

Great Ming 691

Chapter 691: I'll Go With You

In the dead of night, test-02—the small boat carrying the Dao Xuan Tianzun—finally reached the shores of Wenshui County.

Li Daoxuan disembarked, transferred into a specially reinforced, iron-framed carriage, and continued onward without pause. By the time the faintest trace of dawn bled into the eastern sky, he had arrived outside Wenshui County's gates.

The gates were already open.

The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers stood in formation, armor adjusted, weapons secured—clearly prepared to depart at first light.

This single night in Wenshui County had been the most comfortable rest they'd enjoyed in months.

They had slept securely. They had eaten well. County Magistrate Chen had even prepared delicacies—actual treats, not battlefield rations scraped together from desperation.

The feeling reminded them of that time by the Yellow River, when they had waited alongside Xing Honglang's troops for transport ships to arrive, cooking lunch meat together while laughing like normal people instead of soldiers trudging toward death.

They loved these people.

The ones who wore the Dao Xuan Tianzun's image embroidered on their chests.

Everyone here was pleasant. Capable. Dependable. As if misfortune itself avoided them.

But now—

They had to leave.

The moment they stepped out of Wenshui County, they would once again be marching straight into the jaws of ferocious rebel bands. It felt like walking out of heaven and plunging back into hell.

Zhang Fengyi stood at the city gate, gazing one last time at the warm, intact little county town behind her.

She raised her hand, preparing to signal departure.

Just then—

A specially reinforced carriage thundered toward the gate at full speed.

Before anyone could react, a tall, handsome young man leaped down from it, grinning broadly as he waved.

"Hey, General Zhang! How have you been?"

Zhang Fengyi turned sharply.

Her gaze locked onto his face—and froze.

For a split second, she was stunned.

That face...

Where had she seen it?

Then it hit her.

Xing Honglang's chest.

County Magistrate Chen's chest.

The chests of every official and soldier who had ever helped her White Pole Soldiers.

They all bore an embroidered image of this very face.

"You... you are..." Zhang Fengyi hesitated, then realized something awkward—she didn't even know his name.

Yet somehow, instinct told her this man stood at the center of an enormous force.

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"My name is Li Daoxuan. But lately, I've been using the alias Xiao Qiushui to stir up a bit of trouble. General Zhang, please don't reveal my true name. I only tell it to those I believe I can befriend."

Zhang Fengyi: "..."

The air grew momentarily awkward.

She could only force a polite smile.

"Li... ahem. Mister Xiao, then. It's an honor. Only now do I realize that the one who aided my Sichuan White Pole Soldiers time and again... was you."

Li Daoxuan waved it off.

"It was nothing."

Outwardly calm, inwardly he was thinking furiously.

How do I save her?

Warn her about Houjia Village?

Impossible.

He couldn't even determine which Houjia Village it was. Even if he told her to avoid it, she could march into some nameless hamlet, only to realize—too late—that this was Houjia Village, already surrounded.

Revealing vague heavenly secrets wouldn't save her. It would only confuse her.

What about persuading her to withdraw to Sichuan?

No.

She wouldn't listen—not without exposing the truth of her death. And if she feared death enough to retreat, the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers would never have earned their place in history.

Zhang Fengyi was not that kind of general.

After a long internal struggle, Li Daoxuan finally reached a conclusion.

"General Zhang," he said solemnly, "I have a small request."

She looked at him attentively.

"The rise and fall of the realm concerns every common person. Suppressing rebels, stabilizing the people—this is not merely a general's responsibility."

He took a step forward.

"I wish to join your army. As a single soldier. I will march with you and help track down these rebels."

Zhang Fengyi was stunned.

Was he serious?

Everyone wearing the Dao Xuan Tianzun's emblem clearly followed him. He was their leader—an existence standing far above ordinary commanders.

For such a person to join her ranks as a mere foot soldier?

Who would dare accept that?

Yet his tone was unwavering.

She nodded slowly.

"With Mister Xiao's ability, serving as my army's strategist would already be more than enough."

It was acceptance.

Li Daoxuan clasped his hands.

"Then I'll impose upon you."

At that moment, Chen Yuanbo leaned over and whispered,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, how many men do you wish to bring?"

Li Daoxuan had originally planned to go alone—but quickly dismissed the idea.

Once his consciousness shifted perspectives, his physical body would be left vacant. test-02 standing motionless in the middle of a marching army would be... problematic.

"Select fifty men," he whispered. "Their main task is to drive the carriage and guard my body when my consciousness drifts."

Chen Yuanbo nodded.

"I'll arrange it immediately."

Soon, the unit was assembled.

Fifty men wasn't many.

But fifty Chassepot rifles?

That was a frightening amount of firepower.

The problem was logistics. Once they marched with the White Pole Soldiers, they would be cut off from Gao Family Village's supply lines. Every bullet fired would be irreplaceable.

Unless absolutely necessary, they could not fight.

Chen Yuanbo prepared additional provisions.

Since the Dao Xuan Tianzun himself was accompanying the White Pole Soldiers, Gao Family Village spared no expense. Portable rations were distributed generously. Every soldier received several bamboo boxes of lunch meat.

The only downside—

The famously swift Sichuan White Pole Soldiers now advanced... rather slowly.

Still, morale was sky-high.

Who wouldn't be happy marching with food piled on their backs?

Thus, a peculiar force of one thousand and fifty men departed Wenshui County, heading toward Xiuwu County.

Li Daoxuan remained hidden inside the carriage, not showing himself.

Zhang Fengyi was curious—but as a female general, she refrained from initiating repeated contact with a young man, avoiding awkwardness.

After an unknown stretch of travel, a ruined county town appeared ahead.

Xiuwu County.

Months earlier, Li Zicheng had captured it before advancing on Huaiqing Prefecture—a move that had seemed reckless, yet ultimately opened new paths for the rebels.

Xiuwu County had suffered even worse devastation than Wenshui.

County Magistrate Liu Fengxiang had died in battle. The populace was nearly exterminated. Buildings lay in blackened ruins.

A scout reported from the vanguard:

"Sichuan Regional Commander Deng Qi is stationed here."

Deng Qi?

Li Daoxuan recalled the name vaguely—a late-Ming general known for suppressing rebels, frequently mentioned in historical records.

A man who had risen from a lowly officer.

Hundreds of battles.

Almost no defeats.

As Li Daoxuan reviewed what little he remembered—

A short, stocky, energetic middle-aged man strode out from the ruins, waving broadly.

"Yo!" he shouted in thick Sichuan dialect. "One-Eyed Ma's wife! Fancy meeting you here!"

Li Daoxuan's brow furrowed.

Born in Shuangqing City, he understood Sichuan speech perfectly.

That greeting—

It was rude.

Crude.

And deeply disrespectful.

Chapter 692: Striking a Rock with an Egg

Zhang Fengyi was clearly displeased by Deng Qi's casual address. Her brows knit slightly as she replied coldly,

"General Deng, you're here as well? Weren't you dispatched northeast to Laizhou to deal with Kong Youde's rebels?"

Deng Qi laughed heartily, his voice rough and unrestrained.

"This old man put in a hell of an effort at Laizhou and was on my way back to Sichuan in triumph. Halfway through, I heard the bandits had besieged Huaiqing Prefecture. The Ministry of War ordered me to lift the siege, but by the time I arrived, those damn bandits had already fled into the mountains."

He spat to the side, clearly irritated.

"Empty-handed. So I holed up here in Xiuwu County instead."

His expression darkened as he gestured at the ruins around them.

"This godforsaken place—forget people, not even birds bother shitting here. I wanted to ask the magistrate for some grain, but there aren't even two living souls left in the whole county."

Then, with astonishing shamelessness, he looked straight at Zhang Fengyi.

"You got spare grain? Lend me some. I'll pay you back once I return to Sichuan."

Zhang Fengyi cursed inwardly.

Pay me back? If I believed that, I'd deserve to starve.

She shook her head firmly.

"The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers have just returned from the Liaodong front. Our provisions are already stretched thin—barely enough for our own men. I have nothing to spare."

Deng Qi scowled.

"Damn it! Everyone says the same thing—no grain, no grain, no grain! How are soldiers supposed to fight without food?"

Unwilling to listen to his ranting, Zhang Fengyi changed the subject.

"I just came from Wenshui County, far from the front. Do you know where the rebels are currently moving?"

Deng Qi snorted.

"How the hell would I know?"

Before the tension could escalate further—

A rider on a fast horse galloped toward them at breakneck speed. He tumbled from the saddle, face pale with terror, shouting as he scrambled up,

"Thank heaven! Both generals are here! I beg you—please send aid at once!"

Zhang Fengyi's expression tightened.

"What happened?"

Deng Qi muttered darkly,

"Which hole needs saving now?"

The messenger spoke rapidly, nearly choking on his words.

"After hiding in the Taihang Mountains for a time, the rebels reappeared several days ago! Chuang Wang crossed into Hebei; Yan Zhenghu occupies Jiaocheng and is pressing toward Taiyuan; Shang Tianlong holds Wucheng and advances on Fenzhou; and Zijing Liang, together with the West Camp Eight Great Kings, are attacking Qinzhou and Wuxiang!"

Zhang Fengyi gasped.

"This is bad!"

Deng Qi, however, burst into loud laughter.

"Hahaha! They're spreading out again—splitting their forces again!"

Zhang Fengyi turned sharply, fury flashing in her eyes.

"What are you laughing at? Cities are under attack! We must give aid immediately. Where do you plan to go?"

Deng Qi waved dismissively.

"Aid? With no grain? I'm not going anywhere. First thing I need is food."

The messenger was frantic.

"How can you say such a thing?!"

Deng Qi sighed exaggeratedly.

"Fine, fine. I'll pick somewhere at random. I'll head to Hebei—plenty of grain there. I'll forage along the way and deal with whatever bandits wandered over."

With that, he turned and strode off, cursing endlessly in thick Sichuan dialect.

After a long silence, Zhang Fengyi spoke solemnly.

"Taiyuan and Fenzhou are too far—I won't reach them in time. Qinzhou and Wuxiang are closer. I'll go there."

At that moment, Li Daoxuan sprang out of the carriage.

"General Zhang! You heard the report. The ones attacking Qinzhou and Wuxiang are Zijing Liang and the West Camp Eight Great Kings—the core of the rebel forces! Zijing Liang is now their leader, and the Eight Great Kings are infamous for slaughter. You only have a thousand men. Challenging them head-on is extremely dangerous."

After Wang Jiayin's death, Zijing Liang had taken command. His main force consisted entirely of hardened border veterans. Against them, Zhang Fengyi's unit was painfully small.

Yet Zhang Fengyi shook her head without hesitation.

"We cannot abandon cities simply because the bandits are strong. The people being plundered are waiting for imperial troops to save them."

Her voice was steady.

"They may be powerful, but we are not without hope. We only need to hold them back until the main armies of Zhang Zongheng, Zuo Liangyu, and Xu Dingchen arrive."

Li Daoxuan let out a quiet sigh.

Now I finally understand.

This is exactly how Zhang Fengyi died.

Striking a rock with an egg.

And yet—

He understood her choice.

Houjia Village... it must be in either Qinzhou or Wuxiang.

Since the direction was now clear, there was still a chance.

Which of my territories is closest to those two places?

Li Daoxuan retreated into the carriage, then instantly withdrew his consciousness from the box.

He opened his map software, searched rapidly, and found the answer.

Qinzhou and Wuxiang lay in central Shanxi.

The closest territory under his control was—

Pingyang Prefecture.

At present, Wang Er and Bai Mao were stationed there.

And Bai Mao, holding the rank of a thousand-household commander, could legally lead troops.

That settles it.

Li Daoxuan's consciousness leapt toward Pingyang Prefecture—

December. Bitter cold.

Dry, piercing cold. No snow.

Dou Wenda, Prefect of Pingyang, studied the imperial gazette with a grim expression. Bai Mao sat beside him in full armor, while Wang Er—disguised as a subordinate—stood half a step behind.

Dou Wenda sighed.

"The bandits are back again. Emerging from the Taihang Mountains, splitting into several routes, plunging Shanxi into chaos once more."

He looked up anxiously.

"They've already reached Qinzhou and Wuxiang—only two hundred li from us."

"Commander Wang," he said gravely, "you must increase patrols and scouts. I truly fear waking one morning to find Pingyang already under siege."

Bai Mao nodded.

"Rest assured. Pingyang will not fall."

At that instant, the Dao Xuan Tianzun's puppet on his shoulder stirred.

It leaned close to his ear and whispered:

"Prepare to march. Go aid Qinzhou and Wuxiang."

Bai Mao's expression changed instantly.

He turned to Dou Wenda and declared firmly,

"I've reconsidered. Hiding behind city walls is cowardly. It's not how soldiers should fight. Since the bandits are already near Qinzhou and Wuxiang, we should strike first and defeat them a hundred li away."

Dou Wenda was stunned.

He grabbed Bai Mao's arm in panic.

"General Wang, please don't be reckless! You're only a thousand-household commander with barely a thousand troops. The enemy is Zijing Liang's main force!"

Bai Mao straightened his back proudly.

"A true man fears no honorable death on the battlefield. Prefect, you lead the local militia and guard Pingyang. Your commander will return shortly."

Dou Wenda pleaded desperately.

"Don't go! Stay and defend the city! Pingyang cannot do without you!"

Bai Mao replied calmly,

"Prefect, you seem to have forgotten. I am not Pingyang's garrison commander. I was dispatched specifically to encircle and pursue rebels. Remaining here would violate military regulations."

He clasped his fists.

"I must fulfill His Majesty's expectations."

Dou Wenda stood frozen.

Tears silently welled in his eyes.

Chapter 693: Multi-pronged Attack

At the very moment Bai Mao led his troops out of Pingyang toward Qinzhou and Wuxiang, the wheels of war across Shanxi began to turn all at once.

Orders issued by Dao Xuan Tianzun spread outward like ripples across water.

At Dragon Gate on the Yellow River, Shi Jian, stationed at the river crossing, received the signal. Without hesitation, he assembled a thousand men and began marching east, banners snapping in the winter wind.

In Puzhou, Old Nanfeng gathered the veterans of the Guyuan border army. These were men who had fought on the frontier for years, their bones hardened by frost and blood. At dawn, they turned north and set out.

In Hedong City, Xing Honglang's force—the core strength of Gao Family Village—also moved. One thousand men remained behind to secure the Hedong Circuit, while the remaining three thousand split into two columns.

Xing Honglang personally led fifteen hundred men north.

Cheng Xu, commanding the other fifteen hundred, marched east to Jincheng first, then turned north, intending to rendezvous with Li Daoxuan's main axis.

Across the region, every stronghold Gao Family Village had quietly cultivated over the years responded in unison. Troops emerged from hidden valleys and fortified villages, converging from multiple directions.

A vast net was being cast.

Meanwhile, the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers advanced at speed.

Their column cut through prefectures and counties in rapid succession, finally reaching Lu'an Prefecture.

Lu'an—modern Changzhi—stood tall and grim. Its walls were thick, its gates solid. A thousand garrison troops and tens of thousands of civilians crowded within, relying on the city's defenses to survive.

The rebels had already ravaged everything beyond the walls.

When Zhang Fengyi arrived at the city gates, she did not enter. Instead, she reined in her horse and called up to the battlements.

"Where are the rebel forces now?"

The soldiers atop the wall exchanged uneasy glances, then shook their heads vigorously.

"They attacked Lu'an once, but failed to break through. After that, they turned north—toward Qinzhou and Wuxiang. We... we don't know anything beyond that."

Zhang Fengyi's expression darkened. "You didn't send out scouts?"

The garrison soldiers looked aggrieved. "We have no warhorses. Ordinary carts and mules can't scout enemy territory."

For a moment, Zhang Fengyi was rendered speechless.

Beside her, Li Daoxuan let out a quiet sigh. "These men are little more than conscripted peasants. We can't demand too much."

Zhang Fengyi reflected briefly, then nodded. "You're right."

She did not linger. Qinzhou was still more than a hundred li away, and every moment wasted meant more villages burned.

With a sharp gesture, she ordered the advance to continue north.

From this point onward, however, Li Daoxuan knew the danger had escalated.

Somewhere ahead lay Houjia Village—the place where history recorded Zhang Fengyi's death.

But where?

As her appointed strategist, he could not remain silent. "General Zhang, from here northward, rebel activity is dense. We must send scouts far ahead—wide and deep."

Zhang Fengyi nodded at once. "That should have been done earlier."

She immediately dispatched multiple scouting teams, ordering them to range as far as possible.

Li Daoxuan frowned inwardly.

The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers were elite. Zhang Fengyi herself was a general whose name appeared in historical records. Basic precautions—scouting, screening, route control—were second nature to her.

Then how had she still been surrounded?

This wasn't a simple ambush.

Something didn't add up.

That day, the army covered more than forty li.

Whenever they encountered villagers along the road, Li Daoxuan would dismount, hand them a few fragments of silver, and ask quietly:

"Is there a place nearby called Houjia Village?"

No one had heard of it.

By evening, a scout finally returned at full gallop.

"Report! A rebel band is plundering Tunliu County ahead!"

Zhang Fengyi did not hesitate. She immediately ordered the attack.

The rebel force flew a crude banner emblazoned with two characters:

"Jin Gang."

Li Daoxuan had no memory of such a figure from history. He barely had time to think before the White Pole Soldiers charged.

The result was decisive.

The rebel formation collapsed almost instantly. Jin Gang's men scattered in panic, fleeing in all directions.

Tunliu County fell within moments.

Inside the ruined town, corpses littered the streets. Houses lay blackened and collapsed, the air thick with ash and despair.

Zhang Fengyi's jaw tightened.

She rested the troops only briefly that night.

At dawn, the army marched again.

By the following day, grim news arrived.

Qinzhou had already fallen.

Wang Ziyong, with Zijing Liang's main force, had occupied the city. Nearby, the West Camp Eight Great Kings, led by Zhang Xianzhong, were rampaging through Wuxiang.

After the failure at Huaqing Prefecture, the rebels had learned a hard lesson: two hundred thousand men in one place meant starvation.

Following Li Zicheng's advice, they had dispersed again—each force looting independently.

In Qinzhou, Wang Ziyong had just emptied the official granaries.

His mood was excellent.

Then a subordinate rushed in.

"Boss! Jin Gang was plundering Tunliu when he ran into the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers. His force was shattered—he barely escaped!"

Wang Ziyong clicked his tongue. "Again? These White Pole Soldiers are everywhere."

Before he could stew further, another man burst in.

"Boss! Qing Lang was raiding Guojia Village north of Tunliu when he was ambushed. He took two arrows and barely made it back!"

Wang Ziyong's brows shot up. "Them again?"

A third messenger followed almost immediately, pale with fear.

"Boss! Fan Yunshou was attacked at Zhenggou Village. His force was wiped out. Only eighty or so men escaped with him."

Wang Ziyong sucked in a sharp breath. "Are the White Pole Soldiers really that strong?"

At this moment, a lean, sharp-eyed chieftain stepped forward.

It was Yue Jianhu.

He lowered his voice. "Boss, the White Pole Soldiers are fierce—but their numbers are small. They've already split forces. Ma Xianglin's unit has returned to Sichuan. The detachment still in Shanxi is led by Zhang Fengyi—no more than a thousand men."

Wang Ziyong's eyes narrowed. "So they're manageable?"

Yue Jianhu nodded. "Exactly. No matter how elite they are, a thousand men can't withstand our main force. If we gather our brothers, form up properly, and meet them head-on, they won't stand a chance."

Wang Ziyong slammed the table and laughed. "Good!"

"Summon the main army," he ordered loudly. "We march south. I want to see what tricks General Zhang Fengyi can pull with a mere thousand soldiers."

Chapter 694: Dual-Line Operation

Xiling Village.

The Sichuan Bai Pole Soldiers had just finished another swift, brutal victory.

A minor bandit leader calling himself Jiu Di Gun had attempted to loot the village. The result was predictable. At the first clash, his men collapsed like rotten straw. Jiu Di Gun himself fled in panic, abandoning weapons, followers, and dignity alike.

When the dust finally settled, a dozen or so surviving villagers cautiously emerged from their cellars. Their faces were pale, their bodies shaking, as if they still feared the bandits might reappear at any moment.

Then they saw a young man standing in the open.

He was strikingly handsome, dressed simply, with a calm expression entirely out of place amid the ruins. He waved at them gently.

"Come," Li Daoxuan said. "Don't be afraid. Come closer."

The villagers hesitated, then slowly gathered.

Li Daoxuan motioned to his men, who distributed small pieces of silver into the villagers' hands.

"Take this," he said. "Go south to Lu'an Prefecture. Hide there for a while. Don't stay here."

The villagers were overwhelmed with gratitude, bowing again and again, voices overlapping with blessings and thanks.

As they calmed down, Li Daoxuan asked casually, "Is there a place called Houjia Village nearby?"

The villagers exchanged looks.

After a moment, an elderly man stepped forward. "Yes, sir. If you go north along the main road, about twenty li, there's a small village called Houjia Village. Nothing special there—no large families, no walls. May I ask why you're looking for it?"

Li Daoxuan's brow tightened.

Houjia Village.

So it had finally appeared.

Twenty li.

Too close.

Far too close.

From a distance, Zhang Fengyi glanced toward him. She had noticed that this Mister Xiao had been asking about Houjia Village everywhere they went.

She frowned slightly, then her thoughts drifted.

He's so fixated on Houjia Village... Could it be that when he was young, he once met a girl there? A childhood promise, a missed reunion? In times like these, with roads broken and people scattered, such things are all too common...

In ancient times, travel was slow.

There were no letters that always arrived.

No way to search for someone across provinces.

Some people, once missed, were gone forever.

Just then, a Bai Pole Soldier scout came galloping back, dust-covered and urgent.

"General!" the scout shouted. "Zijing Liang's main force is advancing. Led by Wang Ziyong. Estimated numbers—fifty thousand!"

Zhang Fengyi stiffened. "Fifty thousand?"

"Yes," the scout replied grimly. "I observed them from afar. Even excluding the old, the weak, women, and children, at least half are combat-ready."

Li Daoxuan's heart sank.

Houjia Village nearby. Fifty thousand rebels approaching.

Damn it.

This is exactly how it starts.

He opened his mouth, about to say—

Don't go north.

But Zhang Fengyi spoke first, her voice decisive.

"Fifty thousand against one thousand. We cannot meet them head-on."

She raised her arm sharply. "Order: the entire army withdraw southwest. We take refuge in Laoye Mountain."

Li Daoxuan froze. "Huh?"

This... wasn't what he expected.

She wasn't charging forward.

She wasn't blundering into the trap.

Zhang Fengyi was calm. Rational. A general who knew when to advance—and when not to.

"Move, quickly!" she urged the villagers. "Leave at once!"

Clutching the silver Li Daoxuan had given them, the villagers hurried south toward Lu'an Prefecture.

Only after confirming the village was completely empty did Zhang Fengyi give the order to withdraw.

Southwest of Xiling Village rose Laoye Mountain.

Later generations would know it as a strategically vital high ground—its name etched into history during the Shangdang Campaign of 1945. But now, it was nothing more than a vast, wild mountain: steep slopes, dense forests, tangled paths.

Bandits usually fled into mountains to evade government troops.

This time, it was the opposite.

With a massive rebel army pressing in, Zhang Fengyi chose the forest over the plains.

At the foot of Laoye Mountain, Li Daoxuan looked at his specially reinforced carriage and sighed.

It was useless here.

"No choice," he muttered. "From here on, I walk."

That also meant something else.

No more lazily letting the carriage carry the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun while he jumped perspectives freely. From now on, he would have to control his body manually—and only switch perspectives while stationary.

Looks like it's time to dust off those old StarCraft multitasking skills.

Li Daoxuan tried.

He stepped forward—

Instant switch.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, seated on Gao Chuwu's shoulder, suddenly opened its mouth and sang:

"The sun shines bright—"

Switch back.

Second step.

Switch again.

"The flowers smile at me—"

Switch back.

Third step.

Switch.

"The little birds sing, 'Good morning, good morning—'"

Switch back.

"And ask why you're carrying a satchel of explosives—"

Gao Chuwu froze.

"Ah?! Dao Xuan Tianzun just started singing!" he exclaimed. "And asked why I'm carrying explosives!"

Xing Honglang glanced over, utterly calm. "Perhaps Dao Xuan Tianzun fears you're too simple-minded and is testing whether you still remember our mission."

Gao Chuwu scratched his head. "We're... going to fight bandits?"

Xing Honglang smiled faintly. "You remembered. Not bad."

"Heh heh."

"Chuwu!"

"Honglang!"

With a thump, the two embraced enthusiastically.

At that exact moment, Li Daoxuan switched perspectives again.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun witnessed the scene in full.

The song died in its throat.

The flawless dual-line operation shattered instantly.

When Li Daoxuan hurriedly switched back, he realized too late—his body had already lost balance.

Thud.

He hit the ground.

Zhang Fengyi turned at once. "Mister Xiao! Are you alright?"

Li Daoxuan pushed himself up, coughing lightly. "I'm fine. Just... distracted."

Zhang Fengyi sighed gently. "Still thinking about Houjia Village?"

Li Daoxuan blinked. "Huh?"

"Some regrets," she said softly, "are best left in memory."

Li Daoxuan stared at her.

I'm thinking about your future death, General Zhang. How did this turn into a tragic romance?

He wisely chose silence.

The large carriage was concealed in the forest at the mountain's base. From there on, Li Daoxuan joined the Bai Pole Soldiers on foot.

The climb was brutal.

For the fifty militia soldiers accompanying him, every step felt like torture.

But the Sichuan Bai Pole Soldiers moved as if on flat ground.

They had grown up among mountains. Their stronghold, Wan Shou Zhai, was far more treacherous than this. Compared to that, Laoye Mountain was almost gentle.

They surged upward like flying arrows.

The militia, no matter how hard they struggled, fell farther and farther behind.

Above them, the forest swallowed the army whole.

And beyond the mountain, fifty thousand rebels were closing in.

Chapter 695: Mountain Combat

Climbing Laoye Mountain was a torment for most men.

For Li Daoxuan, however, it was merely... inconvenient.

His mechanical body did not rely on muscle or breath, nor did it burn calories like a living human. It moved through a system of esoteric energies far removed from flesh and bone. Exhaustion, strictly speaking, did not exist.

But power still obeyed rules.

The strength a Tianzun body could exert was proportional to its size.

The scout-type Tianzun—small and compact—could only manage limited force.

The human-sized Test-02 Tianzun possessed strength roughly equivalent to an ordinary adult male.

As for the towering eight-meter Tianzun he had deployed in Jishan, that one had been a true giant, capable of uprooting trees and smashing stone.

Such was the hierarchy of esoteric mechanics.

Li Daoxuan had just been indulging in this quiet sense of superiority when—

Crack!

A sharp sound rang out beneath his foot.

The stepping stone, firm enough for any ordinary soldier, split cleanly in two under his weight.

Before he could react, the ground vanished.

With a dull, crashing roar, Li Daoxuan plunged into a narrow ditch below. His excessive weight crushed vines, shrubs, and roots alike, stripping the ditch walls bare as though a metal plow had been driven straight through the mountain.

Dust billowed.

Leaves scattered.

For a brief moment, everything went silent.

"Ah?" Zhang Fengyi's voice rang out, startled. "Mr. Xiao! Are you alright?!"

A moment later, Li Daoxuan pushed himself upright from the ditch, brushing dirt from his sleeves.

"I'm fine," he said cheerfully. "Not a scratch."

Zhang Fengyi let out a relieved breath. "These mountain paths are harsh. It must be difficult for you, following us through such remote ravines."

"Not at all," Li Daoxuan replied, placing both hands and feet against the slope and slowly hauling himself up. "Just a minor mishap."

It took him a bit of effort to climb out, but once he did, he laughed softly.

"Let's continue. This is actually quite fun."

The Next Morning

At dawn, Li Daoxuan immediately co-sensed into the box.

The White Pole Soldiers were already awake.

Not only awake—prepared.

Defensive positions had been established along the mountainside, and soldiers moved with practiced efficiency, adjusting formations and checking weapons.

A militia soldier approached quietly and whispered, "Last night, Zijing Liang's forces reached the foot of the mountain. They lit torches and shouted for hours, trying to intimidate us."

Li Daoxuan merely hummed. "Oh."

"They wouldn't dare climb in the dark," the soldier added. "This mountain is unfamiliar. A night ascent would be suicide. They'll attack during daylight."

Li Daoxuan nodded inwardly.

At least this isn't Houjia Village, he thought.

The butterfly effect shouldn't be this vicious... right?

He turned his attention to the defensive layout.

Stone platforms had been stacked into circular fortifications along the slope—small, compact, and deceptively simple. Archers already occupied them, bows strung, arrows laid out in neat bundles.

Though the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers were famed for their white pole spears, it had never meant they were limited to a single weapon.

Most carried bows.

A select few bore Three-Eyed Arquebuses.

Li Daoxuan recognized them immediately.

In his former life, he had visited the ruins of Wan Shou Zhai, where excavated Three-Eyed Arquebuses were displayed behind glass. Seeing them now, in the hands of living soldiers, felt surreal—but not surprising.

Zhang Fengyi noticed his gaze and smiled wryly. "Our arquebuses are crude, Mr. Xiao. They can't compare to the firearms your troops wield."

Li Daoxuan smiled back. "There's always room for exchange. Given time, I could help you improve them."

Zhang Fengyi shook her head and sighed. "Firearms devour silver. Wan Shou Zhai can barely afford grain. In our homeland, the Tujia people still struggle to eat their fill—how could we indulge in such luxuries? These Three-Eyed Arquebuses were begged from the imperial court."

Li Daoxuan nodded and let the matter drop.

Privately, he had no intention of advancing the White Pole Soldiers' firepower just yet.

Qin Liangyu was loyal to the bone. If he strengthened her forces too early, she might very well turn those guns against his future "new era army."

That bridge could wait—until power had been decided.

A horn suddenly sounded from below the mountain.

Long. Harsh. Menacing.

Zijing Liang's rebel army began its assault.

They surged upward like a black tide, bodies spilling across the slopes in overwhelming numbers. From above, it looked less like an army and more like a flood of ants pouring from a broken nest.

The White Pole Soldiers responded instantly.

Logs and boulders—prepared the night before—were shoved free. They thundered downhill, crushing everything in their path. Arrows followed in dense waves, and the Three-Eyed Arquebuses barked, belching smoke and fire.

The stone platforms transformed into interlocking firing points.

From the rebels' perspective, death came not just from above—but from the sides.

A brutal 270-degree crossfire enveloped the climbing forces.

The sensation was suffocating.

The rebels fired arrows in return, but shooting uphill was a fool's task. The stone platforms absorbed most of the impact, and what arrows did reach their targets lacked force.

A handful of fearless bandits finally reached the platforms, scrambling upward with desperate roars.

They never stood a chance.

White pole spears flashed.

Their movements were fluid, coordinated, merciless. The bandits couldn't parry, couldn't retreat. In seconds, they were impaled and killed—then their bodies were unceremoniously shoved back down the slope.

Flesh joined stone.

Each impact triggered fresh screams below.

Before long, the leading rebels broke.

No amount of shouting from the rear could force them forward again. Retreat began as a trickle—then became a collapse.

The mountain fell silent.

Only corpses, broken weapons, and scattered arrows littered the slope.

Li Daoxuan hadn't fired a single shot.

He watched, exhilarated, as history unfolded exactly as it should.

"The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers truly deserve their reputation," he said sincerely. "This is masterful mountain warfare."

For the rest of the day, the rebels did not dare attack again.

They attempted to probe the flanks, sending small detachments to search for alternative routes. But Zhang Fengyi had anticipated this long ago.

Hidden ambush teams lay in wait.

Each rebel scout that crept too close was met with a sudden volley of arrows—and never returned.

By dusk, Zijing Liang's forces were forced to camp at the base of the mountain, frustrated and bloodied.

As twilight settled, Zhang Fengyi studied the enemy encampment below and chuckled softly.

"There's an old saying," she said. "'To defend a city, one must first clear the surrounding camps.' A mountain is no different."

She turned to Li Daoxuan, eyes gleaming.

"We raid them tonight."

Li Daoxuan laughed. "A thousand against fifty thousand—and you still plan a night raid. General Zhang, your confidence is impressive."

Zhang Fengyi smiled.

"Confidence," she said calmly, "comes from knowing where your enemy cannot stand."

Chapter 696: My Nickname Is Iron Hand

Zhang Fengyi spoke calmly, her tone steady and precise.

"Though the bandit army numbers in the tens of thousands, only about half of them are true fighters. The rest are old men, youths, women, and hangers-on. Their camps are scattered carelessly across the slopes below, with no coordination or defensive structure. It's clear they understand nothing of military formations."

She raised her hand and pointed toward a shadowed ridgeline.

"I'll choose a concealed mountain path and strike one corner of their encampment tonight. At most, only a few hundred bandits will be able to react in time. They can be routed easily. We'll set fires, sow chaos—and withdraw immediately."

Her decision was swift.

That very night, the White Pole Soldiers moved.

Under Zhang Fengyi's command, they slipped down the mountainside like shadows peeling away from the forest. In the deep wilderness, they moved with the silence of beasts born to the mountains—stepping lightly, breathing quietly, leaving no trace behind.

Before long, Zhang Fengyi halted the formation.

Ahead lay a bandit camp at the foot of Laoye Mountain.

It was a mess.

Tents were scattered at random. Fires burned without watch. No sentries, no palisades, no trenches—nothing that could be called even the barest defense.

Zhang Fengyi didn't hesitate.

At her signal, the White Pole Soldiers surged forward.

Flames bloomed.

Tents collapsed.

Shouts and screams erupted as bandits stumbled out half-dressed, clutching weapons in panic. A handful tried to organize resistance, but they were instantly crushed by tightly coordinated white pole spear formations.

The raid was clean. Brutal. Efficient.

Within moments, the camp was engulfed in fire.

Torches flared in neighboring encampments as reinforcements rushed toward the blaze—but by the time they arrived, the White Pole Soldiers were already gone, vanishing back into the mountain paths with terrifying speed.

When Zijing Liang finally reached the scene, he could only stare.

The camp of Green-Backed Wolf lay in ruins—charred tents, scattered corpses, wounded bandits wailing in pain.

Zijing Liang sucked in a breath.

"The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers..." he muttered. "They truly live up to their name."

Deep in the forest, the White Pole Soldiers regrouped.

Zhang Fengyi, however, did not look pleased.

"The bandits are too numerous," she said gravely. "Tonight's raid hurt them, but it was nothing more than a pinprick. Tomorrow, they'll attack the mountain with everything they have. We won't be able to hold the position."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "So—hit and run."

"Exactly."

Orders were passed down at once.

The White Pole Soldiers abandoned their defensive platforms, withdrew silently, and reassembled deeper within the forest. Soon, the entire force advanced again, slipping through dense undergrowth.

Their path was suddenly blocked.

Ahead loomed a sheer cliff—smooth, steep, and unforgiving.

Without hesitation, the White Pole Soldiers linked the hooked ends of their spears together, forming a long chain. One by one, they gripped the improvised spear-rope and scaled the rock face with practiced ease.

The fifty militia soldiers froze.

They stared upward, pale-faced.

They couldn't do that.

In the end, ropes had to be tied around their waists. The White Pole Soldiers hauled them up like sacks of grain. Every man felt his face burn with humiliation.

Then, it was Li Daoxuan's turn.

"...Oh hell," he thought.

Being pulled up was out of the question. His weight would expose everything.

He looked up at the White Pole Soldiers waiting above, shook his head, and waved.

"Forget it," he said calmly. "I'll do it myself."

He pulled his right hand into his sleeve. His left followed, fumbling briefly.

With a subtle motion, he peeled away the silicone outer layer.

What emerged was not flesh—but metal.

His right fist now resembled a solid iron hammer.

Wrapping it back in his sleeve, Li Daoxuan drew his arm back—and punched.

Thud!

The rock wall dented.

Everyone above froze.

Zhang Fengyi's eyes widened.

Li Daoxuan struck again.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Each blow carved out a shallow pit—perfect handholds and footholds appearing one after another. He climbed, punched, climbed again, rhythmically hammering the cliff face.

The smooth rock was transformed into a jagged wall, like a purpose-built climbing route.

In moments, Li Daoxuan reached the summit. He vaulted up, landed firmly, slid his hand back into his sleeve, restored the silicone layer—and only then revealed his fist again.

Normal.

Human.

The White Pole Soldiers were stunned into silence.

The Gao Family Village militia didn't even react.

To them, such a feat was nothing unusual for a god.

Zhang Fengyi finally found her voice. She stared at his fist.

"Mr. Xiao... is your hand injured?"

Li Daoxuan raised it and flexed his fingers. "See? Not a scratch."

"...What martial art was that?" she asked slowly.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "In the jianghu," he said, "people gave me a nickname."

He clenched his fist.

"Iron Hand."

Zhang Fengyi fell silent.

You don't look like a jianghu master at all, she thought.

Before she could speak, shouts echoed from below.

The bandits had caught up.

Their scouts had discovered the retreat and pursued relentlessly—only to be stopped cold by the sheer cliff.

Both sides faced each other across the abyss.

The bandits stared upward, dread creeping into their hearts.

How had anyone climbed this?

Li Daoxuan leaned forward, pointed at the pitted rock face, and grinned.

"I've already carved a path for you," he called down. "Don't be shy—come on up."

The bandits stared.

One or two men might manage it.

An entire army?

Impossible.

Worse still, the White Pole Soldiers now guarded the summit.

A perfect choke point.

Below the cliff, the bandits could only watch helplessly as the White Pole Soldiers disappeared into the forest once more.

Two days passed.

Zijing Liang felt something was wrong.

Before, it had always been him darting through mountains, toying with government troops.

Now?

The roles had reversed.

The White Pole Soldiers struck like ghosts—appearing from one direction one day, another the next. Despite commanding tens of thousands, he couldn't pin down Zhang Fengyi's thousand men.

Enough.

"I'm done wasting time here," Zijing Liang growled.

He turned his army north.

After marching more than twenty li, a small village appeared ahead.

A crooked wooden sign stood at its entrance.

Houjia Village.

The bandits surged in without waiting for orders.

Fire.

Blood.

Screams.

By the time it was over, nearly all the men lay dead. Only women and children remained, huddled together, shaking.

Ge Goufei sidled up, lowering his voice.

"Boss, I've got an idea."

Zijing Liang turned. "Speak."

Ge Goufei grinned darkly. "The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers pride themselves on righteousness. They won't ignore innocent civilians. Why don't we use these women and children as bait?"

Zijing Liang frowned. "This..."

Ge Goufei sneered. "Worried about your reputation in the jianghu? Hah. What reputation? The only justice left in this world is the strength of one's fist."

Zijing Liang hesitated.

Then nodded.

"...Very well."

Chapter 697: The Encirclement

"The bandit forces below have withdrawn."

The scout's report rippled through the White Pole Soldiers like a gust of wind. A cheer rose instinctively, relief spreading across weary faces.

Li Daoxuan quietly exhaled.

Good.

They pulled back.

For a brief moment, hope flickered in his chest.

Maybe the butterfly effect has already taken hold. Maybe Houjia Village can still be spared.

Zhang Fengyi stepped forward, her voice firm and commanding, instantly restoring order.

"Do not relax your vigilance. Expand reconnaissance immediately. Keep Zijing Liang's movements under constant surveillance."

She swept her gaze across the ranks.

"We did not come to Qinzhou and Wuxiang merely to preserve ourselves. Our mission is to protect the prefectures, counties, and villages of this region. For several days, we have tied down Zijing Liang's forces, preventing them from spreading destruction elsewhere."

Her tone sharpened.

"But now that he has abandoned his assault on us, he will resume plundering. We cannot allow that. Wherever he goes—we follow. We will hound him without respite until other government forces arrive and the net closes around him."

A unified roar answered her.

"Understood!"

The White Pole Soldiers immediately began packing their equipment, preparing to descend Laoye Mountain.

Scouts fanned out, keeping Zijing Liang's army under distant watch.

Zijing Liang did indeed march north.

But less than half a day later, a scout came racing back, face pale.

"General," he said grimly, "something terrible has happened."

Zhang Fengyi raised an eyebrow. "Speak."

The scout swallowed hard.

"Zijing Liang's forces have occupied Houjia Village. All the men were slaughtered. The women and children were spared. Their intentions... are unclear."

Zhang Fengyi's heart lurched.

Beside her, Li Daoxuan stiffened.

"H—Houjia Village?" he asked, disbelief flickering across his face.

"Yes," the scout confirmed. "Houjia Village."

Li Daoxuan clenched his fist.

"Damn it."

Zhang Fengyi turned to him, her gaze suddenly searching, thoughtful.

"Mr. Xiao," she said slowly, "you've been asking about Houjia Village from the very beginning. It clearly holds great importance to you."

Importance?

Li Daoxuan nearly laughed bitterly.

According to the original timeline, this place is where you and your thousand White Pole Soldiers die.

But such words could never be spoken.

Instead, he nodded. "Yes. It's important."

That was enough.

Zhang Fengyi's suspicions instantly solidified. There must be someone dear to him there. A woman, most likely. Young men, after all, were always bound by sentiment.

She made her decision.

"Mr. Xiao has aided me greatly," she said resolutely. "I will not stand by while someone important to him is endangered. For both duty and personal obligation, we will immediately reinforce Houjia Village and rescue the women and children."

She turned sharply.

"All troops—move out! Full speed to Houjia Village!"

"Wait!"

Li Daoxuan stepped forward.

"You cannot go."

Zhang Fengyi froze, staring at him in disbelief.

Li Daoxuan spoke plainly. "It's a trap."

Her confusion deepened.

"The rebels spared the women and children on purpose," he continued. "They want to lure you in. They've hidden ambushes around the village, waiting to encircle your force the moment you attempt a rescue."

Zhang Fengyi frowned. "Our scouts are not blind."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "Even if your scouts detect the ambush, what then? When you see women and children kneeling under blades, crying for help—will you still retreat?"

Silence fell.

"...No," Zhang Fengyi admitted quietly.

Li Daoxuan pressed on. "You'll charge. You'll gamble everything on the ferocity of the White Pole Soldiers, hoping to break through and carve out a path of survival for them."

Her jaw tightened.

She knew he was right.

After a long pause, she asked, "Then what do you propose?"

Li Daoxuan met her gaze. "Let me take the lead."

Her eyes narrowed. "You don't look like a military commander."

He coughed lightly. "Poor wording. I won't command your troops. I'll design the plan. You execute it."

"...Go on."

"I will enter Houjia Village alone," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "You will take the White Pole Soldiers and my men to a distant hillside outside the village. Do not approach. No matter what you see—do not approach."

Zhang Fengyi's expression changed instantly.

"Absolutely not! One man against thousands?"

"I won't face thousands," Li Daoxuan replied evenly. "As long as your main force stays hidden, the bandits won't spring their ambush. They'll only send small detachments to deal with me."

"And those," he added quietly, "I can handle."

"Once I neutralize the forces directly threatening the hostages, you move in. At that moment, the ambush will reveal itself. Guard the women and children, and hold the village until reinforcements arrive."

Zhang Fengyi fell into deep thought.

If only one man entered the village...

The bandits would hesitate.

The trap would remain dormant.

But could one man truly handle hundreds—and protect hostages?

Before she could ask, Li Daoxuan's focus fractured.

His consciousness leapt.

On Bai Mao's shoulder, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun stirred.

"Head northeast," Li Daoxuan commanded.

—

Shi Jian's unit.

"East. Increase speed."

—

Back to Zhang Fengyi.

"Once the immediate threat is eliminated—"

—

To Gao Chuwu's shoulder.

"North road. Move fast."

—

Zhang Fengyi stared, stunned, as he continued speaking without missing a beat.

"—that's when you advance."

She frowned. "Reinforcements? From where? Zhang Zongheng? Xu Dingchen? They're tied down elsewhere."

"Neither," Li Daoxuan replied.

His mind jumped again—this time to Cheng Xu, the Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun humming softly against his chest.

"Northeast, twenty-five li. Full march."

—

Then to Lao Nanfeng.

"Force march east. Twenty li. Your men excel at pursuit. You'll finish this."

Lao Nanfeng saluted sharply. "Understood!"

In Li Daoxuan's mind, a vast tactical map unfolded.

Houjia Village blazed red at its center.

Blue arrows surged inward from west, south, and east.

Timing. Distance. Momentum.

Perfect.

"Let's go," Li Daoxuan said, his attention returning fully to Zhang Fengyi.

She met his eyes and nodded.

"Houjia Village."

They set out at once.

Twenty li to the north.

At the same time, multiple forces from Gao Family Village began converging, unseen, from every direction.

Meanwhile—

Zijing Liang had already deployed his net.

Twenty thousand men lay hidden around Houjia Village—in forests, ravines, caves, trenches, and gullies.

Small detachments lurked close to the village itself.

Larger formations waited farther out, carefully concealed.

The plan was simple.

Lure the White Pole Soldiers in.

Fix them in place.

Close the encirclement.

This time—

Zijing Liang was certain.

Zhang Fengyi would not escape.

Chapter 698: What the Hell Is This?

As dusk fell, the last slanting rays of sunlight washed over Houjia Village, turning its broken walls and collapsed roofs a dull, blood-tinged gold.

There were barely a dozen houses left standing.

Each one leaned at a crooked angle, like old men with bent spines, their long shadows stretching across the dirt-packed ground and tangling together in ugly shapes.

In the open space at the heart of the village, a group of women and children were bound tightly with straw rope.

There were no men.

The men of Houjia Village were already dead.

Ge Goufei stood nearby, arms crossed, watching over the captives with a cold, bored expression. Around him loitered several dozen bandits, blades loose in their hands, eyes sharp and restless. This group was his responsibility—the "bait."

Outside the village, hidden among forests, ravines, trenches, and rocky outcrops, Zijing Liang's main force lay in ambush.

Twenty thousand men.

The net had already been drawn tight.

All that remained was to wait.

To wait for Zhang Fengyi.

Yet none of them noticed a tiny figure—no larger than a human palm—quietly wriggle out of a shallow ditch beyond the village perimeter as the light dimmed.

It crept low through the grass, slipped between ferns, and darted from shadow to shadow.

Bare feet padded soundlessly across packed earth.

The little figure passed behind the boots of several bandits, so close it could have reached out and touched them, and yet no one noticed a thing.

Moments later, it blended seamlessly into the huddled group of women and children.

The captives were gaunt, bruised, and exhausted. Their heads hung low; their eyes were dull and unfocused. Hunger and terror had worn them down to the point where even a miracle could slip past unnoticed.

This tiny infiltrator was none other than cc-01, the Reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzun.

He scanned the group quickly, then chose a woman who looked slightly sturdier than the rest—someone whose eyes still held a faint spark of awareness. Reaching out, he gently tugged at the hem of her tattered sleeve.

The woman flinched.

She turned her head—and nearly screamed.

A tiny person, no bigger than her hand, stood beside her.

Before panic could take hold, the little figure raised a finger to its lips.

"Shh."

Her heart hammered violently, but she swallowed the cry in her throat. In a place like this, fear had already taken everything. If even the strangest hope appeared, it had to be grasped.

She bent forward slightly, pressing her ear closer.

The tiny figure whispered, his voice barely louder than the wind:

"Help is coming. I'll cut your ropes first. Don't move. Don't make a sound. Keep pretending you're bound. When the time comes, I'll give the signal. Then you fight. Do you understand?"

The woman nodded again and again, tears welling in her eyes.

A flash of steel.

The straw rope binding her wrists fell away.

Her hands were free.

She didn't dare move them.

Dozens of bandits were still only a few steps away.

She let herself slump sideways, leaning weakly against another woman, and whispered as softly as breath:

"Someone is coming... Don't make a sound... I'll help you next..."

Outside the village, a horse thundered to a halt beside Zijing Liang.

"Report, Chief!" the rider shouted. "Zhang Fengyi's White Pole Soldiers have arrived—but she hasn't advanced. She stopped two or three li away, climbed a hill, and is observing from there."

Zijing Liang nodded calmly. "As expected. If she were the type to charge blindly into a trap, she wouldn't still be alive."

Qing Beilang stepped forward, frowning. "Chief, if the White Pole Soldiers spot our ambush, they might refuse to enter the village at all."

"That depends," Zijing Liang replied coldly, "on whether they truly live up to their reputation."

He smiled faintly.

"Will they sacrifice themselves to save these women and children? Or will they retreat, choosing survival over righteousness?"

He was about to continue his smug lecture on human nature when another bandit came sprinting back, face pale.

"Chief! There's someone on the main road—a swordsman—heading straight for Houjia Village!"

Zijing Liang's eyes narrowed. "A swordsman?"

"Yes... but..." The man hesitated, clearly struggling for words. "He's young. Wearing a conical hat. Longsword at his waist. He just... he looks strange. I don't know how to describe it."

Zijing Liang cursed under his breath. "Damn it."

"What are your orders, Chief?"

Zijing Liang waved his hand dismissively. "Ignore him. Ge Goufei has men inside the village. What can one swordsman do? Tell everyone to stay hidden. No one moves. We wait for Zhang Fengyi."

On the hillside, two li away, Zhang Fengyi pressed her eye to the monocular telescope.

She watched the lone figure walking toward the village.

Her fingers tightened around the tube.

"Please..." she whispered, almost unconsciously. "Stay alive."

Li Daoxuan strolled into Houjia Village as though he were on an afternoon walk.

He raised his voice cheerfully.

"Hello? Anyone home? This humble swordsman is a bit thirsty—could I trouble someone for some water?"

Then he saw them.

Women and children bound in the open.

Bandits standing guard.

Blades gleaming.

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan widened his eyes in exaggerated shock. "What is this? You villains—what do you intend to do to these innocent people?"

Ge Goufei scowled and waved him away. "Get lost. This doesn't concern you."

"How can it not concern me?" Li Daoxuan snapped. "Under heaven's light, in broad daylight, you dare commit such crimes? Release them at once! Otherwise, this swordsman will draw his blade and uphold justice today!"

The bandits nearly burst out laughing.

Where did this idiot crawl out from?

There were more than fifty men in plain sight, with dozens more hidden inside the surrounding houses—over a hundred in total.

Enough to chop this so-called swordsman into minced meat.

Ge Goufei suppressed his irritation and barked, "I said scram! We're handling serious business. I don't want trouble—or you'd already be dead."

"Serious business?" Li Daoxuan snorted. "I see nothing but villainy!"

He stepped forward.

On the distant hill, Zhang Fengyi's breath caught.

Ge Goufei's patience snapped. "Since you refuse a toast, you'll drink the penalty. Kill him."

Two bandits strode forward, blades drawn.

Li Daoxuan's hand rested casually on his sword hilt.

The two exchanged wary glances.

This guy doesn't look right, they thought.

They slowed, advancing cautiously, step by step.

Then—

Li Daoxuan's hand vanished behind his back.

A short, black object appeared in his grip.

Bang!

The sharp crack echoed through the village.

One bandit flew backward and collapsed without a sound.

Dead.

The second bandit leapt sideways in sheer terror.

Ge Goufei froze.

So did every bandit present.

A hundred minds went blank at the same time.

...What the hell is this?

Chapter 699: Storm of Pear Blossom Needles

The sudden appearance of the short musket shocked more than just the bandits.

The women and children lying on the ground were startled as well. Several women nearly sprang up in panic, but at the critical moment, they remembered the repeated warnings of the miniature Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Do not move without orders.

Do not act recklessly.

Protect yourselves first.

Only then did they grit their teeth and force themselves to remain on the ground, conserving what little strength they had left.

They had already believed death was inevitable.

But the appearance of that strange, palm-sized Dao Xuan Tianzun had given them hope. Now, seeing a full-sized version appear and casually blast a ferocious bandit to death with a single shot, they felt like drowning people who had suddenly grabbed hold of a drifting plank in a raging sea.

For the first time, they sensed something they had not dared imagine.

A chance to live.

"Damn it, that bastard has a strange short musket!" a bandit roared.

"Kill him!" Ge Goufei shouted furiously. "Muskets take forever to reload!"

More than a dozen bandits rushed toward Li Daoxuan at the same time.

This was precisely the advantage of arriving alone.

If Li Daoxuan had brought an army, these bandits would never have charged so recklessly. They would have immediately pressed blades to the throats of the women and children. But seeing only one man, they completely ignored the hostages and focused on killing him first.

Li Daoxuan did not fight head-on.

He turned and ran, sprinting toward one of the village houses.

Several bandits were already hiding inside that house. Peering through the window, they watched Li Daoxuan approach and sneered inwardly.

This idiot thinks he can use the house to avoid being surrounded?

Fine. The moment he steps inside, we slash him from behind.

Li Daoxuan reached the door and kicked it open with a loud crash.

Inside, more than a dozen bandits raised their blades in unison, waiting for him to rush in.

But Li Daoxuan did not enter.

He flicked his left hand and tossed something into the room.

A hand grenade.

The fuse hissed softly.

The bandits inside froze, staring blankly at one another.

"Boom!"

The explosion shook the entire house. The dozen bandits inside collapsed at once, their ambush ending before it truly began.

Li Daoxuan was already sprinting toward the next house.

The bandits were stunned.

Ge Goufei went berserk. "That bastard is throwing explosives into houses!"

"What kind of monster is he?"

"Chase him! Hack him to death!"

More than a dozen bandits were still chasing closely behind him.

Li Daoxuan ran in wide circles around Houjia Village.

Round and round he goes,

love spinning endlessly.

Every time he passed a house, the bandits hiding inside scrambled out in panic. No one dared stay indoors, terrified of being blown apart in the dark.

In the blink of an eye, Li Daoxuan had looped around the small village several times, plunging the entire bandit force into utter chaos.

An arrow suddenly whistled through the air.

Thunk!

It struck Li Daoxuan squarely in the back, the shaft trembling violently.

The bandits burst into cheers. "He's hit! He's wounded!"

Then something unbelievable happened.

Li Daoxuan kept running.

Arrow in his back, he sprinted as if nothing had happened at all.

The bandits stared in disbelief.

"What the hell?"

"How is he still running that fast?"

"Is he forcing himself through the pain?"

"He can't keep this up forever!"

"I got him!" one agile bandit shouted.

He caught up from behind and slashed down viciously at Li Daoxuan's back.

Thunk!

The blade clearly struck something soft.

Yet Li Daoxuan neither screamed nor fell.

Instead, the short musket in his hand fired backward in one smooth motion.

Bang!

The bandit flew backward and collapsed.

Another arrow flew.

Thunk!

It lodged into Li Daoxuan's back again.

"He's hit again!"

"What kind of monster is this?"

"Does he not feel pain?"

Ge Goufei was furious. "Circle around from the front! Others flank him! With this many men, you're telling me we can't kill one person?"

Even the bandits guarding the women began rushing in, abandoning their posts to join the pursuit. Over a hundred men chased a single figure, blades clashing as they tore through the village.

One moment, steel rang behind one house.

The next, they burst out from another alley, shouting and cursing.

Houjia Village descended into total chaos.

Logically speaking, this should have been impossible.

One man, no matter how skilled, should eventually fall under arrows, blades, or exhaustion.

Yet the bandits slowly realized something horrifying.

This man did not react like a normal person.

He took hits as if they barely existed, continuing to run and leap like a wild deer.

With so many attackers, the short musket became impractical.

Li Daoxuan casually tucked it into the waistband at his back and drew his longsword.

A bandit charged straight at him, slashing wildly.

Thunk!

The blade struck Li Daoxuan's chest.

At the same time, Li Daoxuan's sword plunged into the bandit's abdomen. He kicked the man away, sending him screaming across the ground.

Li Daoxuan did not slow down in the slightest.

Sharp-eyed bandits finally noticed something wrong.

Through his torn clothing, what looked like flesh was visible. There was a clear cut mark on it, yet not a single drop of blood seeped out.

"That's strange."

"He's hurt, but there's no blood."

"Does this guy even bleed?"

"Damn it, he's tough as Iron Body kungfu!"

Seeing his men utterly unable to handle Li Daoxuan, Ge Goufei could no longer hold back.

He personally grabbed his blade and leapt into the fight.

His nickname, Ge Goufei, Flying Across Ravines, was not empty boasting. His lightness-skill was exceptional. With a few rapid steps, he intercepted Li Daoxuan's path and slashed with a sharp whistle.

Li Daoxuan could take hits to his body.

But not his face.

If his face were damaged, he would lose his co-sensing ability.

He twisted his head aside.

Ge Goufei's blade slammed into his shoulder.

Thunk!

The sensation felt wrong.

Ge Goufei froze for a split second.

At that instant, Li Daoxuan's sword stabbed backward in a reverse thrust.

An ordinary bandit would have died on the spot, but Ge Goufei twisted his body mid-motion, narrowly dodging the fatal strike.

"Hah!" Ge Goufei laughed loudly. "Trying to trade lives with me? You think I'm that stupid..."

Before he could finish speaking, Li Daoxuan's left hand slid out from his sleeve.

In it was a small cylindrical weapon.

The Storm of Pear Blossoms Needle.

Click.

The spring snapped.

A dense burst of fine needles exploded directly into Ge Goufei's face.

There was no room to dodge.

Thwip. Thwip. Thwip.

Needles buried themselves across his face, turning it into a pitted mess. His eyes were struck as well.

Ge Goufei let out a shrill, horrifying scream and collapsed to the ground with a heavy thud, clutching his face.

"My eyes! My eyes!"

"Kill him!"

"Kill him now!"

"Everyone, charge him!"

Chapter 700: One Man Holds the Pass

Gegou Fei's eyes had been gouged out, and with that final shred of reason torn away, his mind collapsed into madness. He rolled and writhed on the ground, screaming hoarsely, his commands turning chaotic and senseless.

"Why are you still guarding those women and children?" he howled. "Come here! Hurry up and kill this bastard! All of you, come here!"

The last dozen fierce bandits who had been stationed to watch over the women and children hesitated for only a heartbeat. They glanced at their leader, blind and thrashing like a wounded beast, then drew their blades and rushed toward Li Daoxuan without another word.

In an instant, Li Daoxuan was surrounded.

Blades flashed from the front while footsteps thundered behind him. He leaped, twisted, ducked, and rolled, steel whistling past him from every direction as killing intent closed in like a tightening net.

Dual threads.

It was time to operate both threads at once.

A blade slashed into his side with a dull impact. Li Daoxuan grunted, forced the pain down, and stabbed backward with his sword in a single smooth motion. At the same time, his consciousness split, switching to the Puppet Heavenly Lord.

"Quickly... move," he told the women and children.

His awareness snapped back. Thwack. Another strike landed, slicing away a chunk of silicone skin. He countered with a sweeping slash, forcing his attackers back, then switched threads again.

"Hide... in the house."

Switching back, he took a massive step and vaulted over a dry well, boots striking the ground hard on the other side.

One more switch.

"The stone house."

The women heard the Puppet Heavenly Lord's broken, fragmentary commands, and at last, understanding dawned. Their eyes darted wildly, then all locked onto the same place.

The village chief's house.

He was the wealthiest man in Houjia Village, and his home was built of stone, the most solid structure in the entire village.

The strongest woman sprang to her feet and ran, skirts hitched up, heading straight for the stone house. The others scrambled up after her, clutching their children tightly as they followed.

One of the bandits who had been guarding them spun around in shock. "Huh? They're running? Weren't their feet bound?"

A bandit turned to give chase.

At that very moment, Li Daoxuan, still entangled among his attackers, suddenly shouted, "Hey!" and lowered his head, charging straight toward the entrance of the stone house.

The bandit who had just turned took Li Daoxuan's full impact squarely in the back. There was a sickening thud as blood burst from his mouth, and he was flung far away, rolling limply across the ground.

The women and children had just scrambled into the stone house when Li Daoxuan arrived behind them. He planted his feet at the doorway, arms spread wide, and stopped moving.

Seeing this, the bandits finally understood.

He had been darting and weaving all over the place, deliberately drawing their attention, dragging them away from the women and children, buying time for them to reach safety.

And now, he stood alone in the doorway.

A single figure, blocking the entrance.

One man holding the pass against ten thousand.

"Damn it, isn't he arrogant?"

"What kind of idiotic tactic is this?"

"Does he really think one man can stop all of us?"

"Kill him!"

This time, the bandits abandoned their blades. Since their enemy was no longer running, spears were the better choice.

They picked up the long spears they had discarded earlier.

Dozens of men armed with spears surrounded Li Daoxuan, forming a tight semicircle. With a unified shout of "Hey!", they lunged forward together.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

In an instant, Li Daoxuan lost count of how many spears pierced him.

He did not dodge. He did not retreat. He did not even raise his longsword to block. Spearheads punched into his body, punching hole after hole through his main frame.

Yet in that very moment, he seized the opening.

His sword flashed.

Crack. Crack.

Several spear shafts snapped in succession.

The bandits froze.

"What in the world?"

"I definitely stabbed flesh. I felt it go in."

"I think I even hit bone."

"His bones are hard. Too hard."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly, saying nothing. He reached up, pulled the broken spear shafts from his body, and casually tossed them into the stone house behind him.

Several women picked up the half-spears with trembling hands. Fear and excitement warred on their faces as they stared at the figure standing in the doorway.

They had seen him struck again and again, yet he still stood there, unmoving, unshaken.

Handsome.

So damn handsome.

The suspension bridge effect took hold.

In that instant, several young women in the village felt that Li Daoxuan was the greatest man in the world.

"Kill him!"

"Cut him down!"

"Why? Why can't we kill this guy?"

Clang.

A blade struck Li Daoxuan's arm and slid diagonally, slicing away a large chunk of flesh. Beneath it, the structure underneath was laid bare.

"Why does it look like metal?"

"Ah... his bones are iron."

The bandits stared in horror at his arm. Where flesh should have been, metallic bone gleamed coldly in the light, a terrifying sight that sent chills straight down their spines.

Shock piled upon shock.

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly. "Ah, this? When I was younger, wandering the Jianghu, I accidentally lost a hand. So I had a prosthetic arm made and attached. Are you afraid of that?"

The bandits stiffened.

Then they roared.

"Charge!"

"Hack him to death!"

They surged forward again.

"The window! A few of you, attack the window!"

"Yes, yes! Break in through the window and kill the women!"

But the women were not fools. The moment they had fled into the house, they had already dragged every piece of furniture they could find to barricade the windows. Cabinets, tables, even a heavy stone millstone had been rolled over to block them.

The bandits hacked at the wooden window grates, only to meet solid resistance behind them. It would take a long time to clear it out.

Outside the village, in the woods, Zijing Liang suddenly received a report.

"Boss, Zhang Fengyi has moved. She's leading her troops and charging toward the village at full speed."

Zijing Liang's eyes lit up. "Excellent. Zhang Fengyi has arrived? Order the entire army to prepare to close the net. Let her enter the village first. Once Gegou Fei's men engage her, we encircle them. Gegou Fei has hostages, so she won't be able to retreat or finish things quickly. We'll trap them completely."

The bandit army began to stir.

At the same time, Zhang Fengyi was charging forward with everything she had.

Her thousand White Pole Soldiers pushed themselves to their limits, sprinting hard, breath tearing from their chests.

It was only two li. Once they began running, it would take barely ten minutes. Without armor or equipment, they could have been even faster. But armored and carrying their white pole spears, with a battle still ahead, they had to conserve some strength. Covering the distance in just over ten minutes was already brutal.

"We're here. Houjia Village is ahead!"

Zhang Fengyi urged them on, her voice tight. "Faster, faster. Li Daoxuan has held out for so long, I'm afraid..."

Her phoenix eyes shimmered with tears. In her heart, she had already prepared herself for the worst.

Yet when she led her troops into Houjia Village, she saw that Li Daoxuan was still alive.

He was still standing at the entrance of the stone house.

The battlefield, however, had taken on a grotesque, almost unreal appearance.

Large sections of his silicone outer layer had been cut away, exposing metal beneath. An iron arm bone on the left, an iron leg bone on the right, even an iron plate revealed on his chest.

Half man, half machine.

The sight alone was enough to make any ordinary person's scalp go numb.

The bandits surrounding him were terrified, fighting as though they were facing a monster. Yet they were already riding the tiger, unable to dismount, with no choice but to keep attacking.