

Great Ming 701

Chapter 701 There Will Be a Turnaround

When Zhang Fengyi saw Li Daoxuan's half-human, half-iron body, she froze for a split second, utterly stunned.

But she was a commanding general.

The battlefield was no place for childish curiosity.

She snapped her gaze away, raised her hand, and pointed toward the bandits swarming around the stone house.

"Kill them all!"

The White Pole Soldiers roared in unison and surged forward.

White pole spears stabbed out like a forest of lightning. The bandits at the front didn't even withstand a single clash—some were skewered on the spot, others screamed and fled. In moments, corpses littered the ground, and the entrance to the stone house was completely cleared.

The White Pole Soldiers immediately formed a defensive ring, sealing the area tight.

At the same time, the fifty Gao Family Village militia rushed forward. They pulled out clean clothes and a fresh cloak, quickly covering the exposed iron structure on Li Daoxuan's body.

With the metal hidden, Li Daoxuan finally looked like a normal human again.

Zhang Fengyi didn't mention his earlier appearance at all. Her eyes were sharp, her mind focused.

"Master Xiao," she asked calmly, "what's the plan now? Do we escort the women and children out and fight our way through?"

"No."

Li Daoxuan shook his head without hesitation.

"We hold this village."

He swept his gaze across the houses and fences.

"With buildings for cover and choke points everywhere, we can defend ourselves. If we leave and get surrounded on open ground, that's when we're truly dead. We stand here and wait for reinforcements."

"Understood!" Zhang Fengyi replied instantly.

She didn't waste a single word.

"Form ranks!"

The White Pole Soldiers moved as one, snapping into formation.

A thousand white spears rose upright.

Cold light gleamed from the spearheads, murderous intent thick in the air.

Inside the stone house, the women and children stared out in disbelief.

"Government soldiers..."

"They actually came to save us?"

"Do government troops really protect common people? Could these be impostors?"

Just then, Li Daoxuan stepped inside, fully dressed, his expression relaxed and steady.

"Don't be afraid," he said with a gentle smile. "We'll get you out of here safely."

"Great hero!"

"Thank you, great hero!"

For reasons they couldn't explain, the moment he spoke, their panic eased.

Outside the village, the bandit army finally revealed itself.

A massive banner rose first.

Zijing Liang.

Then another banner snapped in the wind:

Qing Bei Lang.

Another followed:

Yunzhong Shou.

Then:

Jin Gang Zuan.

More banners unfurled one after another:

Gun Di.

Xin Lai Jiang.

Yi Pian Tie.

Hong Lang Ma.

Fei Cao.

Banner upon banner filled the horizon.

Zijing Liang truly deserved his reputation as the greatest bandit chieftain of the era. Nearly half of the former thirteen great factions and seventy-two bandit routes had bent the knee to him. When he mobilized his full strength, the banners alone seemed enough to blot out the sky.

Even Geguofer, blind and furious, was dragged back into the encirclement by his men.

Standing beneath his own banner, eyes sightless, he roared like a mad beast.

"I'll kill you all! I'll kill you all!"

"Who the hell are you yelling at?" Qing Bei Lang snapped angrily.

"Huh?" Geguofer stiffened. "Brother Wolf? Sorry, sorry—I can't see. I'll turn around."

He turned the wrong way and continued screaming, "I'll skin you alive and rip out your tendons!"

"Your spit is hitting my face!" Zijing Liang roared. "You want to skin me alive? Are you rebelling now?"

Geguofei froze.

"...Boss... over there... that way..."

His subordinates hurriedly spun him around.

Facing the White Pole Soldiers at last, Geguofei bellowed, "You're all dead!"

Zijing Liang's expression darkened.

He waved his hand.

"Attack."

From all directions, the bandit army began to advance toward Houjia Village.

Inside the houses, the women and children were so terrified they didn't dare breathe.

Zhang Fengyi's palms were slick with sweat.

So were the hands of the White Pole Soldiers.

Even the fifty militia soldiers felt their grips growing wet.

Only Li Daoxuan looked completely at ease.

He stood atop the highest rooftop in the village, arms spread wide as if embracing the heavens, and sang loudly:

"Sing of endless ages,

Share a lifetime of mountains unbroken.

So long as righteousness stands—

Come! Fight!"

"Charge!"

"Kill!"

The bandits surged forward like a flood.

The first to open fire were the Gao Family Village arquebusiers.

Though only fifty men, each could fire roughly once every ten seconds—three hundred shots per minute in total. That firepower rivaled a Ming unit of five hundred arquebusiers.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Gunfire cracked sharply through the air.

The first wave of hardened bandits fell instantly.

But this time, the enemy numbers were overwhelming.

Nearly thirty thousand were battle-ready, with another twenty thousand rabble cheering behind them—a full fifty thousand strong.

Fifty arquebuses weren't enough to shake their morale in the slightest.

Once the bandits entered bow range, the White Pole Soldiers loosed a volley of arrows.

At the same time, former border troops mixed among the bandits raised their bows and fired back.

Arrows crossed in midair, trading silent curses before slamming into flesh and shields.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The sound of arrows striking shields was enough to set teeth on edge.

Zhang Fengyi scanned the battlefield, her heart sinking.

"Master Xiao," she said quietly, "although we've saved the women and children... I'm afraid we won't make it out alive."

Li Daoxuan casually lit a grenade, tossed it away, and instinctively covered his ears.

"General Zhang," he said calmly, "don't be so pessimistic. A turnaround is coming."

"But the situation—"

"Hm?" Li Daoxuan tilted his head, hands still over his ears. "What did you say? I can't hear you."

Zhang Fengyi: "..."

"They're closing in!"

"Spear formation!"

The White Pole Soldiers thrust their spears forward in unison. Their formation bristled like a steel hedgehog, countless sharp points extending outward.

The bandits slammed into it from all sides.

Shields clanged against spearheads. Long spears stabbed wildly.

The moment the lines met, men began to fall.

The melee was savage.

Bandits died.

But even more bandits replaced them.

The White Pole Soldiers were elite, disciplined, and perfectly coordinated. The bandits couldn't compare. Though some former soldiers were mixed in, their formations were chaotic, their strength unfocused.

Spears clashed.

Arquebuses thundered at close range.

Li Daoxuan's grenade arced over the front line and dropped deep into the bandit ranks.

BOOM!

Men and horses were blasted into the air.

Zijing Liang watched with a cold smile.

To him, this was nothing more than a trapped beast's final struggle.

No matter how fiercely the White Pole Soldiers fought, the difference in numbers was too great.

They wouldn't escape.

Not this time.

Just then, a scout came sprinting over.

"Boss! Boss! A government unit has appeared in the northwest! Their banner bears the character 'Wang!'"

"Wang?" Zijing Liang frowned slightly. "Which general named Wang is stationed around here?"

"They don't seem important—only about a thousand men."

Zijing Liang laughed loudly.

"So reinforcements have arrived to save the White Pole Soldiers?"

"Hah!"

He turned his head.

"Qing Bei Lang. Take your men and wipe them out."

Chapter 702 Do You Understand What "Taboo" Means?

"Taboo" Means?

Qingbei Lang led his men straight toward the northwest.

Before long, the enemy came into view.

Roughly a thousand Ming soldiers advanced in neat ranks, clad in standard Ming cloth armor. Their steps were steady, their formation tight.

Qingbei Lang sneered.

Only a thousand?

He raised his hand, ready to have his men shout a few mocking insults and break the enemy's nerve—

But before he could open his mouth, the Ming soldiers lifted their weapons in unison.

Flintlock rifles.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

They fired without a single word.

No warning. No bravado. Just gunfire.

A swath of Qingbei Lang's men fell instantly, bodies tumbling like wheat before the scythe.

"What the hell?!" Qingbei Lang roared. "Where's the honor in this?!"

There was no time to curse further.

Their bows couldn't reach that far, while the enemy's flintlocks were already roaring. The only option left was to close the distance.

"Charge!" Qingbei Lang bellowed. "Charge through!"

They ran.

But before they covered much ground, the Ming soldiers calmly reloaded.

Then—

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Another volley thundered out.

Qingbei Lang's side suffered heavy casualties again.

As he charged forward in a blind rage, the distance finally closed enough for him to see the enemy commanders clearly.

Then his gaze locked onto one bearded face.

His blood ran cold.

Wang Er.

Even through the thick beard, Qingbei Lang recognized him instantly.

For a moment, his mind went blank.

Impossible.

There was absolutely no way Wang Er would defect to the Ming court. No way.

At the center of the battlefield, Zijing Liang frowned and turned his head toward the northwest.

The sound of flintlock fire was relentless.

A strange unease crept into his chest.

Why were these reinforcements also armed with flintlock rifles?

Ming armies weren't rich. Not rich enough to hand flintlocks to every random unit that showed up.

Before he could think it through, another scout sprinted over.

"Boss! Another Ming unit—about a thousand men—has appeared to the west!"

"What?" Zijing Liang's eyes widened. "Another thousand?"

A head popped up beside him.

Yunzhong Shou grinned. "Boss, I'll block them."

Zijing Liang nodded sharply. "Go."

Yunzhong Shou immediately led his men westward.

The moment they clashed with the force Shi Jian had dispatched from Dragon Gate Ferry, the battlefield exploded with the continuous roar of flintlock fire.

Zijing Liang's expression stiffened.

The west, too?

Flintlocks again?

What kind of cursed day was this?!

Before he could vent his frustration—

From the southwest came a thunderous shout, hundreds of voices roaring together:

"Xing Honglang of Yongji has arrived!"

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Gunfire erupted from the southwest, and rebel soldiers immediately screamed as they fell.

Zijing Liang cursed aloud. "Damn it! Xing Honglang—that rotten salt smuggler who defected! Even you came to bite me?"

Then, from the south, another shout rolled across the battlefield:

"Lao Nanfeng of Guyuan is here!"

Gunfire followed instantly.

Only then did the rebels realize the truth.

They were being enveloped.

A massive, fan-shaped encirclement of flintlock units was steadily tightening, firing as they advanced from every direction.

They might endure fifty flintlocks.

But thousands?

One volley alone shattered entire front lines.

Almost instantly, rebel morale collapsed across multiple fronts.

Qingbei Lang fled back in chaos.

Yunzhong Shou fled back in panic.

Other bandit leaders followed, faces pale with terror.

Only Geguofei—blind in both eyes—stood in place, roaring wildly:

"Who's firing?! Who's firing those guns?!"

"Boss! The left flank has collapsed!"

"Boss! The right flank is breaking!"

"Boss! The vanguard surrounding the White Pole Soldiers is scattering!"

"Our main formation—Ming troops are pushing in!"

Zijing Liang sucked in a sharp breath.

"Retreat! Retreat now!"

There was only one direction left.

Northeast.

The main force turned and fled in disorder.

But just as Zijing Liang started to run—

A unit suddenly burst out from the diagonal front.

These soldiers were fierce, brutal, and utterly unlike the flintlock units.

They wielded cold weapons—sabers, spears, halberds—

And hand grenades.

At their head rode a general radiating the savage aura of a veteran border commander.

Lao Nanfeng.

"I've come today," he roared, "to take your heads and trade them for military merit and silver! Don't blame me for being ruthless!"

He waved his hand.

A grenade flew.

BOOM!

Then another.

And another.

Several hundred soldiers hurled grenades in unison.

Explosions ripped through Zijing Liang's fleeing formation, blasting it into utter chaos.

Lao Nanfeng raised his saber.

"Brothers! Charge! Kill bandit chiefs! Earn merit! Get promoted! Get rich!"

"I'll swagger through this world!"

"All the money and all the women will be ours!"

The soldiers roared with laughter.

"Military merit!"

"Military merit!"

"I am vulgar and shallow!" Lao Nanfeng shouted.

"We only love money and beautiful women!"

"Charge!"

Their morale dwarfed that of the flintlock units.

These were true border troops—reckless, greedy, fearless men willing to gamble their lives for glory.

Zijing Liang's heart sank.

"Border army... damn it, these are border army! Has Zhang Zongheng arrived? Or Cao Wenzhao?"

But even those famous generals might not be as terrifying as Lao Nanfeng.

Because Lao Nanfeng had grenades.

His sudden strike shoved Zijing Liang into absolute desperation.

Seeing that these men focused on close combat, Qingbei Lang tried to rally himself and charge.

The moment he raised his blade—

Slash!

Lao Nanfeng's saber flashed.

Qingbei Lang's head flew, blood spraying far across the ground.

Lao Nanfeng laughed uproariously.

"Got myself a bandit chief's head!"

A soldier pointed ahead. "Brother Nanfeng! There's another one!"

"That's Yunzhong Shou!"

Lao Nanfeng's eyes turned savage.

"Damn it. Who gave him the nerve to use such an arrogant name? Trying to imitate Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

"Kill that bastard!"

The Guyuan border troops charged.

They tore through the broken rebel ranks like wolves through sheep. No one dared block them.

In moments, they reached Yunzhong Shou.

Yunzhong Shou swung his saber in desperation.

Lao Nanfeng sidestepped, grabbed him by the throat, and snarled:

"Your name is far too damn arrogant."

He stabbed.

Pulled out.

Stabbed again.

Again.

Again.

Dozens of times.

Yunzhong Shou collapsed in a heap.

Lao Nanfeng spat.

"Next life," he growled, "don't pick a name like that. Do you understand what taboo means?"

Much later, he would learn the truth.

Dao Xuan Tianzun never cared about such things.

He did not mind others sharing his name, wearing the same clothes, or eating the same food.

He would never establish hierarchies over such trivialities.

But on this battlefield—

Ignorance was fatal.

Chapter 703 Trying to Steal My Glory?

Lao Nanfeng wove through the fleeing bandits like a demon let loose.

One slash.

Another.

Four or five minor bandit chiefs fell in rapid succession—Qingbei Lang, Yunzhong Shou, Jin Gang Zuan...

Each time he took a head, he dipped a finger into the blood on his saber and dragged a horizontal line across his face.

Before long, his face was striped red and black, like some feral beast freshly painted for war.

"Where's Zijing Liang?!" Lao Nanfeng roared.

"Only the biggest bandit chief is worthy of the greatest glory!"

His men shouted back at once:

"Northeast!"

"Northeast!"

"Boss, Zijing Liang's banner is over there!"

Lao Nanfeng's eyes lit up.

"Good!" he bellowed. "Chase him! Glory, silver, and honor are all under that banner!"

The Guyuan border army answered with a thunderous roar.

Ever since their release from labor reform, these men had followed Lao Nanfeng into Puzhou—the so-called Center of the World. They lived well, ate well, drank well, and were paid on time.

Gao Family Village never defaulted on wages, unlike the imperial court.

Their lives were already enviable.

But human desire was endless.

Who wouldn't want to climb even higher?

"Kill Zijing Liang!"

"Take the chief general's head!"

"That's where the real merit is!"

The Guyuan border troops charged like rabid wolves, tearing after Zijing Liang's banner.

From afar, Cheng Xu was leading his flintlock soldiers, methodically shooting down fleeing rebels. He glanced toward Lao Nanfeng's direction and couldn't help shaking his head.

"Damn," he muttered. "Those guys are terrifying. My unit would never dare charge like that."

Nearby, Xing Honglang also glanced at her own flintlock formation.

Flintlock soldiers are strong, she thought, but they're meant for steady advance and positional warfare. Charging with sabers out, screaming like madmen... that's not our way.

Even Li Daoxuan silently evaluated the scene.

In an era without automatic weapons, flintlocks simply can't compete in a pure charge.

This kind of glory?

No one could dispute it with Lao Nanfeng.

...Or so it seemed.

Because someone did intend to compete.

The White Pole Soldiers moved.

They, too, were a melee force.

After the Gao Family Village troops arrived and broke the encirclement, the rebel army collapsed. Amid the chaos, Zhang Fengyi snapped out of her daze.

She vaulted onto a rooftop, scanned the battlefield, and instantly locked onto Zijing Liang's banner.

"Pursue!" she shouted, pointing.

A thousand White Pole Soldiers surged forward as one.

Lao Nanfeng heard furious footsteps behind him. He glanced back—and nearly blew a fuse.

"The White Pole Soldiers?!" he shouted.

"I just saved your lives, and now you're trying to steal my glory?!"

He roared at his men, "Run! Faster! If the White Pole Soldiers get there first, every one of you loses enough silver for two visits to a—"

"Boss!" a soldier yelled. "Dao Xuan Tianzun forbids brothels!"

Lao Nanfeng instantly corrected himself.

"Then ten concerts!"

The Guyuan border army gasped.

Ten concerts?!

That's ruinous!

"Ao—ao—!"

They exploded forward like lunatics, accelerating so hard that even the legendary Wudang Cloud-Climbing Steps would hang its head in shame.

Behind them, the White Pole Soldiers suddenly noticed the Puzhou garrison pulling away.

Zhang Fengyi was stunned.

"They're... speeding up again?"

She felt a fire ignite in her chest.

"Sichuan White Pole Soldiers!" she shouted.

"Look at them! The Puzhou forces are fighting with their lives! Are we going to lose to them?"

The White Pole Soldiers roared back:

"Ao—ao—!"

"The Sichuan Army will not lose!"

The name Sichuan Army was no empty boast.

They surged forward again, legs churning like wind-and-fire wheels, fast enough to make even the famed Lingbo Drifting Steps beg for mercy.

Up front, Lao Nanfeng nearly lost his mind.

"They can still accelerate?!"

"Damn it, do they really have to be this desperate just to steal my glory?!"

The Guyuan border army screamed back:

"Can't lose!"

"Run!"

White Pole Soldiers: "Impossible! They're still faster? Charge harder!"

Guyuan border army: "I refuse to believe this!"

White Pole Soldiers: "Charge!"

Guyuan border army: "RUN!"

Two elite melee forces—like twin blades fitted with rocket boosters—plunged straight into the routed rebel army from opposite directions.

The clever bandits immediately realized something was wrong.

Both blades were aimed at one target.

Zijing Liang.

Those with sense quickly split off to either side, abandoning the banner entirely.

No one dared block their path.

It didn't take long.

From left and right, Lao Nanfeng and Zhang Fengyi arrived simultaneously beneath Zijing Liang's banner.

Zhang Fengyi shouted, "Bandit chief! Don't you dare run!"

Lao Nanfeng roared, "The glory is mine!"

Both charged forward—

Only to freeze.

Standing beneath the banner was a man clad in Zijing Liang's armor.

His eyes were tightly shut.

Blood trickled from their corners.

Blind.

It was Ge Goufei.

He stood there trembling, utterly lost.

Freshly blinded, he hadn't yet learned to rely on sound. He only knew Zijing Liang had dragged him along, thrown armor on him, and fled.

Everything else was darkness.

Zhang Fengyi's heart sank.

"Damn it... Zijing Liang used a blind man as a decoy."

Lao Nanfeng cursed loudly.

"Shameless bastards. Selling out their own comrades without hesitation."

Ge Goufei panicked.

"Who's there? Who's speaking? Where am I? Where's the boss? Boss Zijing Liang?!"

Zhang Fengyi hesitated. "What do we do with him?"

Lao Nanfeng snorted.

"What do you think?"

His saber fell.

Ge Goufei screamed once—then fell silent forever, trapped in eternal darkness.

Lao Nanfeng wiped his blade and drew another bloody line across his face.

Zhang Fengyi looked at the crisscrossed marks and knew he had personally slain countless bandit chiefs today.

She couldn't help but admire him.

What a brutal... and valiant general.

Lao Nanfeng sighed.

"So dull. So anticlimactic."

"The biggest glory escaped."

"I've lost my motivation."

Zhang Fengyi scanned the battlefield. Rebels were fleeing in all directions, flooding mountains and plains alike.

Finding Zijing Liang now was impossible.

She exhaled slowly.

"Sound the retreat."

"Sound the retreat!"

Gongs rang out across the battlefield.

The Gao Family Village forces and the White Pole Soldiers began to withdraw, each army regrouping as their generals converged once more on Houjia Village.

Chapter 704 Let Others Write It

Houjia Village had never witnessed such chaos in all its years.

The women and children were still crammed inside the stone houses, hugging their knees, too frightened to step outside.

In the span of less than an hour, their emotions had been flung up and down like a broken pulley.

When Li Daoxuan first appeared and rescued them, they had finally dared to breathe again.

Then he had braced himself against the door alone, holding off more than a hundred bandits battering it from outside—and their hearts leapt straight back into their throats.

When the White Pole Soldiers charged in and drove off Yuejian Fei, they relaxed once more.

Only to be immediately surrounded by an even larger wave of bandits.

Fear returned, sharper than before.

Then reinforcements arrived.

Relief again.

Back and forth, over and over.

By now, even the strongest nerves would have snapped.

Yet through it all, one thing never changed.

No matter how the battle outside shifted, Li Daoxuan never moved from the doorway.

He stood there calmly, his back facing the women inside the house, like a human wall. Just a silhouette—but somehow, it carried an indescribable sense of security.

"Don't be afraid," Li Daoxuan said softly. "It's over now. Everything has passed."

The women froze.

"...Huh?"

They didn't cheer. Instead, they crept closer behind him, cautiously peeking past his shoulders.

Only then did they see it.

The fighting was truly over.

Beyond the village perimeter, government troops stood in orderly ranks. Armor glinted. Weapons were sheathed.

A small group of commanders, each accompanied by only a few attendants, began walking toward the village.

Fear crept back in immediately.

"Government soldiers..." one woman whispered. "They're often bad people too."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Don't be afraid. These are good soldiers."

The women hesitated. "Are there... really such things as good soldiers?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "You can't paint everyone with the same brush. Yes, many soldiers are corrupt—but even in mud, white lotuses can grow. Armies like the Qi Family Army, or the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers, are examples of genuine righteousness."

They didn't fully understand his reasoning.

Yet somehow, they believed him.

As if to prove his words, Li Daoxuan didn't step aside. He stayed at the doorway, unmoving.

Soon, Cheng Xu, Xing Honglang, Gao Chuwu, Shi Jian, Bai Mao, Wang Er, and the others arrived in turn. Each cupped their fists respectfully.

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun," they said in unison. "The strategic mission has been completed."

Only Lao Nanfeng looked miserable.

He stepped forward, head lowered. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... this subordinate failed your trust. I was unable to capture the bandit chief Zijing Liang."

Li Daoxuan laughed. "It's fine. You did well—exceptionally well. Later, I'll get you two new concert videos. Dozens of new songs."

Lao Nanfeng's eyes lit up instantly.

Now that was a reward worth its weight in gold.

He could copy the celestial maidens' songs and dances, hire singers to perform them, sell tickets, rake in tips—

Tsk. Tsk. Tsk.

Glorious.

Zhang Fengyi entered from the outer perimeter, cupped her fists, and spoke, "Mr. Xiao—ah!"

She glanced around, saw there were no outsiders, and quickly corrected herself.

"Mr. Li. It turns out you had already arranged for so many subordinates to come to our rescue. If not for you, I was ninety percent certain I would have died today."

Li Daoxuan waved it off. "A small matter. Not worth mentioning."

"A life-saving grace is hardly a small matter," Zhang Fengyi said solemnly. "I, Zhang Fengyi, owe you a debt—and the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers owe you an even greater one. This kindness will be repaid."

Li Daoxuan didn't pursue the topic. Instead, he looked toward the northeast, brows slightly furrowed.

"These roaming bandits are troublesome. Even with such a wide net cast, Zijiang Liang still escaped."

The generals nodded inwardly.

Roaming bandits truly are a scourge.

Defeating them was easy.

Wiping them out completely?

That was another matter entirely.

Zhang Fengyi frowned. "I've been thinking about this for a year now. We keep winning battles, yet we never eradicate them. Is it truly impossible to wipe them out?"

Li Daoxuan replied, "Roaming bandits aren't just a military problem. They're a social one."

Zhang Fengyi blinked. "?"

"To eliminate them," Li Daoxuan continued, "you must cleanse the soil that breeds them. Cutting weeds at the surface does nothing. You must dig out the roots."

Zhang Fengyi's eyes widened slightly. "You mean..."

"Only when the common people are well-fed, warmly clothed, and free from despair will banditry truly vanish."

Silence fell.

The idea sounded simple.

Yet everyone present knew how impossibly difficult it was.

Li Daoxuan turned to Cheng Xu. "Instructor He, draft a few memorials to the court. Praise Xing Honglang, Lao Nanfeng, Shi Jian, and Wang Xiaohua. See if we can get their ranks raised."

Then he looked back at Zhang Fengyi. "General Zhang, you should write one as well. Instructor He's prose might not suit your standards."

Zhang Fengyi laughed and shook her head. "How could it not? I'm a crude soldier—writing is far beyond me. Instructor He's work will surely be better."

She would regret those words in less than an hour.

After reading Cheng Xu's memorial, Zhang Fengyi felt her scalp go numb.

"Your humble servant, Lao Nanfeng, led one thousand troops from Puzhou, advancing northeast. Southwest of Qinzhou, we encountered the two-hundred-thousand-strong bandit army of Zijing Liang. Though outnumbered, this servant felt not a trace of fear..."

Zhang Fengyi stared.

Two hundred thousand?

"...The bandits divided into four armies of fifty thousand, attacking from all directions. This servant calmly planted his spear, drew his bow, and fired in every direction..."

Her lips twitched.

"Firing more than fifty arrows in succession, each struck down an enemy chieftain. One arrow slew Yuejian Fei, another Qing Bei Lang, another Jin Gang Zuan, another Yunzhong Shou..."

"Wait," Zhang Fengyi shouted. "What in heaven's name is this nonsense?!"

"...After personally slaying over fifty bandit leaders, the enemy collapsed. This servant then charged Zijing Liang's banner, dueling him for over two hundred rounds while sustaining three grievous wounds..."

Zhang Fengyi nearly screamed.

"...Summoning divine might, I pierced Zijing Liang's shoulder. Alas, due to my injuries, I could not pursue him further."

"Aaaaaaargh! Give me a pen!" Zhang Fengyi roared. "I'll write my own memorial!"

Li Daoxuan watched, thoroughly entertained.

Ah, Zhang Fengyi... still too green. You'll get used to this sort of shamelessness with time.

Zhang Fengyi picked up the pen, determined to write the truth.

Then she hesitated.

If I'm too honest... wouldn't I expose Instructor He's memorial as fabricated? What if that harms them instead?

She sighed deeply.

In the end, she wrote:

"The battle was chaotic. Your humble servant was trapped in a heavy encirclement and was rescued by Xing Honglang, Lao Nanfeng, Shi Jian, and Wang Xiaohua. I was unable to clearly observe the course of events and respectfully request His Majesty consult the memorials written by others."

She set down the pen.

...Let others write it.

Chapter 705 I'm a Match for a Scholar

With the serious matters finally settled, Li Daoxuan turned to face the women and children huddled inside the stone house.

Soldiers stepped forward and distributed military rations.

The women and children ate ravenously. As their stomachs filled, the panic gripping their hearts gradually loosened.

These dozen or so women and children could no longer stay in Houjia Village.

In such turbulent times, without men to shield them, a group like this had no chance of surviving on their own.

Their homes were already gone.

From this moment on, their only path was to drift.

Li Daoxuan lowered his voice. "Do you have anywhere to go? Relatives, perhaps? Your maiden homes?"

The women shook their heads in unison.

"No."

Li Daoxuan asked again, "Then... what are your plans?"

The women looked up at him.

Their gazes were strange—hesitant, fearful, yet strangely resolute.

Li Daoxuan felt a sharp chill creep up his spine.

Before he could speak again, the women suddenly dropped to their knees as one.

"Please, Master," they said together. "Take us in. We are willing to be concubines or maids. From today onward, we will belong to you."

Li Daoxuan froze for a moment.

Then he sighed and shook his head.

"I cannot take you in," he said gently. "But my territory can. Come back with my people. They will arrange a proper place for you."

The women exchanged uneasy glances, fear flickering across their faces.

One of them gathered her courage and asked softly, "Master... will you go back with us? If you are not there... we are a little afraid."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"Don't worry," he said. "Once you are within my territory, I am everywhere."

The women did not truly understand his words.

But they had no power over their fates. Fearful yet obedient, they followed the Gao Family Village logistics team as instructed.

Their future lay ahead like a blank page.

They had no idea where they were being taken.

Along the way, the women were extremely cautious, walking with heads lowered, terrified that the logistics soldiers might mistreat them.

But before long, they realized their fears were unnecessary.

The discipline of the Gao Family Village logistics troops far surpassed anything they had ever seen in the Ming army.

Not a single soldier spoke improperly to them. No wandering glances. No crude jokes.

Half a day passed peacefully.

Then came mealtime.

The logistics team halted at an abandoned village. After inspecting the well and confirming there was clean water, they decided to camp there.

Some soldiers fetched water. Others gathered firewood and set up cooking fires.

Everyone moved with practiced efficiency.

The women and children swallowed nervously.

They were hungry again.

Yet none of them dared to ask for food.

They shrank into a corner, hoping to remain unnoticed. What if the soldiers had forgotten them entirely? What if asking reminded them of their existence and brought trouble instead?

Just as they huddled there, the logistics captain approached.

"Everyone," he called gently, "come over. Dinner is ready."

The women flinched.

The captain smiled kindly.

His name was Wang Chan. Because he had graduated from Gao Family Village School and could read and calculate, he had given himself a courtesy nickname: Zhuge Wang Chan.

"Don't be afraid," Zhuge Wang Chan said. "I won't harm you. Oh—right. Let me show you something."

He took two steps forward and pointed at his chest.

Embroidered on his tunic was the image of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The women stared.

At first, they didn't recognize it.

Then realization dawned.

That face... isn't that the same person who charged into Houjia Village and stood alone at the stone house door?

The embroidery blurred some details, but the resemblance was unmistakable.

Their fear eased, just a little.

Zhuce Wang Chan beckoned again. "Come. We've set aside a separate pot for you. The water is already heating. It'll boil soon. This pot is just for you dozen people. Cook however you like."

He placed a bag of flour on the ground.

After a brief hesitation, he added two bamboo boxes of luncheon meat.

Then he retreated several steps.

Like someone feeding wary stray cats.

The method worked.

The women cautiously approached.

They opened the flour bag. Even less than half a bag was more than enough for all of them.

Their eyes brightened.

Then they opened the bamboo boxes.

Inside were neatly cut cubes of meat.

"Ah!" several women gasped. "Meat!"

Zhuge Wang Chan smiled. "You should cook it yourselves. We men can barely manage edible food. What you make will definitely taste better."

With that, he turned and walked back to his unit.

The women hurriedly thanked him, then gathered around the pot.

Hands flew.

Their cooking skills were leagues above the soldiers'. Before long, a thick flour porridge simmered, fragrant and rich.

Though no one taught them how to prepare luncheon meat, they instinctively diced it finely and tossed it into the pot.

Soon, steam rose.

When the lid was lifted, the aroma drifted through the camp.

The women first served bowls to their children, then to themselves.

As they ate, tears slid silently down their faces.

Such good food...

If only we could eat like this again tomorrow...

That wish was quickly fulfilled.

When evening came and it was time to eat again, Zhuge Wang Chan returned with the same provisions.

This time, the women's fear vanished completely.

Watching the logistics soldiers clumsily prepare their own meals, several women couldn't help shaking their heads.

One of them stepped forward. "Big Brother, let us help you cook. We cannot keep eating your food for free. It makes us feel ashamed."

And so, the logistics camp grew lively.

The soldiers sat to the side, watching as the women busied themselves.

As their courage returned, the women began chatting.

One of them looked at Zhuge Wang Chan curiously. "Big Brother, you seem like a scholar."

Zhuge Wang Chan straightened a little, pride flickering across his face. "All logistics captains in Gao Family Village are educated. Logistics work involves documents, calculations, and reports. To be a captain, one must at least graduate from elementary school."

The woman blinked. "Elementary school...? Then tell me—who is more capable? You, or a xiucai?"

Zhuge Wang Chan laughed heartily. "In literary essays, I'm inferior to a xiucai. But when it comes to mathematics, I'm stronger."

She didn't understand "literary essays" or "mathematics."

But she understood one thing clearly.

This man—

He was a match for a scholar.

Chapter 706 Find a Man and Marry Here

How strange.

A man with the air of a scholar, yet he had chosen to join the army.

Good iron is not made into nails; good men do not become soldiers.

So what had driven him down this path?

The woman dared not ask directly, afraid of offending him. Instead, she carefully changed the subject.

"Sir... where are you soldiers from? And where will you take us to settle?"

Zhuge Wangchan chuckled. "We're not exactly government soldiers. We're a militia from Gao Family Village. Our territory has grown quite large, so there are many places where you could settle."

He counted on his fingers. "We'll pass through Pingyang Prefecture, then Jishan County, Hejin County... and finally Gao Family Village itself. You may choose to stay anywhere along the way, or come back with us. The decision is entirely yours."

The women exchanged uneasy looks.

"Ah?" one of them said hesitantly. "'Decide for ourselves'? Does that mean... you'll abandon us halfway?"

Those words struck fear straight into their hearts.

Decide for ourselves.

To them, this was not freedom — it was terror.

They would rather cling to someone's authority, obey clear commands, and live under rules, than be told to choose their own path. In this world, how many women truly had the right to decide their fate?

Zhuge Wangchan immediately sensed their fear. He smiled and tapped the embroidered emblem on his chest.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently. "With Dao Xuan Tianzun watching over us, you will never be abandoned. You may not understand it now, but you will — in time."

Only then did the women slowly relax.

As their mothers loosened up, the children, emboldened, began creeping closer to the soldiers.

A boy of seven or eight years old edged up to a logistics soldier, staring wide-eyed at the Chassepot rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Uncle..." the boy whispered. "That thing... it looks really powerful. I saw it yesterday. It goes 'bang,' and the bad man far away just falls down."

The soldier laughed. "That's right. This is Gao Family Village's newest weapon. One shot can kill an enemy hundreds of meters away. Terrifying, isn't it?"

The boy swallowed. "C-can I touch it?"

After checking that the rifle was unloaded, the soldier carefully handed it over.

The boy's small hands trembled as they touched the cold metal.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "I touched it! When I grow up, I want to be a powerful soldier like you, Uncle!"

The soldier shook his head with a grin. "That's not a good goal. A child your age should be going to school, studying for free, and growing up to be educated and cultured. Becoming a soldier like me? That's not something to aspire to."

The words were casual.

But they struck someone like a thunderbolt.

A young woman — the boy's mother, around twenty-five or twenty-six — rushed forward and grabbed the soldier's hand.

"Sir!" she blurted out. "Did you just say... school is free?"

The soldier stiffened, his face flushing. "Ah—yes, sister. All village schools under Gao Family Village offer free education."

Her voice trembled. "My child is seven and a half this year. Is that too old? Too young? Can he still attend?"

The soldier quickly replied, "Perfect age! Older or younger doesn't matter at all."

Her eyes shone.

She shook his hand vigorously. "Are there other requirements? Household registration, perhaps? If I marry someone from the village, would my son then qualify?"

The soldier stood there dumbfounded, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "Sister... that's a bit extreme. There's no need for that. Household registration isn't required."

Silence fell.

Around them, everyone froze.

Zhuge Wangchan burst out laughing and hurriedly scolded him. "Enough! Be careful what you say!"

Then he turned serious.

"Listen carefully," Zhuge Wangchan said to the soldiers. "Don't talk about things like marriage on this journey. These women have just escaped with their lives. Pressing such matters now would be exploiting their desperation."

He pointed at the emblem on his chest. "If Dao Xuan Tianzun found out, he'd slap you so hard you'd fly across the river!"

The logistics soldier jumped in fright and hurriedly bowed, whispering toward the emblem, "Dao Xuan Tianzun, forgive me. I truly meant no harm."

The young woman pulled her son back, though, truthfully, she wasn't angry.

In reality, this group of women desperately needed something to rely on. Knowing that someone might be willing to take her in brought her relief, not disgust.

Unbeknownst to them, Dao Xuan Tianzun had observed the entire exchange.

Yet he remained silent, as if absent.

Watching the women's reactions, he sighed inwardly.

How tragic.

Women in this old society... so fragile, so helpless.

Women who feel they cannot survive without leaning on a man — how pitiful, how heartbreaking.

That night, the logistics team camped in an abandoned village.

The women and children were housed in a derelict building, while the soldiers took turns standing guard outside. The sight filled them with a sense of security they had never known before.

At dawn, they resumed their journey.

From Qinzhou, they traveled southwest, marching from sunrise to sunset for many days until they finally reached Pingyang Prefecture.

Prefect Dou Wenda had been practically living on the city walls, staring northeast day after day, waiting for Commander Wang Xiaohua to return and garrison the city.

When he saw a group approaching, he jumped up in excitement — only to deflate when he realized it was merely the logistics team.

Without Commander Wang, his heart felt utterly empty.

The women and children gazed up at the towering prefectural city, awe and unease mingling in their hearts.

If we found a man here and married him... perhaps we could survive, they thought.

Such thoughts drifted quietly through their minds.

Zhuge Wangchan approached them and spoke softly. "Pingyang is large, but it isn't entirely within our territory. It would be better not to settle here. Of course, we won't stop you if you insist — this is only advice."

Given such a clear hint, the women immediately abandoned the idea.

They continued onward.

Before long, they arrived at Jishan County.

The fifth year of Chongzhen brought plentiful rain, not drought. Jishan, already a key agricultural region, had further benefited from Gao Family Village's fertilizer factory.

This year's harvest was abundant.

The entire county brimmed with vitality, every household preparing for the New Year.

The moment the women entered the city, warmth flooded their hearts.

"So prosperous..."

"If we married here... surely we could live."

Chapter 707 Is She a Liar?

Jishan County was bustling to an almost unbelievable degree.

The women stared at the streets in a daze—granaries full, shops busy, people walking with relaxed, unhurried steps. Compared to the hollowed-out villages they had fled, this place felt like another world entirely.

"So prosperous..." someone murmured.

"If we married a man here," another whispered, "maybe we could really live..."

Before those thoughts could settle, the street ahead suddenly stirred.

A young woman appeared, leading a sizable group of people straight toward them.

She was clearly unmarried—her hair flowed freely down her back, arranged in the style of a well-bred young lady rather than that of a married woman. Her clothes were thick and finely made, trimmed with fur despite the season. One glance was enough to tell: this was a wealthy young mistress, not an ordinary townswoman.

She crossed the street and, by coincidence—or perhaps intention—ran straight into the logistics team.

Her eyes lit up.

"Eh? Isn't that Little Zhuge?" she called out, waving. "What brings you to Jishan County?"

Zhuge Wangchan waved back, laughing.

"Miss San! I've joined the militia's logistics corps—Captain of the Eighth Squad now. Just passing through on official business."

This young woman was none other than Miss San, daughter of San Shier.

In Jishan County, she had partnered with the local gentry Mo Xiaopin to establish a fertilizer factory. She came frequently to supervise production and argue—passionately—about technical improvements.

Seeing an old classmate from Gao Family Village School, she immediately shed her usual reserve.

Honestly, Little Zhuge, you really didn't apply yourself," she said, half scolding, half amused. "We were in the same class! You were one of the most promising students of the first generation, and yet you dropped out after elementary school. If you'd just finished middle school, who knows how far you'd have gone? Look at Chen Yuanbo—he's already magistrate of Wenshui County. Even Dao Xuan Tianzun personally praised him."

Zhuge Wangchan scratched the back of his head, grinning sheepishly.

"Well... some people are just born a bit clumsy."

Miss San snorted.

"Then how dare you call yourself Zhuge Wangchan?"

He spread his hands.

"Hey, compared to my classmates I might be slow, but in the grand scheme of the world, I'm still pretty clever."

Miss San rubbed her temples, utterly exasperated.

"There it is again. That attitude is exactly why you dropped out—you're far too easily satisfied."

Zhuge Wangchan laughed quickly, raising both hands in surrender.

"Alright, alright, spare me! Let's not dig up ancient history. What are you doing, leading such a big group through the streets?"

She brightened.

"The factory's expanding. Our cafeteria can't keep up anymore—we're recruiting another batch of women cooks."

As she spoke, her gaze drifted past him... and landed on the women and children standing behind the logistics soldiers.

She blinked.

"...Little Zhuge," she said slowly, "where did you abduct these people from?"

Zhuge Wangchan nearly choked.

"What kind of nonsense is that?! Abducted? These are refugees Dao Xuan Tianzun personally rescued from Houjia Village. He ordered me to escort them back to Gao Family Village for resettlement."

Miss San's eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Hehehe... resettlement, huh? Well, anywhere can be resettlement, can't it? Our Jihua Number One Factory can resettle people too!"

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun said they're free to choose," Zhuge Wangchan replied. "Entirely up to them."

Miss San didn't hesitate. She immediately turned to the women.

"Hey, sisters! Looking for a place to settle down?" she said brightly. "You've come at the perfect time! Our Jihua Number One Factory is hiring women cooks. Your job would be simple—prepare three meals a day for the workers."

The women exchanged looks.

"...Such a job exists?" someone asked cautiously.

Miss San launched into explanation with contagious enthusiasm.

"Of course it does! Three catties of flour per day as wages. Meals are free—same food the workers eat. Clean, comfortable dormitories for living. Your children can attend the factory's children's school at no cost."

She ticked items off on her fingers.

"Year-end bonuses. Summer cooling allowances. Winter heating allowances. Zongzi for the Dragon Boat Festival. Mooncakes for Mid-Autumn Festival. Spring and autumn outings for employees. And sometimes, we even invite opera troupes to perform right inside the factory!"

Silence.

Utter, stunned silence.

The women stared at her as if she had just recited a fairy tale.

This wasn't "good treatment."

This sounded like a trap.

In unison, they took a step back—then another—and hid behind Zhuge Wangchan.

"Big brother..." one whispered urgently.

"She's lying, isn't she?"

"She's trying to trick us into being sold to a brothel, right?!"

Miss San froze, completely dumbstruck.

Zhuge Wangchan burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! Relax, relax. She's a good person—you're just not used to how things work around here yet."

But the women didn't budge. Compared to a stranger spouting impossible promises, they trusted Zhuge Wangchan far more. They clutched their children and stubbornly refused to go anywhere near the fertilizer factory.

Miss San could only sigh in defeat.

"Alright, alright. I'll go put up recruitment notices instead. There are always people willing to come. These sisters probably need time to settle down first."

That night, the logistics team rested in Jishan County.

Early the next morning, they set out again.

They passed through Hejin County, then crossed the Dragon Gate Bridge.

The women were completely mesmerized by the massive stone span, but what shocked them most was the strange structure standing at the western end—

Dragon Gate Train West Station.

Zhuge Wangchan led them into the waiting hall.

Someone couldn't help asking, "Big brother, it's still early. Shouldn't we walk another ten or twenty li before resting?"

Zhuge Wangchan smiled.

"No more walking from here on."

"...Huh?"

"We're taking transport."

Before they could process that, a piercing woo—woo! split the air.

Then came a rhythmic choo-choo-choo.

The ground trembled.

An enormous iron beast roared toward them.

"W-what is that thing?!" someone screamed.

A man stepped down from the machine, waving cheerfully.

"Little Zhuge! You're back?"

Zhuge Wangchan laughed.

"Old Li! What are you doing on the train?"

Old Li grinned.

"Official operations start tomorrow. I've been hired as a ticket inspector. See that little window? They'll sell tickets there starting tomorrow."

Zhuge Wangchan nodded thoughtfully.

"So even this railway will start charging fares. Makes sense—can't keep letting everyone ride for free after spending so much to build it."

Old Li leaned in conspiratorially.

"Oh, and there's more. The long-distance line is finished—the one connecting Xi'an through Dali, Chengcheng, Gao Family Village, Heyang, Qichuan Ferry, Linyi Yellow River Bridge, Sunji Town, Puzhou, all the way to Hedong Circuit. The opening ceremony's about to happen."

Zhuge Wangchan's eyes widened.

"That's incredible! I'll definitely ride it when I get the chance."

He turned back to the women, who stood frozen in shock.

With a wave of his hand, he smiled.

"Alright, everyone—let's get on."

Chapter 708 The Five-Taels Cotton-Padded Jacket

The women boarded the enormous iron train.

With a shrill whistle and a deep, clattering rumble, it lurched forward, dragging them away from everything they had known—and toward a future none of them could yet imagine.

The novelty alone was enough to leave them giddy.

For women and children who had never once left Houjia Village, whose world had extended no farther than muddy paths and crumbling courtyards, this experience was overwhelming in the best possible way. They pressed their faces to the windows, pointed excitedly, laughed, gasped, and whispered to one another.

They had no idea that what carried them forward was a technological miracle that no other place on earth possessed.

Only Gao Family Village had this.

But precisely because they did not understand, they were able to enjoy it fully.

Those who knew too much were often lost in shock and disbelief; those who knew nothing could simply feel joy.

Before long, the train slowed and rolled into Han City Station.

It would stop here for a quarter of an hour.

Passengers disembarked. Others boarded.

Even with the logistics soldiers, women, and children together, the carriage wasn't full. A handful of ordinary travelers came and went, adding to the quiet bustle.

Among them was a man dressed in merchant's robes.

On his chest, embroidered in gleaming gold thread, was the image of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The moment he entered the carriage, his eyes lit up.

"Well, well—if it isn't Little Zhuge!"

Zhuge Wangchan turned and laughed.

"Who else could it be but Boss Teng Yifeng! Aren't you supposed to be buried in your cement factory over in Chengcheng County? What brings you all the way to Han City?"

Teng Yifeng chuckled, patting his belly.

"After all these years of development, Chengcheng is nearly saturated. Cement sells fine, but growth has slowed. If I want the silver to keep flowing, I have to open factories where development is still booming."

Zhuge Wangchan smiled.

"Boss Teng's expanding everywhere. You'll be raking it in."

Teng Yifeng waved a hand modestly.

"It's all thanks to Dao Xuan Tianzun's guidance."

As the two men chatted, the women nearby listened quietly.

One of them, sharper-eyed than the rest, noticed something peculiar.

Boss Teng's Dao Xuan Tianzun emblem was embroidered in gold thread.

Zhuge Wangchan's, by contrast, was done in plain cotton thread.

The difference was striking.

She crept over to a logistics soldier and whispered, "Big brother... does the embroidery mean rank? Gold for high status, silver for the next, cotton for the lowest—like official robes in the imperial court?"

The soldier laughed softly.

"Nothing like that. Gao Family Village doesn't rank people that way."

"Whatever thread you use is entirely your own choice," he explained. "If you like gold, use gold. If you like cotton, use cotton. Naturally, people with more money tend to use gold—but it's not a rule."

He leaned in conspiratorially.

"Take San Shier, our chief administrator. He's one of the highest-ranking people in the village and certainly not poor, but he insists on using colorful cotton thread for his Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidery."

"And Gao Sanwa?" the soldier continued, grinning. "That little rascal didn't embroider anything at all. He spent a pile of money hiring a craftsman to cast a copper badge with Dao Xuan Tianzun's face carved into it."

The soldier shrugged.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun himself encourages everyone not to show class distinctions through clothing or appearance. Freedom matters more."

The women didn't quite understand phrases like class distinctions.

But they understood something very practical:

Gold thread cost money.

Cotton thread was affordable.

When it came time to choose a man... they would have to look carefully.

While they were still pondering this, Teng Yifeng glanced toward them.

"Little Zhuge," he said casually, "where did you recruit these women from?"

Zhuge Wangchan sighed.

"Why does everyone say 'recruit'? These are refugees rescued by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Teng Yifeng's eyes brightened immediately.

"Refugees? Then they'll need work once they reach Gao Family Village, won't they?"

"They will," Zhuge Wangchan replied.

Teng Yifeng didn't waste a second. He turned to the women with an eager smile.

"Ladies, would any of you like to work at my factory? My new cement plant needs cooks and cleaners. The pay is three catties of flour a day. Room and board included. Year-end bonuses, zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival, mooncakes at Mid-Autumn—everything included."

The women froze.

"...Huh?"

They had heard these exact words once before—in Jishan County, from a refined young lady of a great household.

At the time, they had been certain it was a scam.

Now, hearing the same promises from a man in merchant's robes, their minds spun.

One woman finally gathered the courage to ask, "Are... are wages here always so generous?"

Teng Yifeng winced.

"G-Generous? Please don't say that, I'll be embarrassed. These wages are actually quite ordinary."

He hesitated, then added, "Tell you what—at the end of the month, I'll add another five catties of flour as a bonus."

The women gasped as one.

Seeing their expressions, the escorting logistics soldier chuckled and leaned in.

"To be honest, these wages really aren't high. Grain prices in Gao Family Village are very low. A catty of flour costs only seven or eight copper coins. Three catties a day is just over twenty copper—less than seven hundred a month."

The women stared at him blankly.

"What... what did you say?"

The soldier lowered his voice.

"Cooking and cleaning are unskilled labor, so they're paid subsistence wages. But if you know weaving, sewing, or embroidery—don't work for Boss Teng."

"Go to the textile factory instead. Skilled female workers earn three taels of silver a month."

"Three taels?!"

"Three taels!!!"

The words struck like thunder.

In Houjia Village, no one earned that much. They had only heard of the village chief's distant relative—an oil merchant in Qinzhou—who earned four taels a month.

Every time the village chief mentioned him, his chest would puff with pride.

Once, when that oil merchant visited, all the women of Houjia Village had rushed to see his wife.

She wore a floral cotton-padded jacket.

She had a silver hairpin in her hair.

That jacket alone cost five taels of silver.

The women had envied her so much it hurt.

And now—

One woman whispered, voice trembling, "If I earned three taels a month... and food and housing were provided... why would I need to marry?"

Her eyes slowly brightened.

"I could raise my children myself. I could buy a five-tael cotton-padded jacket—for me and for my child. I could even wear a silver hairpin."

For the first time since fleeing Houjia Village, the thought crossed their minds—

Perhaps... a man was no longer the only way to survive.

Chapter 709 This Business Seems Profitable

The great train thundered onward, carrying the women and children through the night, until at last it arrived at Gao Family Village proper.

The sun had already sunk beyond the western hills.

Yet Gao Family Village was anything but quiet.

Nightfall only made it livelier.

The entire Gao Family Business District blazed with lanterns and electric lights, streets overflowing with people, laughter, music, and endless motion. Shops were still open, food stalls sent steam curling into the air, and voices overlapped in a joyous din. Prosperity was not hidden here—it shouted from every corner.

The women froze the moment they stepped off the train.

What kind of place... is this?

Even without ever having seen Qinzhou City, they were certain of one thing:

This place was far more prosperous.

Dragged straight from a ruined village into a city of light, their hearts pounded. Awe mixed with fear. Their hands instinctively tightened around their children.

And then—

They saw someone approaching.

A young man.

They recognized him instantly.

The one who had stood alone at the stone house door in Houjia Village.

The one who had fought bandits head-on and shielded them with his own body.

Li Daoxuan.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

Test-03—externally indistinguishable from an ordinary man, yet beneath the skin lay a terrifying war construct: weapons folded within weapons, even ribs capable of unfolding into blades.

He waved casually.

"Hey. Welcome to Gao Family Village."

The women felt an overwhelming wave of relief crash over them.

"Ah... Hero Xiao—"

"No—Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

They already knew.

This was the supreme ruler of this land.

What puzzled them was how he had returned so quickly. Back in Houjia Village, he had clearly gone off with the army to suppress bandits.

Li Daoxuan smiled, as if reading their thoughts.

"Didn't I tell you?" he said lightly. "Once you enter my domain, you'll find that I'm everywhere."

The women exchanged glances.

Yes... he had said that.

Li Daoxuan continued, "It's late today. I'll have Yiye arrange your food and lodging. Rest well first. After that, you're free to walk around, look around, and find work you like."

"If you have questions, ask Yiye or the village administrators. No one here will refuse to help you."

The women hurriedly bowed, voices overlapping with thanks.

Li Daoxuan paused, then added calmly, deliberately:

"I hope you remember one thing."

"As long as you wish it, and are willing to work for it, you do not need to rely on anyone else to survive."

"You do not need to place your future in a man's hands."

The women gasped softly.

Before they could fully process those words—

Music exploded from the nearby business district.

A famous female singer from Puzhou's Flower World Star Agency was performing as part of a tour.

Her voice rang out, bright and fearless:

I'm not afraid of cockroaches—

not afraid anymore.

Sleeping alone, I'm not afraid anymore.

No matter how dark the night,

I'll just pretend not to see—

because the sun will surely rise...

Men and women alike sang along.

Laughter erupted.

Groups of women danced openly in the streets, spinning, clapping, shouting lyrics at the top of their lungs—without shame, without restraint, without fear.

The newly arrived women stared.

These women were nothing like those of Houjia Village.

They were alive.

Unbound.

If only we could live like this...

Meanwhile—

On the eastern outskirts of Xi'an City, a grand ribbon-cutting ceremony was underway.

Today marked the official opening of the long-distance railway connecting Xi'an directly to the Hedong Circuit.

The project had been monumental.

More than six hundred li of track, crossing mountains, valleys, rivers, and plains, linking every critical point under Gao Family Village's control from east to west.

The iron consumption alone was staggering.

The iron mines under Gao Family Village's control were nowhere near sufficient—this railway owed its existence largely to the Dao Xuan Tianzun's... creative shortcuts.

(Of course, for the next railway, the Dao Xuan Tianzun had already resolved not to "cheat" again.)

Nearly all the high officials and noble families of Xi'an Prefecture had gathered at the station.

Flat Rabbit, Gao Family Village's chief representative in Xi'an, stepped forward to take the ceremonial scissors.

Then he paused.

After a moment's thought, he handed them to Wang Tang, muttering quietly, "You do it. I'm not suited for this kind of scene."

"I'm honestly itching to unleash my My Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord Sword and rob the rich to help the poor, rather than exchange empty pleasantries with this crowd."

Wang Tang gave a helpless smile.

"Rabbit Lord... you truly are something else."

Taking the scissors, he endured a mountain of formal greetings, polite smiles, and hollow praise—skipping at least a hundred million unnecessary words.

Snip.

"I hereby declare!" Wang Tang announced loudly, "The Xihe Number One Train, connecting Xi'an to Hedong, officially begins operation today!"

Thunderous applause erupted.

"Boarding is now open! And as a special promotion—today's first journey is completely free!"

Free?

The nobles surged forward without hesitation.

Only one man remained behind.

The Prince of Qin's heir, Zhu Cunji, stood on the platform, face full of regret.

"Alas... I cannot go."

Imperial princes of the Ming were forbidden from leaving their fiefdoms.

Zhu Cunji could roam Xi'an City, perhaps even visit Lintong's hot springs—but no farther.

Wang Tang walked over, smiling.

"Your Highness, the train stops in Lintong as well. You may ride it and simply disembark there."

Zhu Cunji's eyes lit up.

Without another word, he dashed aboard.

The train soon rumbled forward, carrying nobles, guards, maids, servants—and the Prince's heir himself—toward Hedong.

Zhu Cunji could only ride a short distance, but even that was enough.

As the scenery flashed past, a thought slowly formed.

He beckoned a conductor.

"Today's ride is free," Zhu Cunji asked casually, "but future rides will require tickets, correct?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Are they expensive?"

The conductor scratched his head.

"That depends. The luxurious front carriages cost dozens of taels for a few stops. The middle carriages cost a few taels for several stops. The rear carriages—just a few dozen copper coins."

Zhu Cunji quietly counted the number of carriages. Then he estimated passenger capacity.

His fingers moved.

"...If the train is full," he murmured, "one trip could earn over a thousand taels of silver."

The conductor laughed nervously.

"It's not easy to fill it completely..."

"Even half-full," Zhu Cunji said calmly, "that's several hundred taels."

He smiled.

"This business seems... very profitable."

Zhu Cunji had no ambition for power.

But money?

Money was something he liked very much.

His gaze swept the carriage—and landed on a familiar figure.

At the far end sat Li Daoxuan, leisurely holding a birdcage. Inside, a black mynah tilted its head, watching the world with malicious intelligence.

Zhu Cunji immediately sat down opposite him, smiling broadly.

"Steward Li," he said, "we meet again. This humble prince has a small business proposal he wishes to discuss with you."

The mynah bird suddenly squawked loudly:

"What's the use of talking business? It won't get hard!"

Zhu Cunji: "..."

Chapter 710 Upgrades and Replacements

Li Daoxuan watched Zhu Cunji take his seat and immediately guessed what was running through the heir apparent's mind.

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan said with a smile. "Your Highness seems quite taken with this grand iron carriage."

"Indeed. Very much so." Zhu Cunji chuckled as he looked around the carriage. "Just one trip like this—hundreds, even thousands of taels in fares. Truly... a remarkable way to make money."

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow. "Thinking of getting involved?"

"Absolutely." Zhu Cunji nodded without hesitation.

Li Daoxuan laughed and shook his head. "Your Highness, I'm afraid you can't build it."

Zhu Cunji froze. "Why not?"

Li Daoxuan tapped the metal wall beside him. "This single carriage—how much iron do you think it consumes?"

Zhu Cunji: "!"

Li Daoxuan continued calmly, "And the rails laid across the land. From here to the neighboring county alone—how much iron would that take?"

Zhu Cunji: "!!!"

This time, the heir apparent finally understood.

Even with the resources of the Prince of Qin's mansion, such a project was simply too vast. The iron alone would bankrupt him.

Zhu Cunji frowned. "Then how did you manage it?"

He didn't believe that Li Daoxuan—this so-called Gentleman Li—was wealthier than an imperial prince. If even he couldn't afford it, how had Li Daoxuan pulled it off?

Li Daoxuan replied lightly, "A stock-sharing system."

Zhu Cunji: "???"

"One person can't shoulder it alone," Li Daoxuan explained. "You gather wealthy partners. For example—if I invest one hundred thousand taels, and another person invests the same, each holding half the shares, suddenly you have two hundred thousand taels to work with."

Zhu Cunji's eyes lit up.

So it was simply a partnership—just dressed up with new terminology.

"If I wanted to do this," Zhu Cunji said slowly, "I'd need to cooperate with others?"

"Precisely." Li Daoxuan smiled. "Bring in the wealthy households and magnates of Xi'an. Pool their funds. Order grand trains and rails from me. Choose routes, lay the tracks, run the trains, and collect fares..."

Zhu Cunji nodded thoughtfully. "This... requires careful consideration."

At that moment, a mynah bird screeched from its cage, voice sharp and mocking:

"What's the use of pondering? You can't get it up anymore!"

Zhu Cunji's face darkened instantly.

Snap.

"You foul bird!" he roared. "This Heir Apparent has tolerated you for far too long!"

Li Daoxuan merely smiled inwardly.

Go ahead. Ponder all you like.

As a prince, you won't dare partner with ordinary merchants. You'll look for imperial relatives instead. And just like that—out comes a Royal Railway Company.

Public infrastructure funded by royalty.

When the tide of revolution arrives, all of it will naturally fall into the hands of the people...

Tsk. Perfect.

Before long, the train arrived at Lintong Station.

Zhu Cunji could go no farther. With a sigh filled with regret, he disembarked and headed toward the hot spring resort.

The grand train pressed on, rumbling through prefectures and counties, until it finally reached Gao Family Village Railway Station.

Here, the first avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun disembarked. His steps swayed slightly as he entered the waiting room.

Inside, the third avatar, who had been seated, stood up. He took the birdcage from the first avatar's hand and gave his shoulder a light pat.

"Congratulations," he said warmly. "On your honorable retirement."

With that, the third avatar turned and boarded the train once more.

Time's great wheel rolled forward without mercy.

In Gao Family Village, heroes continued to surpass their predecessors. Middle-school graduates were beginning to step onto the stage, showing talent and ambition.

Even Dao Xuan Tianzun's true body was undergoing continuous upgrades and replacements—discarding old shells, refining new ones—marching steadily toward a fresh rebirth.

Meanwhile, the Gao Family Village Army continued its pursuit of Zijing Liang's forces.

As the saying went:

Evil must be eradicated thoroughly.

After routing Zijing Liang once, a victorious pursuit was only natural.

At the same time, the imperial court had cast its net wide.

The Supreme Commander of Xuanfu and Datong, Zhang Zongheng.

The Governor of Shanxi, Xu Dingchen.

The Sichuan Grand General, Deng Qi.

The famed Sichuan White Pole Soldiers.

Vice Grand General Zuo Liangyu.

Multiple forces converged, tightening the encirclement around Zijing Liang.

Gao Family Village was preparing to coordinate with them—

When, just after passing Wuxiang County, a lone rider came galloping toward them at full speed.

The man dismounted in a tumble, barely steadying himself as he shouted urgently, "Is Commander Wang Xiaohua present?"

Every head turned at once.

All eyes landed on Bai Mao, expressions strange.

Cold sweat broke out on Bai Mao's back. "Hey—just 'Commander Wang' will do. No need to shout my full name like that!"

The messenger bowed hastily. "I am a household retainer of Prefect Dou Wenda of Pingyang. I bear urgent military intelligence."

Bai Mao: "?"

"The rebel army of Yan Zhenghu has breached Xishui County," the messenger said breathlessly. "When I departed, they were less than a hundred li from Pingyang Prefecture. The Prefect has only local militia—utterly useless. He begs Commander Wang to return with reinforcements!"

Bai Mao fell silent.

At that moment, the second avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun, who had just finished repairing his damaged silicone body, waved a hand.

"Go," he said calmly. "The pursuit of Zijing Liang won't fail because of your absence. But we cannot allow the people of Pingyang to be slaughtered."

Bai Mao clasped his fists. "Understood!"

He immediately turned back with Wang Er, leading their troops toward Pingyang Prefecture.

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly and turned to Shi Jian.

"Xishui County lies near the Yellow River," he said. "Yan Zhenghu may not go to Pingyang at all. If he advances south along the eastern bank, the Longmen Yellow River Bridge will be his first target."

Shi Jian stiffened. "I understand."

"You return at once and garrison Longmen Bridge."

Shi Jian accepted the order and departed with his men.

Just like that, Gao Family Village's forces were reduced by two thousand.

Before they could resume the pursuit, yet another rider came charging in—this time a militia scout from Gao Family Village.

He dismounted swiftly, knelt, and bowed deeply toward Dao Xuan Tianzun's second avatar.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun—disaster has struck!"

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan said.

"Shang Tianlong has captured Yangcheng," the scout reported rapidly. "He's approaching Hedong Circuit. Our salt-producing lands are no longer safe. The brothers guarding the city sent me to request reinforcements!"

Li Daoxuan fell silent.

Before he could speak, Cheng Xu said gravely, "Dao Xuan Tianzun, protecting our own territory must come first."

"Correct." Li Daoxuan nodded.

Though he cared for all under Heaven, priorities still existed. The lives of his people outweighed those of unaligned commoners.

If Hedong Circuit was threatened, Xing Honglang's forces had to return.

And since roving bandits didn't siege cities methodically—preferring to bypass defenses and strike weak points—Puzhou City was also in danger.

That meant Lao Nanfeng's forces had to return as well.

Cheng Xu sighed. "Then... we can no longer pursue Zijing Liang."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "Withdraw the troops. We return."

Zhang Fengyi hesitated. "Gentlemen... if all of you withdraw to defend your own lands, what should I do?"

Li Daoxuan looked at her. "General Zhang, the White Pole Soldiers have endured prolonged fighting. Continuing the pursuit would be unwise. Why not withdraw to Hedong Circuit with us and rest?"

Zhang Fengyi wanted to continue fighting—but when she glanced at her troops, their exhaustion was unmistakable. Many were wounded, others barely standing.

They truly needed rest.

"...Very well," she said at last. "I will withdraw with you to Hedong City."