had never seen anything like this.

"Magistrate Chen," Fan Shangzheng finally asked, unable to hold back, "this operation requires a vast amount of capital. Wenshui County's treasury was plundered clean by the rebels. How can you possibly sustain this?"

Chen Yuanbo smiled calmly.

"With Xiao Qixia's help, of course. His family is wealthy enough to provide funds and supplies."

Fan Shangzheng lowered his voice. "Even if his family is rich... why would he pour money into a small county town like this?"

Chen Yuanbo sighed softly.

"For the people, Governor. Frankly speaking, in circumstances like these, the imperial court should be allocating disaster funds and distributing relief grain. But the court cannot act—and even you, as Governor, are powerless."

"So Xiao Qixia has no choice but to use his own wealth."

Fan Shangzheng fell silent.

As Governor, he could shift funds from other counties—but only tiny amounts. Enough to keep people from starving, nothing more.

Henan simply had no spare resources.

A clever cook with no rice.

He decided not to think about it further.

Fan Shangzheng's greatest headache remained Huaiqing Prefecture.

How to lift its siege?

The answer arrived faster than expected.

A force of two thousand government troops approached from the west and entered Wenshui County.

Leading them was none other than Zuo Liangyu, Vice Commander-in-Chief of Shanxi.

At last, the Shanxi army had crossed into Henan.

Why now?

Because the rebels entering Henan had terrified the provincial elite.

Led by Zhu Changxun, Prince of Fu, the gentry and nobility submitted a joint memorial requesting military aid.

And the power of that memorial exceeded even an imperial decree.

An imperial edict could be openly resisted, delayed, or hollowly obeyed.

But the interests of the gentry and the civil bureaucracy were one and the same.

Thus, the Ministry of War pushed through all obstacles and urgently redeployed Zuo Liangyu toward Huaiqing.

At the same time, Zhang Zongheng's Xuan-Da border army swept south through Yangcheng, Zezhou, Gaoping, Changzhi, and Tunliu.

And the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers were also on the move.

In an instant, the tide shifted again.

It seemed the imperial court was capable once more.

The rebels—once more—appeared to falter.

The Imperial Study.

Zhu Youjian, the Chongzhen Emperor, stared at a letter, his brows tightly knit.

A family letter.

From his uncle—Zhu Changxun, Prince of Fu.

The opening was all pleasantries and rambling trivialities.

Then the tone changed.

The imperial clan, the letter claimed, was being bullied.

A parcel of land under the Prince of Fu's jurisdiction had been forcibly occupied by a local gentry family. When rent was demanded, they refused to pay.

Occupying imperial land was a heinous crime.

He requested judgment.

Zhu Youjian couldn't help but feel both amused and irritated.

He summoned the Jinyiwei Commander.

"What is the situation at Xiaolangdi?" he asked. "How dare someone seize an imperial fief?"

The commander sighed.

"Your Majesty, Xiaolangdi has been plagued by river bandits since the late Eastern Han. Yellow Turbans once entrenched themselves there. Across dynasties, bandits were suppressed again and again, only to return."

"Though it is nominally part of the Prince of Fu's domain, his household has been unable to govern it for many years."

Zhu Youjian nodded slowly.

"So it's that sort of 'occupation.' I thought it was something serious."

The commander hesitated, then said quietly, "Even so, Your Majesty... royal dignity must not be lost."

Zhu Youjian nodded.

"Indeed. Royal dignity must not be lost."

He waved his hand.

"Inform the Governor of Henan. Reclaim the land at Xiaolangdi and return it to the Prince of Fu's household."

"As you command."

Zhu Youjian shook his head, set the matter aside, and returned to his memorials—

As if nothing of consequence had occurred.

Chapter 685 An Occasional Favor

After a meticulous repair, Dao Xuan Tianzun's silicone exterior was finally restored to flawless condition.

Once again dressed in his dashing warrior's outfit, a three-foot sword hanging at his waist, his complexion radiant and full of life, he wore a lazy, mischievous smile that could instantly spark wild "rich hero romance" fantasies in the minds of young women.

He stepped out of the Gao Family Village Women's Vocational School.

Ridiculously handsome.

He had barely taken a few steps when a young student hurried over, holding out a small cylindrical object with both hands.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, there's something I'd like you to take a look at."

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan paused, intrigued. "What is this?"

The girl's face glowed with excitement. "This is a concealed weapon the Saintess once mentioned—the Storm of Pear Blossom Needles. I was very interested, so I redesigned the spring mechanism and finally managed to make it."

Li Daoxuan froze for a moment.

The Storm of Pear Blossom Needles hadn't been Gao Yiye's original idea at all. It was something he had casually mentioned long ago while "touring the mortal world," walking hand-in-hand with her, recounting half-remembered martial arts tropes from another era.

He hadn't expected Gao Yiye to turn around and teach it to the vocational school students.

This... was genuinely interesting.

Li Daoxuan took the small cylinder, turning it over in his hands.

"There's a latch here," the student explained eagerly. "When you want to use it, load the needles through this opening. Pull this back to tension the spring."

"And then," she pointed, "press here."

Li Daoxuan followed her instructions.

Click—snap!

With a crisp metallic sound, a dense cluster of fine needles burst forth from the cylinder's mouth, shooting several meters away in an instant.

Li Daoxuan's eyes lit up.

"Excellent!" he praised. "This is very well done."

The student smiled shyly. "It really shouldn't be credited to me. It was the Saintess who came up with it."

"No, no, no," Li Daoxuan laughed, waving his hand. "The Saintess only provided the idea. You're the one who turned imagination into reality—and that's the hardest part. Anyone can dream of flying, but the one who actually builds an aircraft is the true genius."

The girl was overjoyed.

"I'll have San Shier issue you a Scientific Creativity Incentive Award later," Li Daoxuan added.

Her eyes sparkled. "Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"I'll borrow this Storm of Pear Blossom Needles for now," Li Daoxuan said cheerfully.

The student panicked a little. "Ah? This is just an experimental model. Dao Xuan Tianzun, please wait a bit—I can make a prettier version—"

"Bring me the refined one when it's ready," Li Daoxuan said, already tucking the cylinder into his belt. "I'll use this one first."

His mood value instantly skyrocketed by +999.

His flintlock marksmanship was atrocious. When playing Beachhead Landing 1632, he couldn't hit a single bandit—every shot neatly traced the enemy's silhouette instead. His swordsmanship was even worse, bordering on suicidal mutual destruction.

But now?

With the Storm of Pear Blossom Needles—

My combat power has exploded!

Still smiling, Li Daoxuan continued walking forward. As he reached the edge of Gao Family Village's commercial district, a woman's loud voice rang out:

"Everyone! Hurry to the Dao Xuan Tianzun Fabric Manor! New Dao Xuan Tianzun—style warrior outfits just arrived!"

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan's interest was instantly piqued.

He slipped into the crowd.

Outside the fabric manor, lines of young men and women stretched far down the street, all scrambling to buy the exact same warrior outfit Li Daoxuan was wearing now.

The style was unmistakable—straight out of Legend of the Condor Heroes (1983), the outfit Yang Kang wore when he first met Mu Nianci at the martial arts contest.

Previously, the Daoist robes worn by Dao Xuan Tianzun's statue were considered sacred attire—something mortals dared not imitate.

But now?

Dao Xuan Tianzun himself was wearing a warrior's outfit.

Mortal clothing.

And with the deity personally modeling it, the advertising effect within Gao Family Village was nothing short of catastrophic.

The women of Gao Family Village worked through the night, sewing nonstop. Long queues formed across the entire commercial district.

A young man burst out of the shop, laughing wildly.

"Hahaha! These clothes are so handsome! Way too handsome!"

Before he could finish celebrating, he looked up—

And saw the real Dao Xuan Tianzun standing right in front of him, wearing the exact same outfit, smiling faintly.

"Hey," Li Daoxuan said, amused. "Gao Sanwa. What are you doing here?"

The young man nearly jumped out of his skin. "Dao Xuan Tianzun! I—I was just—"

Li Daoxuan nodded approvingly. "Looks good. Very handsome."

That single sentence was enough.

The crowd erupted into cheers.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun didn't mind people wearing the same clothes as him, then what was there to hesitate about?

Even more people rushed to buy outfits.

Chun Hong, the fabric shop manager, smiled so hard her face practically blossomed like a flower.

Li Daoxuan looked over the lively, joyous streets of Gao Family Village—then remembered the bleak misery he had witnessed not long ago in Wenshui County, Henan.

He sighed softly.

"Everything about this era is wonderful," he murmured. "Except that the land is far too vast. Saving such a huge country... the road is long."

Just then, a convoy appeared in the distance.

The carts were tightly sealed, escorted by armed militia. One glance was enough to tell they came from the Gao Family Village Ordnance Bureau.

Li Daoxuan walked over to ask.

Sure enough—it was a shipment of paper cartridges for Chassepot rifles.

One hundred thousand rounds.

Their destination: Qichuan Ferry, then onward to places like Xiaolangdi and Wenshui County.

As the front lines expanded, the burden on logistics would only grow heavier.

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but mutter inwardly, How do those other transmigrators conquer nine-point-six million square kilometers in minutes? Do their soldiers not need ammunition shipped?

...They must be using cheat powers.

Well then.

I'll use one occasionally too.

Li Daoxuan laughed. "I'm in a good mood today. I'll help you with part of the journey."

The transport team: "???"

As his words fell, a colossal golden hand suddenly descended from the sky.

The villagers erupted in excitement.

"Wow! It's been ages since we've seen Dao Xuan Tianzun's great hand!"

The giant palm landed gently on the ground.

Li Daoxuan was the first to climb up and sit down, beckoning casually. "Bring the ammunition up."

The transport soldiers immediately understood.

Cart after cart was rolled onto the golden palm. Then the soldiers themselves climbed aboard, sitting in neat rows, faces glowing with excitement.

Once everyone was settled, the golden hand slowly rose into the air.

It accelerated.

The wind howled.

Another golden hand descended, cupping over them like a shield.

The speed increased further—

Whoosh!

In the blink of an eye, they reached Qichuan Ferry.

The golden hand dipped into the river, scooped up a large ship, and continued southeast. Moments later, Sanmenxia came into view.

This was the limit of Li Daoxuan's vision.

He gently set the ship and soldiers down by the riverbank.

"That's as far as I'll take you today."

The transport soldiers shouted excitedly, "We'll be bragging about this for the rest of our lives!"

Chapter 686 Three-Way Talks

Dao Xuan Tianzun once again arrived in Wenshui County alongside the transport ships.

After several days of nonstop labor, the battered county town had finally begun to regain its shape.

Brand-new districts rose block by block. Many of the buildings were constructed with cement—neat, clean, and astonishingly sturdy.

That said, the people of the Great Ming had never been fond of stark, bare cement walls. Quite a few residents, eager to show off their woodworking skills, added an outer layer of timber to their cement homes. Upon these wooden facades, they carved intricate patterns—flowers, clouds, beasts, and auspicious motifs—transforming cold gray structures into lively works of art.

It was craftsmanship worthy of a celestial empire.

As Li Daoxuan led the transport convoy through the city gates, Fan Shangzheng, Governor of Henan, hurried over with a smile. It turned out that the Governor, having little urgent business on hand, had been casually strolling near the gate when he happened to encounter Li Daoxuan.

"Hero Xiao," Fan Shangzheng greeted warmly, "your injuries—are they fully healed?"

"They're fine," Li Daoxuan replied. "All healed."

Fan Shangzheng let out a long sigh. "For the sake of the common people, you have provided funds, contributed effort, personally entered battle, and even suffered injuries. Truly... I scarcely know how to express my gratitude."

"It's nothing, really nothing," Li Daoxuan waved it off. "But tell me—what has happened in Huaiqing Prefecture since I left?"

At this, Fan Shangzheng's expression brightened considerably.

"The siege of Huaiqing Prefecture has finally been lifted!" he announced.

"Supreme Commander Zhang Zongheng of Xuanfu and Datong, Zhang Fengyi leading the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers, You Shilu of Shanxi, and Vice Commander Zuo Liangyu—multiple armies converged to relieve the city. The rebels did not dare resist and fled east into the Taihang Mountains."

"They escaped again," Li Daoxuan murmured.

Privately, he reflected: My interference altered some details. The rebels never crossed the Yellow River to ravage Henan... but in the end, they still retreated into the Taihang Mountains.

The shape of history had bent—but it had not broken.

Once entrenched in the Taihang Mountains, some rebel bands would inevitably slip through into Hebei Province.

And Hebei lay dangerously close to the capital.

If rebels appeared there, the shock would ripple straight into Beijing. The Ming court would respond with even harsher measures.

Measures that, in the end, would still fail.

No matter how ferocious the court became, the rebels would only grow fiercer in return.

Ultimately, the task of truly dealing with them would still fall upon Gao Family Village.

Just then, a troop of horsemen thundered into the county town.

The leader wore an embroidered flying-fish robe—unmistakably a Jinyiwei officer. Upon spotting Fan Shangzheng at the city gate, he dismounted swiftly and cupped his fists.

"Governor," he announced, "I bear an imperial verbal decree, by His Majesty's command."

Fan Shangzheng was startled.

A verbal decree delivered by Jinyiwei? That was highly unusual.

"Let us speak somewhere private," he said at once.

The two entered a nearby building.

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow. He quietly moved aside and released a palm-sized reconnaissance avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun, instructing it to follow them inside.

"What are His Majesty's commands?" Fan Shangzheng asked.

The Jinyiwei replied, "The Prince of Fu has submitted a letter to His Majesty, lamenting the situation at Xiaolangdi."

"Xiaolangdi again?" Fan Shangzheng blurted out.

"The Emperor said," the Jinyiwei continued, "'Such trivial matters would normally not be worth mentioning. However, since this concerns the dignity of the imperial family, it cannot be ignored. No formal edict will be issued. Instead, I am to verbally instruct the Governor to reclaim Xiaolangdi and return it to the Prince of Fu's estate, so as to silence further lamentations.'"

Fan Shangzheng didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"The Prince of Fu... lamenting?" he muttered.

The Jinyiwei sighed. "His Majesty is also... quite troubled."

Listening in, the tiny Dao Xuan Tianzun avatar nearly laughed out loud.

This felt exactly like a street thug losing territory and immediately running to complain to his boss.

Fan Shangzheng exhaled deeply. "Please convey this to His Majesty," he said slowly. "Xiaolangdi is simply beyond my ability to reclaim."

"And why is that?" the Jinyiwei asked.

"Since the time of the Yellow Turban Rebellion," Fan Shangzheng explained, "Xiaolangdi has been plagued by river bandits. For over a thousand years, it has never truly been pacified. Only recently did Bai Yuan arrive—exterminate the bandits, resettle the populace, and restore order."

He paused, then added frankly, "If Xiaolangdi were handed back to the Prince of Fu's estate... forgive my bluntness, but what ability does that estate have to govern it?"

The Jinyiwei fell silent.

"The Prince of Fu's estate is notorious for extortion," Fan Shangzheng continued. "The common people would flee. Xiaolangdi would once again become a den of bandits. This would benefit neither the court nor the people."

The Jinyiwei sighed, half amused, half helpless. "Your reasoning is sound. But what, then, are we to do about the Prince of Fu's complaints? Governor, you must share some of His Majesty's burdens."

Fan Shangzheng, as a literati official, nearly blurted out Let that fool cry himself hoarse!—but such words could never be spoken aloud.

He could only reply, "Very well. I will consider another form of compensation for the Prince of Fu's estate."

"I will report this to His Majesty," the Jinyiwei said.

He came swiftly—and left just as swiftly.

Fan Shangzheng stepped out of the building and stared at the drifting clouds above.

"A thorny matter indeed," he sighed.

Li Daoxuan emerged nearby, feigning ignorance. "Governor, what troubles you so?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," Fan Shangzheng waved it off.

Then he changed the subject. "Hero Xiao, you and Mister Bai Yuan seem to be quite close?"

"Yes," Li Daoxuan replied. "We're on very good terms."

"Then... I have an impertinent request," Fan Shangzheng said carefully.

Li Daoxuan already knew what was coming.

"Regarding Xiaolangdi," Fan Shangzheng continued, "would it be possible to invite Mister Bai Yuan for a discussion? A proper meeting. I have no intention of forcing him to return Xiaolangdi to the Prince of Fu's estate. Nor do I believe the estate deserves even a few hundred taels of rent."

He sighed. "But imperial dignity cannot be ignored entirely. This matter must be resolved, one way or another."

He wasn't wrong.

A place as vast and strategically vital as Xiaolangdi could not simply belong to whoever held it by force—no dynasty could tolerate that forever.

Gao Family Village needed a legitimate justification to remain there.

Li Daoxuan smiled. "Very well. I'll agree on my brother Bai Yuan's behalf. Let us arrange a meeting—some tea, calm discussion, and clear terms."

Fan Shangzheng immediately sent servants to contact representatives of the Prince of Fu's estate.

As for Li Daoxuan?

With a simple co-sensing leap, his consciousness transferred to the golden-threaded Dao Xuan Tianzun avatar resting on Bai Yuan's chest. A few words later, the matter was settled.

Three days later.

A warm winter sun shone brightly, lifting spirits.

Li Daoxuan strolled leisurely into Luoyang, the so-called Heart of the World.

Puzhou had once been hailed as the "Center of the World," and Luoyang now claimed the title of its "Heart." Similar names—yet each represented a different age, a different glory, a different turn of history.

At Luoyang's largest tavern, Fan Shangzheng had arranged a banquet.

The stage was set.

The three-way talks were about to begin.

Chapter 687 Establishing Cooperation

Li Daoxuan had just reached the entrance of the restaurant when he ran into Bai Yuan.

Bai Yuan wore immaculate white robes, looking every bit the refined gentleman—no, a refined middle-aged gentleman—yet without the slightest hint of the greasy air that often plagued men of status. The moment he saw Li Daoxuan, he executed an exaggerated formal bow. Only after completing the ritual did he lean in and lower his voice, chuckling softly.

"So," he asked, "what's our play today against the Prince of Fu's Residence?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"The same approach we used on the Prince of Qin's Residence. These princes indulge themselves, hoard vast lands and social resources, and contribute nothing. Until the day we completely sever ties with the imperial court, they remain useful tools."

Bai Yuan's eyes lit up with instant understanding.

"Then it's time we extended our reach to Luoyang."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Exactly. We'll just replicate the Xi'an strategy."

Bai Yuan's expression immediately steadied, confidence settling in.

The two ascended to a private room on the second floor. Fan Shangzheng was already seated inside, and beside him sat Eunuch Zheng—an old acquaintance from previous encounters.

The moment Eunuch Zheng saw Bai Yuan and Li Daoxuan, he let out a disdainful hmph, lifting his chin and angling his nostrils toward the ceiling, radiating imperial arrogance.

Bai Yuan chuckled.

"So the Prince of Fu's Residence has sent Eunuch Zheng once again to mediate?"

Eunuch Zheng sneered.

"How could His Highness, with his exalted status, personally concern himself with such a trivial matter as Xiaolangdi?"

Bai Yuan showed no sign of irritation. Having grown up in a rigidly hierarchical society, he was more than accustomed to this tone. He calmly took his seat.

"Eunuch Zheng," he said evenly, "I'm here not out of respect for you, but for Governor Fan."

Eunuch Zheng bristled.

"You—!"

"Me," Bai Yuan replied calmly.

The room fell into an awkward silence.

Fan Shangzheng hurriedly stepped in to smooth things over.

"Gentlemen, let us not waste time on trivialities. Let us discuss the matter at hand."

He turned toward Eunuch Zheng.

"I have verified the records. Xiaolangdi is indeed part of the Prince of Fu's fief. By law, it should be returned to the Prince of Fu's Residence."

At these words, Eunuch Zheng's face lit up with unconcealed delight.

But Fan Shangzheng immediately continued.

"However, when Xiaolangdi was under the Prince of Fu's administration, it was overrun by river bandits. Merchants were robbed, trade was crippled, and the Yellow River routes suffered endlessly. It was only after Mister Bai took charge that order was restored."

He fixed Eunuch Zheng with a steady gaze.

"If we return Xiaolangdi now, how can you guarantee that the bandits will not return?"

Eunuch Zheng protested hastily,

"That... that won't happen! This time, the Prince of Fu's Residence will manage it properly."

"Will it?" Fan Shangzheng pressed. "Can you guarantee it?"

Eunuch Zheng's confidence visibly faltered.

"Well... that is to say..."

Fan Shangzheng continued calmly,

"Rather than risking another collapse, wouldn't it be far better to leave Xiaolangdi in Mister Bai's hands, allowing him to manage it on your behalf? Would that not be ideal for everyone?"

At this point, Eunuch Zheng finally realized that the Governor was openly siding with Bai Yuan.

Scholar-officials had always enjoyed suppressing imperial princes. And what could the princes do in response? Cry to the Emperor? Start a rebellion?

He stiffened, struggling internally, before finally saying,

"Our Prince of Fu's Residence never intended to reclaim Xiaolangdi itself. We merely wished to collect a few hundred taels of silver in rent. But alas... even that modest sum, they refused to pay."

Fan Shangzheng immediately countered.

"When has Xiaolangdi ever paid rent to the Prince of Fu's Residence? For generations it was occupied by bandits. Furthermore, Mister Bai has neither farmed nor conducted commercial operations there. He merely built villages to resettle refugees. He hasn't collected a single copper from them. Where, then, would the rent come from?"

This time, the argument struck home.

Bai Yuan had earned nothing from Xiaolangdi. Demanding rent was nothing more than an attempt to squeeze blood from stone.

If the Prince of Fu's Residence insisted, Bai Yuan could simply abandon the area—and the refugees would once again scatter, or worse, become bandits themselves. Xiaolangdi would revert to chaos.

Eunuch Zheng was well aware of this. He had simply hoped no one would say it out loud.

At last, he spread his hands helplessly.

"Very well. Then how do you propose we resolve this?"

Bai Yuan opened his folding fan with a crisp snap.

"This matter is actually quite simple. I have no desire to offend the Prince of Fu's Residence. On the contrary—I sincerely wish to be on friendly terms."

Eunuch Zheng snorted.

"Hard to tell."

Bai Yuan smiled.

"I am skilled in business. How about this: I assist the Prince of Fu's Residence in managing certain enterprises. I guarantee your profits will increase dramatically. At that point, we won't be talking about a few hundred taels—but truly enormous sums."

At the mention of profit, Eunuch Zheng's ears perked up.

Princes had no political future. Their greatest pleasure lay in accumulating wealth. The Prince of Fu was no exception.

If Bai Yuan truly had the ability to generate massive profits, then Xiaolangdi suddenly seemed... irrelevant.

There were no eternal enemies in this world.

Only eternal interests.

Eunuch Zheng's tone softened immediately.

"Our Prince's Residence is certainly interested in such matters. Please, elaborate."

Bai Yuan nodded.

"I have business dealings with the Prince of Qin's Residence in Xi'an. I've helped them earn a considerable amount. If you wish, you may send a letter and verify this directly."

Eunuch Zheng gasped softly.

"Ah!"

That sealed it.

No one would fabricate a lie that could be verified with a single letter. If Bai Yuan had truly enriched the Prince of Qin's Residence, then the Prince of Fu could not afford to lag behind.

Bai Yuan continued,

"Seventy li southwest of Luoyang lies the Yiluo Coal Mine. That belongs to the Prince of Fu's family, correct?"

"Yes," Eunuch Zheng replied. "But it flooded some time ago. The shafts are filled with water and silt, and production has halted. Why bring this up?"

Bai Yuan smiled.

"Let our cooperation begin there. I can send people to clear the shafts and resume mining. Profits will be split—seventy percent to us, thirty to the Prince of Fu's Residence."

Eunuch Zheng scoffed.

"That's His Highness's coal mine! You take it for free and still demand seventy percent? Are you trying to insult us?"

Bai Yuan replied calmly,

"That coal mine is just like Xiaolangdi. Without us, you cannot use it. Do you have the ability to drain the water and clear the silt? If not, you won't earn even one percent—let alone thirty."

Eunuch Zheng choked.

"Uh—"

Fan Shangzheng seized the moment.

"He has a point. While the Yiluo Coal Mine isn't large, it supplies much of Luoyang's coal. Since the flood in early summer, production has halted for nearly half a year. Winter has arrived, and coal is in dire shortage."

Eunuch Zheng grew visibly uncomfortable.

The concubines within the Prince of Fu's Residence relied on charcoal braziers for warmth. With coal scarce, tempers were flaring—and when concubines were displeased, the eunuchs suffered first.

Chapter 688 The Contract System

Zheng Gonggong hesitated.

"Do you truly have a way to restore the coal mines and resume production?"

Bai Yuan replied calmly, "If I can pacify Xiaolangdi's river pirates, dealing with a few coal mines should hardly be a problem."

Zheng Gonggong frowned.

"Even so... a seventy–thirty split still feels a little too stingy."

Bai Yuan laughed softly.

"I can guarantee that even with a seventy–thirty division, the Prince of Fu's Residence will earn just as much as it did before the disaster."

"Oh?" Zheng Gonggong's brows rose. "You're saying that if the coal mine is handed to you, its profits might exceed pre-flood levels?"

Now that was interesting.

Bai Yuan continued smoothly,

"If you remain uncertain, we can adopt a different arrangement altogether. Lease the coal mine to me. I'll pay the Prince of Fu's Residence a fixed amount every month—profit or loss irrelevant. For simplicity, we can set that amount equal to the mine's output before the flood."

Zheng Gonggong pondered in silence.

That mine is half-ruined, he thought. The shafts are flooded, clogged with silt. Draining them alone would take months, perhaps years. Even if restored, the output wouldn't amount to much. A profit-sharing deal carries risk. But a fixed lease? That's guaranteed silver with zero responsibility.

With a decisive clap of his hands, Zheng Gonggong declared,

"I believe the latter option is far superior!"

Bai Yuan celebrated inwardly.

Watching from the side, Li Daoxuan also smiled faintly.

Excellent.

The contract system was precisely what Gao Family Village wanted. Once the Prince of Fu's Residence was locked into a fixed payment, they would never be able to demand more—while Gao Family Village could endlessly expand output through technological upgrades.

By the time the truth became obvious, the Prince of Fu's Residence would be choking on regret.

To ensure that regret arrived on schedule, the contract had to be airtight.

Bai Yuan suddenly frowned, adopting a hesitant expression.

"Ah... this is awkward. I'm suddenly feeling a little uncertain about the second option. Perhaps we should return to the seventy–thirty split?"

Zheng Gonggong's face darkened instantly.

"Absolutely not! It's already settled! How can you go back on your word? That would be utterly unreliable. It must be the second option—without question!"

"Ah? Well... this... sigh... very well," Bai Yuan said reluctantly.

He looked like a man being dragged into a disadvantageous agreement, the very image of someone liable to renege.

Alarm bells rang in Zheng Gonggong's head.

He immediately turned to Fan Shangzheng.

"Governor, you've witnessed our agreement. What if, in a few days, Mister Bai changes his mind? Without a written contract, it would be impossible to arbitrate. I propose we draft a binding agreement, with you serving as witness."

Bai Yuan hesitated again.

"This... such a rigid contract, isn't that a bit excessive?"

"Not at all," Zheng Gonggong said firmly. "A contract should be rigid."

"Oh... this... this..." Bai Yuan stammered, his resistance visibly weakening.

Fan Shangzheng finally lost patience.

"Mister Bai, I cannot side with you on this matter. You should sign. This is beneficial to all parties. The contract will be made in duplicate, and I will personally sign and notarize it."

With the governor himself offering notarization, there was nothing left to say.

Sign it.

Bai Yuan lowered his head and began drafting the agreement.

His calligraphy was refined and elegant, every stroke clean and decisive, leaving no room for ambiguity or later manipulation. Of the gentleman's Six Arts, he considered calligraphy indispensable—and it showed.

Before long, the contract was complete.

The Yiluo Coal Mine was leased to Bai Yuan for ten years. During this period, he would pay the Prince of Fu's Residence a fixed lease fee, equal to the mine's pre-flood output.

For ten years:

Bai Yuan could not suspend payments, regardless of losses.

The Prince of Fu's Residence could not demand higher fees, regardless of profits.

After ten years, renegotiation would be permitted.

Both parties signed and affixed their thumbprints. Then Fan Shangzheng added his own signature and seal in the notary section.

The contract was sealed.

Bai Yuan's heart surged with satisfaction. He glanced sideways at Li Daoxuan, eyes practically dancing. Li Daoxuan returned a look that clearly said: Beautifully executed.

Zheng Gonggong stood to leave.

Just as he turned, Bai Yuan spoke up.

"Gonggong, there's no need to rush. We've only settled one coal mine. There are other matters worth discussing."

Zheng Gonggong paused.

"What else could there be?"

"Well," Bai Yuan said casually, "the Prince of Fu's Residence also owns an iron mine in Xin'an County, west of Luoyang, does it not?"

"You want the iron mine as well?" Zheng Gonggong exclaimed.

Bai Yuan smiled.

"With coal comes iron. The two are inseparable."

Zheng Gonggong laughed silently to himself.

Excellent.

We've secured guaranteed income, and now you're worried we haven't earned enough yet? That iron mine is flooded and worthless anyway. If you want it, take it all.

He spread his hands magnanimously.

"Very well. Let's include the iron mine in the contract as well."

Six hours later...

Zheng Gonggong returned to the Prince of Fu's Residence, arms wrapped around a thick stack of contracts.

Prince Zhu Changxun was, as usual, reveling among his concubines.

Zheng Gonggong laid the documents before him, beaming.

"Your Highness," he announced gleefully, "we've encountered a monumental fool!"

"Oh?" Zhu Changxun murmured distractedly.

Zheng Gonggong presented a list.

"These are all the properties flooded by the Yellow River in June. They were utterly worthless—incapable of producing a single copper. Yet a colossal fool has contracted all of them. From now on, the Residence will receive several thousand taels annually!"

Zhu Changxun skimmed a contract and laughed.

"There really are such idiots in the world. Still, it's always pleasant when others labor to enrich our family."

"This servant showed some foresight," Zheng Gonggong added proudly. "The term is ten years. If that fellow truly restores these properties, we'll simply reclaim everything once the contract expires."

"Well done," Zhu Changxun praised. "Keep a discreet eye on him. I want to see how this Mister Bai operates."

"This servant will monitor him closely."

As a eunuch, Zheng Gonggong was meticulous where his master's interests were concerned.

His primary target of observation was the Yiluo Coal Mine.

The pits were still flooded. Draining them alone would be an immense undertaking. Zheng Gonggong was eager to see how many laborers Bai Yuan would recruit—and how many buckets they'd need to bail water by hand.

He stationed men nearby and ordered daily reports.

He didn't have to wait long.

Three days later, a subordinate rushed back, breathless.

"Gonggong! Bai Yuan is preparing to drain the mine shafts!"

Chapter 689 Don't Tell the Prince

Upon receiving the report, Eunuch Zheng immediately dropped everything he was doing. He hastily gathered a few trusted subordinates, mounted swift horses, and galloped straight for the Yiluo Coal Mine.

The mine lay over seventy li from Luoyang. Even at full speed, the journey consumed a fair amount of time. By the time Eunuch Zheng arrived, Bai Yuan's people had already sealed off the area. The mine entrance was surrounded by multiple layers of guards, posted with unmistakable seriousness.

It was clear they were preparing for something big.

No sooner had Eunuch Zheng approached than a guard stepped forward and blocked his path.

"Danger zone," the man said curtly. "Unauthorized personnel are forbidden beyond this point."

Eunuch Zheng snorted.

"I represent the Prince of Fu's Residence! This entire mine is leased from us. How dare you call me unauthorized?"

The guard looked him up and down, eyes filled with suspicion.

"You look like a shifty, middle-aged fat man. Not like anyone important. I don't believe you're from the Prince of Fu's Residence."

Eunuch Zheng exploded on the spot.

"Outrageous! I am Eunuch Zheng of the Prince of Fu's Residence! Go—inform Bai Yuan immediately, or you'll regret offending me!"

The guard appeared startled, muttered an apology, and scurried off inside.

A moment later, Bai Yuan emerged with a warm, genial smile.

"Ah! Eunuch Zheng! What an honor. Please forgive the lack of reception. That guard is merely a temporary worker and failed to recognize you."

Eunuch Zheng had never heard the phrase "temporary worker" before. It sounded humble, even pitiful, and his anger dissipated instantly.

He had no idea that Gao Family Village had deliberately assigned an impudent greenhorn to guard the perimeter—specifically to knock him down a peg.

Bai Yuan led him inside.

Before Eunuch Zheng stood a bustling scene. Workers crowded the mine entrance, and in their midst loomed a colossal contraption—an iron beast of unfamiliar shape.

A boiler sat at its heart. Thick pipes extended forward from it like the limbs of some mechanical monster.

The workers shouted in unison.

"One! Two! Three—heave!"

"One! Two! Three—heave!"

Together, they lifted a long iron pipe and slowly lowered it into the yawning black mouth of the mine shaft.

The shaft swallowed the pipe whole. Its depths were pitch-black, unfathomable.

Eunuch Zheng had no intention of peering inside such a filthy place. He stood at a distance, watching as the men disappeared into the shaft and reemerged some time later.

"Done!" someone shouted. "The pipe is fully submerged!"

Bai Yuan raised his hand.

"Begin pumping."

With a thunderous roar, the boiler came to life. Steam hissed violently. Gears spun, wheels turned—and suddenly—

Whoosh!

A thick torrent of murky yellow water blasted out of the pipe and poured into a pre-dug drainage channel, rushing away in a steady stream.

The workers erupted in cheers.

"The water's coming out!"

"It's working!"

Eunuch Zheng stood frozen.

"Huh?"

Though he had never seen such a machine before, he instantly grasped what it did.

This thing... was extracting water.

And since the pipe reached deep into the mine shaft—

It was draining the flooded mine.

His jaw slackened.

He had imagined hundreds of laborers hauling buckets day and night, bailing water by hand for weeks, even months. He never would have dreamed Bai Yuan possessed such a miraculous device.

That thick pipe gushed endlessly.

At this rate, the shaft would be dry in mere days.

Don't panic, Eunuch Zheng told himself.

Even if the water is drained efficiently, it only restores the mine to its former condition. The output will remain the same. The Prince's Residence still gets its fixed lease. No loss. No loss at all.

Several days later...

Another report reached Eunuch Zheng.

"Eunuch," a subordinate said, "Bai Yuan is doing something strange again at the mine."

Eunuch Zheng frowned.

"Again?"

He mounted his horse and rushed out once more.

After enduring another humiliating encounter with yet another "temporary worker," he finally gained entry.

This time, he saw workers laying down narrow iron tracks—single rails fixed onto wooden sleepers—stretching from the mine entrance straight into the depths below.

On the track sat a small cart, secured by an iron chain.

A worker gave it a push.

The cart rolled forward slowly—then suddenly accelerated.

Whoosh!

It vanished into the darkness.

Eunuch Zheng, still unwilling to enter the mine, waited anxiously outside.

Before long—

Ding!

A small bell rang.

"Ready!" someone shouted. "Pull it up!"

The boiler roared again. The same machine that had drained water now operated as a winch. The chain tightened, rattling loudly.

Moments later, the cart emerged.

It was full.

Coal piled high.

"Unload!"

A worker hooked the cart's side panel. With a sharp pull, it swung open, and the coal spilled cleanly onto the ground.

The panel was resecured. The cart was shoved forward.

Whoosh!

Gone again.

Eunuch Zheng was struck dumb.

He finally understood.

Miners no longer needed to carry coal out on their backs.

They simply dug, loaded the carts, and let gravity and machinery do the rest.

This wasn't just an improvement.

This was revolutionary.

The output wouldn't double.

It wouldn't triple.

It could be ten times. Twenty times. Thirty times!

If only he had known...

If only he had insisted on profit-sharing instead of a fixed lease—

Aaaaah!

Eunuch Zheng clutched his chest, nearly unable to breathe.

Suddenly, he turned to his subordinates, face grim.

"Listen carefully," he said in a low voice.

"The Prince must never be told about this."

Every man present froze—then nodded vigorously.

As long as the Prince remained ignorant, he would believe the lease fees were an incredible gain.

Thus, everyone would "profit."

No one would suffer a loss.

His confidants swore immediately.

"Rest assured, Eunuch. We will die before speaking a word."

Eunuch Zheng nodded solemnly.

"Good. Good. I have devoted my life to serving His Highness with utmost loyalty. A filthy mine like this is beneath the Prince's dignity. I shall... oversee it on his behalf."

His subordinates bowed.

"Eunuch Zheng speaks with great righteousness."

Chapter 690 The White Pole Soldiers Return

It was the twelfth month of winter, in the fifth year of the Chongzhen Emperor's reign—

the year 1632.

Cold.

Bitter, bone-piercing cold.

For reasons no one could explain, the past few winters had grown increasingly brutal, colder than any living person could remember. Even the old men, who loved to boast about having "seen everything," could only shake their heads and fall silent.

For the poor, winter had always been a trial.

But this year, it was an execution.

Those without proper clothing shivered through the nights. Those without food endured hunger layered atop frost. In previous winters, families with a little spare silver could still scrape together enough to buy coal, light a small brazier, and survive.

This year?

The Yellow River had burst its banks at Mengjin County. Floodwaters drowned half the Henan plain. Coal mines around Luoyang were submerged one after another, production completely halted.

No coal.

No fire.

The common folk could only grit their teeth and endure.

But today—

The freezing despair ended.

More than a dozen large carts rolled into Luoyang City in succession, creaking beneath their heavy loads. They passed through the gates and stopped before the government-run coal depot.

Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng personally stepped forward and announced loudly:

"Coal is now available for purchase once more!"

The city exploded.

Cheers rippled outward like a wave. Crowds surged toward the depot from every direction. Even those too poor to buy rushed over—if only to shout, to laugh, to feel hope again. Those with modest means shoved forward eagerly, clutching copper coins with reddened hands.

At a distant street corner, Eunuch Zheng stood quietly, hidden among the shadows.

His expression was... complicated.

Joy.

Relief.

Regret.

And a sharp, gnawing pain in his heart.

Meanwhile, Fan Shangzheng gazed upon the bustling crowd, his smile widening by the second.

Political achievement, he thought.

Pure, unadulterated political achievement.

At that moment, he noticed someone approaching.

Li Daoxuan.

The Mysterious Hero of the Central Plains smiled and waved.

"Governor Fan, you seem in excellent spirits."

Fan Shangzheng laughed heartily.

"How could I not be? It's all thanks to the Mysterious Hero—mediating between Bai Yuan and the Prince of Fu's estate, resolving disputes, restoring coal supplies, and incidentally saving the people of Henan from freezing to death."

He lowered his voice slightly, pleased.

"I am already drafting a memorial to the court, praising the Prince of Fu's estate and the gentry for working together to relieve disaster victims."

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"Excellent. A model for all under heaven to follow."

Fan Shangzheng nodded solemnly.

"All under heaven should follow it."

Just then, a rider galloped in at full speed, dust flying.

"Governor!" the messenger shouted. "A letter from His Majesty!"

"A letter?" Fan Shangzheng frowned slightly. "Not an imperial decree?"

"Yes—just a letter."

Fan Shangzheng accepted it and read quickly.

The opening lines rebuked him harshly for allowing Shanxi rebels to slip into Henan, causing chaos in several counties. Then came praise for his success in capturing the Eight Great Kings of the Southern Camp and sending them to the capital.

Merits and demerits canceled each other out.

No reward.

No punishment.

Fan Shangzheng sighed and handed the letter to Li Daoxuan.

"Without the Mysterious Hero's help this time, my official hat would already be gone."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

History has shifted again, he thought.

In the original timeline, Fan Shangzheng had failed disastrously. Rebels ravaged Henan. He was dismissed and sent home. In the sixth year of Chongzhen's reign, Xuan Mo would replace him—only to fail even faster.

But now?

Zhu Youjian had no intention of removing Fan Shangzheng.

He might even remain in office for some time.

Fan Shangzheng leaned closer, lowering his voice.

"I'll only say this to you. His Majesty... has grown increasingly extreme. Civil governance means little to him now. Suppress bandits, and he smiles. Fail at it, and no merit can save you."

He sighed bitterly.

"Sometimes, I truly no longer know what a civil official's duty even is."

Li Daoxuan shook his head, smiling without warmth.

At that moment, another rider arrived.

"Governor! Zhang Fengyi's Sichuan White Pole Soldiers have reached Wenshui County. They are preparing to enter the Taihang Mountains to suppress bandits."

Li Daoxuan's expression shifted.

Zhang Fengyi...

He frowned inwardly.

Ma Xianglin isn't with her? This feels familiar... too familiar.

He had read this passage once. Long ago. The details were blurry—but his instincts screamed warning.

"Governor," Li Daoxuan said calmly, "I have urgent matters to attend to. I'll take my leave."

Fan Shangzheng clasped his hands.

"Mysterious Hero, please."

Li Daoxuan entered the coal depot, now bustling with Gao Family Village personnel. Officially government-run—practically Gao-controlled.

He sat down and gave a simple order:

"Immediately transfer this body to Wenshui County."

His consciousness withdrew.

Outside the box, Li Daoxuan opened his computer and began searching.

The results confirmed his fear.

In the fifth year of Chongzhen's reign, Ma Xianglin—the One-Eyed Horse—and his wife Zhang Fengyi had split forces. Records said Ma "returned south," though no one knew what that truly meant.

Zhang Fengyi stayed.

Two to three months later—

She was surrounded and killed in battle at Houjia Village.

Where was Houjia Village?

Li Daoxuan searched.

Too many.

Houjia Village in Hebei.

Houjia Village in Shanxi.

Houjia Village in Henan.

Historical records contradicted each other completely.

He closed the map.

I'll find her first, he decided.

Then I'll worry about where she dies.

Wenshui County.

Zhang Fengyi arrived at the county seat leading one thousand Sichuan White Pole Soldiers.

This was not her intended route. She had planned to move north toward Huaiqing Prefecture, but rebel bands scattered like ghosts—appearing in Xiuwu one day, Wushe the next, then vanishing again.

Chasing them had dragged her straight into Wenshui.

To find a county that still stood intact amid the ruins was a rare comfort.

And at the city gate, she noticed something even more heartening.

The county magistrate, Chen Yuanbo, wore a familiar silver-embroidered emblem on his chest.

She remembered it.

Back in Puzhou, Xing Honglang's reinforcements had worn the same mark.

She didn't know which deity it represented—but it certainly wasn't an evil one.

"Magistrate Chen," Zhang Fengyi greeted with a clasped fist.

"This general has led the White Pole Soldiers in pursuit of Shanxi bandits. Men and horses are exhausted. We request temporary lodging. We will depart early tomorrow morning. I guarantee strict discipline."

Chen Yuanbo smiled sincerely.

"General Zhang, your reputation precedes you. You are most welcome."

As he turned to make arrangements, the Silver-Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest spoke softly:

"When does Zhang Fengyi plan to leave?"

Chen Yuanbo replied, "Early tomorrow morning."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun fell silent for a moment, then said calmly:

"Tomorrow morning? Good. That's enough time."