

Great Ming 731

Chapter 731 A Shoddy Production Gao Family Village.

Gao Yiye held a thick stack of papers in both hands, reading them over and over again.

The pages were slightly wrinkled at the corners.

This stack of paper was, in theory, a speech personally written for her by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Of course—

This so-called "personal writing" was, in reality, Dao Xuan Tianzun copying materials from the internet, pasting them together, and then carefully replacing a few key terms so they wouldn't sound too outrageous in a feudal setting.

Ahem.

Even though Gao Yiye had already memorized every word, she still felt uneasy.

Because today's broadcast was live.

Not recorded.

Not edited.

Not fixable.

And more importantly—

This wasn't just a trial broadcast within Gao Family Village.

It would be simultaneously broadcast to every single region under Dao Xuan Tianzun's direct control.

At this very moment—

Gao Family Village's commercial district.

Chengcheng County's City God Temple plaza.

Heyang County.

Qichuan Ferry.

Puzhou City.

Dragon Gate Ferry.

Sunji Town.

Huanglong Mountain Prison.

Han City.

Fenglingdu Ferry.

Dali County.

Baishui County.

Lintong Hot Spring Resort.

Every place where Dao Xuan Tianzun's hand could reach—

Large screens had already been erected in the central squares.

The people had been notified days in advance.

Now, massive crowds gathered before the screens, shoulder to shoulder, craning their necks in anticipation.

This wasn't their first time.

Over the past few days, these screens had already run several trial broadcasts.

And the content had been... chaotic.

One day, Gao Yiye catching thieves.

Another day, "Shi Kefa's First Legal Education Program", where Shi Kefa nervously forgot half his prepared lines.

Another day, a documentary showing Dao Xuan Tianzun excavating the Huangqiu Terrace Tunnel.

Yet another day, footage of daily life inside Huanglong Mountain Prison.

Disordered.

Unpredictable.

Strange.

But precisely because of that—

People were hooked.

By now, everyone had learned one simple rule:

After finishing work in the evening, go to the square and wait.

Those who came early got good spots.

Those who came late either stood at the back—or paid silver to squeeze forward.

Right on time.

The massive screen flickered.

Light bloomed across the plaza.

Gao Yiye appeared.

She smiled gently.

"Today," she began, "I want to talk to everyone about the Gao Family Village Militia."

Her tone was calm, steady, reassuring.

"In the past," she continued, "there was a saying among the common folk:

'A good man doesn't become a soldier, and good iron isn't used for nails.'"

As she spoke—

The image behind her changed.

Scenes of Ming soldiers flashed across the screen.

Burning villages.

Looting homes.

Dragging civilians away.

Killing innocents, then falsely claiming military merit.

The crowd erupted instantly.

"Bastards!"

"That's exactly how they are!"

"No better than bandits!"

Faces twisted with anger.

Before emotions could spiral out of control, Gao Yiye's voice cut back in.

"But," she said firmly,

"our Gao Family Village Militia is not like that."

The screen changed again.

Militia soldiers helping elderly villagers cross roads.

Distributing food during famine.

Rescuing people during floods.

Standing guard through bitter cold and blazing heat.

"These are disciplined soldiers," Gao Yiye said.

"Righteous soldiers.

The people's own sons and brothers."

Her voice grew stronger.

"Becoming a soldier is no longer a shame.

It is a glorious mission."

What followed—

Was an omission of countless sensitive words.

Words that, in another world, would have guaranteed instant censorship.

Instead, the message was delivered through images.

Clear.

Blunt.

Overwhelming.

The audience saw the militia's weapons—

Uniform flintlock rifles, capable of striking enemies from a hundred meters away.

They saw the food—

Every meal with meat.

Every bowl steaming and full.

They saw the housing—

Solid brick homes allocated to soldiers.

They saw the pay—

Militia soldiers lining up every month to receive five full taels of silver.

Five taels.

The crowd was stunned.

Minds reeled.

Old beliefs shattered like rotten wood.

"A good man doesn't become a soldier?"

To hell with that.

"So joining the militia is this good?"

"I always thought it was like being a military household."

"This... this is completely different!"

"Military households are bound for life! Generations trapped!"

"But militia service is voluntary!"

"You can even retire!"

"No forced inheritance!"

"Five taels of silver, food included, housing included—are you kidding me?"

"I'm a craftsman and can't even make three taels a month!"

"I'm signing up!"

Voices overlapped.

Excitement spread like wildfire.

At the same time—

In Puzhou City, outside the Stars Performing Arts Agency—

A massive advertisement had been pasted.

On the third day of the third lunar month
On the third day of the third lunar month

The epic film Mu Guiying will meet you

No one paid it much attention.

The date was still far away.

Most people assumed Lao Nanfeng had simply invited a troupe to perform another stage play.

Watching plays was normal.

Nothing special.

No one realized—

That at this very moment, outside the diorama box, Li Daoxuan was sitting before his computer, editing footage.

Li Daoxuan rubbed his temples.

The timeline was a mess.

Camera angles awkward.

Cuts clumsy.

Performances exaggerated.

The action scenes?

A disaster.

The Twelve Widows of Tianbo Mansion swung their weapons like they were rehearsing opera, not fighting wars.

No weight.

No impact.

No brutality.

"This is trash..." Li Daoxuan muttered.

A complete shoddy production.

But—

He didn't have the skill to fix it.

"...Forget it," he sighed.

"It'll have to do."

Time passed.

The third day of the third lunar month arrived.

With no battles recently, Lao Nanfeng wasn't wearing armor.

Instead, he wore a dignified long gown, looking refined and scholarly.

He stood proudly at the entrance of his Grand Theater, hands behind his back, wearing a smug smile.

Qiu Qianfan, Prefect of Puzhou, approached with a laugh.

"Commander Nan," he said, "I heard there's a new play today. I came specifically to show support."

Lao Nanfeng grinned.

"Today's not a play," he corrected.

"It's called a movie."

"Movie?" Qiu Qianfan frowned.

"What kind of nonsense term is that?"

Lao Nanfeng explained casually,

"It's Mu Guiying's story, performed inside the Immortal Treasure Mirror."

Qiu Qianfan snorted.

"In the end, it's still just a play. People love inventing new names to fool others."

Lao Nanfeng laughed.

"Just go in and watch."

Qiu Qianfan shook his head and walked inside.

Soon, more guests arrived—

Wealthy households.

Salt merchants.

Regular patrons.

Everyone came to give Lao Nanfeng face.

Not a single one of them realized—

They were about to witness something that would shatter their understanding of entertainment forever.

Chapter 732 So This Is What Movies Are Like

The grand theater quickly filled with people.

Qiu Qianfan was, after all, the Prefect of Puzhou. A figure of power and wealth like him naturally occupied one of the best seats in the very front row. Around him sat a circle of officials, gentry, and local dignitaries, all carefully arranged according to status.

Only after everyone else had taken their seats did Lao Nanfeng arrive at an unhurried pace. He glanced around, then casually sat down beside Qiu Qianfan, as though this were the most natural thing in the world.

Qiu Qianfan chuckled as he turned his head.

"Commander Nan, you truly enjoy the favor of Dao Xuan Tianzun. To think one of these Divine Mirrors would be specially installed inside your grand theater."

Lao Nanfeng's chest puffed out slightly.

"I fought for this with my life," he said, not bothering to hide his pride. "At the Battle of Houjia Village, how many bandit chiefs did I personally cut down? Only after that did Dao Xuan Tianzun bestow this treasure upon me."

Qiu Qianfan sighed, his tone filled with genuine envy.

"Ah... I, too, wish I could render some merit for Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Lao Nanfeng laughed.

"You? Forget it. Everything you know would be completely crushed by the middle school students of Gao Family Village."

Qiu Qianfan's face stiffened slightly. Embarrassed, he lowered his voice.

"I've already sent my son to Gao Family Village School, hmph. Once he finishes studying the Celestial Heavenly Books, he certainly won't lose to your Gao Family Village middle schoolers."

Lao Nanfeng merely shrugged.

"We'll see. Enough talk. It's about to begin."

At that moment, all the lights inside the grand theater suddenly went out.

The entire hall plunged into pitch darkness.

"Huh?"

"What's going on?"

"Why did the lights go out?"

The audience immediately began murmuring.

Normally, whenever there were song-and-dance performances here, the theater would be brilliantly lit. Lao Nanfeng spared no expense, hiring the finest lantern craftsmen to make all sorts of elaborate lamps. When fully lit, the entire theater sparkled magnificently.

So what was going on tonight?

Were they playing some kind of strange "dark room" trick?

Just as confusion spread—

The enormous tablet screen set up on the stage suddenly flickered, then lit up.

A wave of excitement instantly rippled through the crowd.

"Oh! The Divine Mirror is on!"

"So this performance was recorded beforehand and is being played through the Divine Mirror?"

"That's quite novel!"

In truth, the people present were not entirely unfamiliar with the Divine Mirror. Over the past few days, they had watched trial broadcasts in the market squares: news footage, Shi Kefa's legal education programs, documentaries about construction projects, and even daily life in Huanglong Mountain Prison.

So while they were surprised, they were not utterly at a loss.

Slowly, several large characters appeared in the center of the screen.

Mu Guiying

Beneath them, another line appeared, slightly smaller.

A Li Daoxuan Production

The audience gasped.

"Was this made by Dao Xuan Tianzun Himself?"

"A Dao Xuan Tianzun production!"

"My heavens, this ticket was worth it already!"

"It hasn't even started yet, and I already feel like I've struck gold!"

The chatter grew louder and louder.

Meanwhile, the words on the screen continued to scroll downward.

Starring: Cai Lin

Featuring: Lao Nanfeng

Featuring: Chen Qianhu

Line after line passed by.

At the same time, a calm, emotionless voice began narrating:

"During the Northern Song Dynasty, the Yang family generals were either slain in battle or murdered by treacherous ministers. When the Western Xia rebelled, the Tianbo Mansion found itself with no man left to lead the army. At this critical moment, Mu Guiying stepped forward..."

Many people barely listened.

Who didn't know this story already?

Everyone assumed that once the introduction ended, Cai Lin would appear on screen, singing and dancing like in a normal play.

But—

Suddenly, all the text vanished.

What replaced it was a vast stretch of desolate land.

The scene moved, sweeping across the frontier.

In reality, this footage was taken from old recordings Li Daoxuan had made of the Gao Family Village Militia fighting bandits. Through AI synthesis, their clothing and banners had been altered, transforming them into Song and Liao soldiers clashing in battle.

The effect was crude.

But the audience didn't know that.

As the image passed over two opposing armies locked in combat, everyone in the theater was stunned.

Only Li Daoxuan, outside the diorama box, shook his head.

"Terrible. Absolutely terrible. These effects are way too cheap. Next time, I really need to hire professionals."

Inside the theater, Qiu Qianfan stared, trembling.

"Just now... was that... an actual battle between the Song and Liao armies? Is Dao Xuan Tianzun using the Divine Mirror to show us scenes from hundreds of years ago?"

He wasn't the only one thinking this.

Everyone remembered that only days earlier, Dao Xuan Tianzun had shown footage of a thief stealing. They had believed the Divine Mirror could reveal events that had already happened.

Naturally, they assumed this was the same.

Someone in the audience suddenly jumped up.

"Incredible!"

"Sit down!"

"You're blocking my view!"

After sweeping over the battlefield, the image suddenly descended, plunging straight into the melee. Soldiers clashed, weapons swung, and blood splattered.

The entire hall fell silent.

No one spoke for a long while.

Once again, only Li Daoxuan sighed.

"Fifty cents. These effects are worth fifty cents at most."

The image paused on the face of a man wearing Liao armor. Subtitles appeared beside him:

Xiao Tianzuo, General of Liao

Although the name was unfamiliar, everyone immediately recognized the face.

"Isn't that... Chen Qianhu?"

There he was, dressed as a Liao general, wielding a massive hammer. He smashed a Song soldier to the ground and burst into laughter.

"Song soldiers are nothing but soft eggs! Die! Die! With the Yang family generals gone, who in the Song realm can oppose me? Hahahaha!"

All heads in the VIP section turned simultaneously toward Chen Qianhu, who was sitting among them.

Chen Qianhu's face flushed crimson.

"Don't look at me! Watch the movie! I didn't want to play such an obnoxious role either, but Commander Nan ordered me to!"

"Hmph."

The crowd snorted and turned back to the screen.

The image soared upward again, piercing through layers of clouds until the screen turned completely white. Then it plunged downward.

Below appeared a grand mansion.

Qiu Qianfan blurted out,

"Eh? Isn't that Li Xiangui's residence, south of the city?"

Lao Nanfeng grinned.

"Indeed. We borrowed his house to serve as the Tianbo Mansion."

The audience fell silent.

Li Xiangui, sitting nearby, burst into laughter.

"My house! That's my house!"

On screen, the plaque at the entrance, originally reading "Li Mansion," had been forcibly altered to read "Tianbo Mansion." The modification was crude and obvious.

But no one cared.

The audience watched with growing delight.

The scene moved through halls and corridors, finally stopping in a side chamber.

Cai Lin stood there in full armor.

Normally gentle and soft-spoken, she now looked valiant and heroic. In an instant, she captured the hearts of more than half the audience.

Beside her, text appeared:

Mu Guiying

Only now did the audience truly understand.

This thing called a "movie" was completely different from traditional opera.

Opera relied on a fixed stage, exaggerated movements, and symbolic performance.

But this—

This pursued realism.

It felt as though an entirely new world had been opened before their eyes.

Chapter 733 Let's Make a Short Series

The screening of Mu Guiying came to an end.

The audience remained immersed for a long while, reluctant to leave their seats. For the officials, gentry, and wealthy patrons present, this completely new art form had proven more than worth the price of admission.

After returning home, these influential figures began actively spreading the word.

Movies, by their very nature, relied heavily on word-of-mouth. As long as the reputation was good, ticket sales would naturally rise over time.

First came the relatives and close friends of the officials and gentry. Then, gradually, the trend spread to ordinary wealthy households. Before long, even relatively well-off workers from the Gao Family Village factories began to attend.

Puzhou City itself had long since been developed as a system of "satellite villages and towns."

Many factories were located ten or even twenty li away from the main urban area. As a result, a large number of workers would take public buses into the prefectural city after finishing their shifts, just to watch Mu Guiying.

Because of this, once night fell, the prefectural city became unusually lively.

The street in front of the Puzhou Grand Theater, in particular, was bustling to an astonishing degree.

Seeing the opportunity, peddlers hurried to set up stalls along both sides of the street. Snacks of every variety filled the air with fragrance. Some vendors even sold items they had previously received as "blessings from Dao Xuan Tianzun," such as—

Potato chips.

Snow crackers.

Chocolate.

Jelly.

Even Li Daoxuan was momentarily stunned when he saw this.

How had this place suddenly transformed into something resembling a bustling market street from a later era?

People spent money here without the slightest hesitation.

From any perspective, this was a very good thing.

It stimulated the economy.

And it was precisely the kind of change Li Daoxuan liked to see.

At that moment, outside the diorama box, Li Daoxuan was eating his meal. Today, he had ordered Cantonese rice noodle rolls. One couldn't always eat spicy food; occasionally switching to something lighter was necessary.

As he ate, his messaging app suddenly began flashing.

It was a university alumni group chat.

This group had been quiet for a long time, nearly dormant. Now, for some reason, it had suddenly come alive.

A message appeared:

"Hey everyone, how've you all been? Short-form series are really popular right now! Our class was all design majors, so some of you must be into short series too, right? Come take a look at the one I made and give me some advice."

Attached was a video.

Li Daoxuan was eating anyway and had nothing urgent to do, so he clicked it open.

At a glance, he almost laughed.

It was one of those classic online "underdog strikes back, billionaire falls in love" short series.

The story was simple: a plain-looking woman in her early thirties, dirt poor, enters a company to work. She is bullied by her department manager. Just when her situation reaches rock bottom, the company's

young, rich, second-generation chairman inexplicably falls for her—simply because she talked back to him a couple of times in the elevator.

From there, the chairman goes all out to support her. The female lead achieves a dramatic reversal of fortune, while the department manager is humiliated again and again, eventually begging for mercy.

Once the video was sent, the already quiet group chat became even quieter.

The classmates were collectively speechless.

Li Daoxuan, who was bored anyway, decided to say something polite.

"Hey, old classmate, it's really well shot. Nice work. This one's definitely going to be a hit."

The moment this message was sent, the group exploded with activity.

QueenOfAThousandFaces_M:

"Xuanzi, you're praising him against your conscience, aren't you?"

LoneGooseWanderer:

"Xuanzi, you just couldn't bear to crush his fragile heart, right? That short series is ridiculously clichéd. It's a trope from Korean dramas twenty years ago. It's definitely going to flop."

Ji Menghan:

"Xuanzi, don't tell me you invested in this short series?"

Li Daoxuan hadn't expected such a reaction. Feeling slightly awkward, he hurriedly typed:

"No, no, I didn't invest. I was just following the principle of 'mutual encouragement for collective progress.' Just a casual comment—don't read too much into it."

LoneGooseWanderer:

"That makes sense. I thought you'd gone crazy."

QueenOfAThousandFaces_M:

"By the way, Xuanzi, what have you been up to these past few years?"

Li Daoxuan paused.

I can't exactly tell them I've been staying at home, making money by carving micro-sculptures and filming short videos inside a box, can I?

How should he answer?

Just then, an idea occurred to him.

Li Daoxuan uploaded his own crudely produced, "five-mao special effects" version of Mu Guiying into the group chat.

"I'm making a short series too. Everyone, take a look and give me some feedback."

The moment the video appeared—

The entire group fell into complete silence.

After a long pause, the classmate who had originally shared his short series finally replied:

"Xuanzi, your short series is really well shot. I think it's definitely going to be a big hit."

The rest of the group immediately reacted:

"Holy cow, you two really are just flattering each other, aren't you?"

Ji Menghan:

"Let's be honest, Xuanzi. Your special effects are way too 'five-mao.' Actually, even five-mao is generous—I'd say four-mao at most."

LoneGooseWanderer:

"Don't be angry, Xuanzi, but your special effects really are terrible. This series is doomed to fail."

QueenOfAThousandFaces_M:

"While the special effects are awful and the acting is stiff, this film isn't completely without merit. Everyone, look closely: the fight scenes are incredibly realistic, and the combat choreography is absolutely top-tier."

At her suggestion, everyone dragged the progress bar to the major battle scenes.

They ignored Mu Guiying's awkward acting and highly unprofessional movements, focusing instead on the clashes between the ordinary soldiers.

The formations.

The tactical coordination.

The professionalism.

The desperate struggle to survive.

The unyielding will to fight.

QueenOfAThousandFaces_M:

"Xuanzi, I'm genuinely impressed by your action scenes. How about we collaborate?"

Li Daoxuan replied:

"Oh? How would we collaborate?"

QueenOfAThousandFaces_M:

"Give me the raw footage. I'll re-edit it and add proper effects. I'll cut out the awkward dramatic scenes, reduce the female lead's screen time, and rework it into an ultra-short combat series—one minute per episode—marketed purely on the fight scenes."

Li Daoxuan asked:

"Can that actually make money?"

QueenOfAThousandFaces_M replied confidently:

"Absolutely. And I'm not flattering you—I'm being objective. Once you cut out the main actors and focus only on the extras fighting, the quality is world-class. No more talk. You invested in actors and

equipment, that's a big cost. I'm just contributing a computer and my labor. If we make money, you take eighty percent, I take twenty. Deal or not?"

Li Daoxuan replied immediately:

"Deal."

They quickly drafted a simple agreement online. Electronic contracts were easy these days. In less than half an hour, the terms of cooperation and profit sharing were settled.

Li Daoxuan selected several clips that didn't obviously look like they were filmed inside the box and sent them over.

QueenOfAThousandFaces_M got to work immediately, editing through the night.

She was astonishingly efficient.

Early the next morning, while Li Daoxuan was still deciding where he would "co-sense" and explore for the day, a message popped up.

"The first episode of the short series has already been uploaded."

Li Daoxuan downloaded the short-series app and opened it.

Sure enough, the first episode was already there.

The view count, however, was pitifully low.

Tsk, he thought.

Looks like it's going to flop.

Chapter 734 New Village Bookstore

Despite the low number of views, Li Daoxuan noticed that the first episode of the short series already had several reviews. More importantly—every single one of them was positive.

He clicked on the comments and read them one by one.

"The fight choreography in this video is extremely realistic."

"Damn, my scalp went numb watching this. They're actually killing people."

"The ancient military formations are recreated with frightening accuracy."

"It really feels like watching a real battlefield."

"That actor playing Xiao Tianzuo—he definitely has genuine martial skills."

There were only a few scattered reviews, but among them, not a single negative remark could be found. All praise. Such unanimity was rare.

Li Daoxuan nodded slightly to himself.

The reception isn't bad. I'll wait and see how the next episodes perform.

The rest would depend on Thousand-Faced Queen M continuing her work. There was no point rushing her.

Recently, Li Daoxuan had been focused on matters of culture. Thinking along those lines, he decided to take a look at developments in the cultural industry. With a shift of thought, his shared perception jumped to the cotton-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun talisman hanging on Gao Shan's chest.

Gao Laba's son—Gao Shan.

At this moment, Gao Shan was in Yan'an Prefecture, standing at the entrance of a newly renovated, officially opened, large-scale bookstore.

The signboard above the door read: New Village Bookstore.

The meaning was obvious—the brand-new Gao Family Village.

Gao Family Village already had a village-run bookstore, personally managed by San Shier. Chengcheng County also possessed a sizable bookstore overseen by Principal Wang.

After careful consideration, Gao Shan decided that the main branch of the New Village Bookstore should be established here, in Yan'an Prefecture.

He wanted to innovate, expand outward, open new markets, and truly take off from this location.

The decoration of the bookstore had cost an enormous amount of silver. It was the kind of expenditure no ordinary young man could afford. However, behind Gao Shan stood Gao Laba.

And Gao Laba's wealth had always been something of a mystery.

He never told anyone how much money he made selling rice noodles. No one really knew.

It was only when Gao Shan decided to embark on this business venture that people finally realized just how unfathomable Gao Laba's financial strength truly was.

Li Daoxuan swept his gaze across the entire bookstore.

The interior was lavishly furnished. Gold leaf adorned many of the decorative elements, giving the space a bright and dignified appearance. The windows were made from large, seamless panes of glass, transported all the way from the glass factory in Gao Family Village, allowing sunlight to pour freely into the store.

The bookshelves were crafted entirely from top-grade timber, coated with fine lacquer. At their corners, artisans had carved delicate patterns and ornamental designs, meticulous and refined.

Li Daoxuan immediately recognized that the modern bookstore concepts he had once discussed with Gao Shan had been thoroughly absorbed and put into practice.

Following those ideas, the bookstore was divided into distinct areas: one section devoted to book displays, and another furnished with tea tables—clearly separating the "sales area" from the "reading lounge."

Within the sales area, the shelves were further subdivided with great care. Textbooks, novels, comic books, and reference materials were each arranged in their own sections.

At this point, several customers had already entered the store and begun browsing.

All of them appeared to be people of some means—at the very least, they were not the kind who worried about where their next meal would come from. After entering, nearly all of them headed straight toward the textbook section.

Most had come to purchase the Four Books and Five Classics, planning to study diligently in preparation for the imperial examinations.

One young scholar browsed for a while before selecting a copy of *The Great Learning*. He flipped it open, examined it closely, and nodded in satisfaction.

"Shopkeeper," he said, "I could already sense how impressive this bookstore was from outside. Now that I'm inside, it's even more remarkable. The paper quality of this book is excellent, and the printing is superb. Truly marvelous. It's far better than the copy of *The Great Learning* I bought previously."

Gao Shan smiled and stepped forward.

"My friend," he asked, "since you already own a copy of *The Great Learning*, why purchase another?"

The scholar let out a helpless sigh.

"My younger brother is too mischievous," he explained. "He knocked over my inkstone and ruined several of my important books."

Gao Shan responded sympathetically, "Ah, that is truly unfortunate. It seems your home study environment is not ideal."

The scholar sighed again, even more deeply this time.

"With three younger brothers and two younger sisters at home," he said, "once they start making noise, the house turns into utter chaos."

"In that case," Gao Shan suggested, "why not read here instead? Over there is our reading lounge. It's quiet and elegant. You could read while enjoying some tea—wouldn't that be most pleasant?"

The scholar looked toward the reading lounge.

Inside, several tea tables were arranged neatly, each separated by partitions, forming small, independent spaces. It truly was an excellent environment for reading and studying. His eyes immediately lit up.

Gao Shan continued, "There's another benefit as well. If you suddenly need to consult other reference books, you can easily retrieve them from the sales area."

The scholar clapped his hands.

"Brilliant! Simply brilliant!"

He hurried into the reading lounge, claimed a tea table, ordered a pot of the cheapest Eagle Tea, and soon became completely absorbed in his book, oblivious to everything else.

Li Daoxuan chuckled silently.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Gao Shan really understands what he's doing.

Thanks to Gao Shan's arrangements, before long, several scholars had taken seats in the reading lounge, each immersed in their studies.

The more introverted scholars quietly read on their own. The more outgoing ones, however, would actively approach other tables, sit down, and open their books.

"My esteemed friend," one might say politely, "these few lines are somewhat unclear to this humble junior. Might I trouble you for some guidance?"

The scholar being addressed would immediately straighten up, pride evident on his face. Scholars of this era were rarely modest when it came to their learning. Once invited to explain, they would eagerly assume a posture of authority.

"Ah, these lines," he would begin, "their meaning is as follows..."

What followed was inevitably a long discourse filled with quotations from the classics and elaborate explanations, enough to fill several pages.

After receiving instruction, the questioner would naturally express his gratitude.

"My friend, we are truly fated to meet," he would say warmly. "Today, I must treat you to some tea. Shopkeeper, bring us your very best!"

Gao Shan would answer promptly, "Of course. One pot of special-grade pre-Qingming Longjing, coming right up."

Upon seeing the bill, the scholar would be momentarily startled—it was expensive, nearly twice the price charged by ordinary teahouses.

But after giving it some thought, he would reconsider. The decor, the atmosphere—weren't these several times better than any regular tea shop? Paying double the price seemed entirely reasonable, even conscientious.

Thus, the scholarly atmosphere in the reading lounge steadily grew thicker and richer.

Li Daoxuan reflected inwardly:

Once news of this place spreads, I'm afraid nearly all the scholars and students in Yan'an Prefecture will gather here. This will naturally form a cultural center—an excellent outcome indeed.

Gathering scholars together to study and discuss was far better than having them labor in isolation. It was much more conducive to nurturing truly capable individuals.

Just then, a large group of people appeared at the bookstore entrance.

Leading them was Chen Qiyu, Governor of Yansui, followed by guards, attendants, and various retainers.

As soon as he entered, Chen Qiyu burst into laughter.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" he exclaimed. "So the bookstore has finally opened! I wanted to visit while it was still under preparation, but now it's officially open. Congratulations—my sincere congratulations!"

The scholars and students inside all turned their heads at once.

The Governor!

They were startled, yet at the same time, an inexplicable excitement welled up within them.

Chapter 735 Stirring Up Trouble Again

The instant they recognized the Governor, the young scholars and students all had the same thought at once:

Coming to this bookstore today was absolutely the right decision!

Under normal circumstances, even catching a glimpse of the Governor was no easy matter. Who could have imagined that simply coming to read books in a bookstore would allow them to stand so close to him?

This was nothing short of a windfall—an enormous gain.

The group hurriedly rose to their feet and bowed in unison.

Chen Qiyu glanced at them briefly, then waved his hand casually, signaling for them to continue as they were.

The scholars promptly sat back down. Outwardly, they appeared to be reading, but in reality, not a single word entered their minds. Their attention was entirely fixed on Chen Qiyu.

Chen Qiyu was naturally aware of this, but he had no interest in worrying about a group of youngsters. Smiling faintly, he turned to Gao Shan and said, "I have been looking forward to the opening of your bookstore for quite some time."

Gao Shan laughed.

"Thank you for your kind support, Governor. The note you previously sent made the process of opening the shop much smoother. None of the yamen runners responsible for this area dared to come and cause trouble."

Chen Qiyu smiled.

"As it should be. A bookstore opening here benefits both the people and the state. It's only right that I offer some assistance."

Gao Shan asked politely, "Will the Governor be selecting any books today?"

Chen Qiyu smiled faintly.

"I brought a few people with me," he replied, "to look over some technical manuals."

He had long heard reports from his subordinates that the New Village Bookstore had a dedicated section for technical books, containing many practical manuals. That was precisely why he had brought several officials along.

Gao Shan accompanied them inside.

Chen Qiyu himself did not examine the shelves closely. Instead, his subordinates browsed carefully, pulling books down one by one and flipping through them.

Before long, the master artisan among the group selected several volumes from the shelves:

Methods for Optimizing Steel Quality

How to Forge Unbreakable Blades

Detailed Explanation of Furnace Temperature Control Technology

How the Patterns on Japanese Samurai Swords Are Created

He opened them and skimmed through the contents. The more he read, the more astonished he became.

After several moments, he closed the books, straightened his clothes, and bowed deeply to Gao Shan.

"Master Gao," he said excitedly, "these books contain secret techniques that master craftsmen pass down only to their sons, never to their daughters!"

Gao Shan burst into laughter.

"In Gao Family Village," he said, "uttering the phrase 'pass down only to sons, never to daughters' would earn you a beating!"

He was not exaggerating.

Everyone in Gao Family Village knew that Dao Xuan Tianzun loathed that phrase intensely.

The phrase offended on two levels. First, it embodied patriarchal thinking, an attitude Dao Xuan Tianzun openly despised. Second, it obstructed the spread of knowledge and hindered technological advancement.

As a result, in Gao Family Village, anyone who dared say "pass down only to sons, never to daughters" would immediately be criticized by passersby. At best, they would receive a stern lecture; at worst, they would be dragged before a statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun and ordered to reflect deeply on their misguided values before the divine image.

All technologies developed in Gao Family Village were bought out by the village after the inventor received a generous Scientific Invention Incentive Award. The technologies then became village property, and explanatory manuals were compiled and printed for all students to study.

The books Gao Shan had brought out this time were merely the more basic technical manuals.

Naturally, he would not bring out anything truly advanced.

First, there was the risk of technological leakage. If Gao Family Village and the imperial court were ever to fall out, it would be problematic if the court turned around and used Chassepot rifles against the Gao Family Village militia. Second, even if some technologies were leaked, outsiders would not necessarily be able to understand them.

Books that no one could comprehend would not sell, which would not align with his business interests.

Even so, these "basic" technical books from Gao Family Village were already considered advanced—at the level of "pass down only to sons, never to daughters"—in the eyes of outsiders.

No wonder the master artisan from Yan'an Prefecture was so excited.

Chen Qiyu turned his head and asked, "Are these books truly that good?"

The artisan nodded vigorously.

"Extremely good! Truly 'pass down only to sons, never to daughters' level!"

Chen Qiyu laughed, half scolding him.

"They've printed an entire shelf of them and put them out for anyone to buy. Why are you still muttering about 'passing down only to sons, never to daughters'? Buy several more. Take them back and distribute a set to each craftsman household."

The artisan replied, both amused and distressed,

"But the craftsmen are illiterate! These books may be mostly illustrations, but they still contain text."

Chen Qiyu fell silent.

Did he really have to hire scholars to read technical manuals to craftsmen?

No scholar would be willing to do such a thing.

Chen Qiyu sighed.

"Governor!" the official in charge of agriculture suddenly exclaimed. "I've found a large number of agricultural books here—The Benefits of Winter Plowing for Next Year's Sowing, Methods for Planting Potatoes, Corn, and Sweet Potatoes, How to Increase Cotton Yields..."

Chen Qiyu asked, "Are these also at the 'pass down only to sons, never to daughters' level?"

The agricultural official looked somewhat embarrassed.

"I suppose... one could say that."

Chen Qiyu nodded decisively.

"Good. Buy them all and promote them vigorously. It doesn't matter if the farmers can't read. Let the literate scholars in each village read to them. This is far more important than artisan techniques."

In this dynasty, officials traditionally valued agriculture over industry, and Chen Qiyu was no exception.

Just moments earlier, he had found it unthinkable to have scholars read technical manuals to craftsmen. Yet when it came to agriculture, the idea suddenly became perfectly acceptable.

Blatant hypocrisy, indeed.

Watching this unfold, Li Daoxuan found himself speechless. He could only sigh inwardly.

Slowly... slowly things will change.

The agricultural official leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"Governor, there's something else..."

Chen Qiyu frowned.

"What is it? Why are you hesitating?"

The official whispered, "Last year, rainfall was abundant, and the Yellow River even overflowed. But since the beginning of this year... the rain has been rather scarce. I fear we may be facing another drought."

"What?" Chen Qiyu was greatly startled. "How can you say that? It's only March!"

The official replied, "Governor, think about it—how long has it been since it last rained?"

Chen Qiyu froze.

Li Daoxuan also frowned involuntarily.

Another drought? Then the bandits we just suppressed... I'm afraid they'll rise again.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than—

Speak of the devil.

A messenger burst in from outside and dropped to his knees with a loud thud at the bookstore entrance.

"Reporting, Governor!" he shouted. "Wang Chenggong—the rebel leader who was pacified two years ago—taking advantage of the Mongol incursions at the border and General Wang Cheng'en's absence, has once again gathered his followers and rebelled in Xichuan! He has plundered Shuanghui and is now encamped at Wangjia Fork, commanding a force of over two thousand men!"

Li Daoxuan cursed inwardly.

Damn it!

Chen Qiyu stiffened.

"This again?"

He hesitated for less than three seconds before hardening his resolve. With a wave of his hand, he ordered,

"Go at once and invite Garrison Commander Shi Jian."

Watching his expression and movements, Li Daoxuan could not help but recall a scene from Journey to the West—when Sun Wukong wreaked havoc in the Heavenly Palace, and the Jade Emperor hid beneath his desk, shouting, 'Go quickly and invite the Buddha Rulai!'

Chen Qiyu added, "Send the previous messenger. He's been there before—he knows the way."

A subordinate stepped forward.

"Reporting, Governor! The previous messenger has already fled. We have no idea where he's gone."

Chen Qiyu stared at him, utterly dumbfounded.

"???"

Chapter 736 Li Yuan, the Deserter

Last year, despite abundant rainfall, the Yellow River had suffered severe flooding.

Yet nature was fickle. As the sixth year of Chongzhen arrived, drought returned. Throughout Northern Shaanxi, not a single drop of rain fell.

From Yan'an Prefecture all the way to Yansui Town (Yulin), a thousand li of yellow sand stretched endlessly. Famine once again gripped the land.

At the same time, Mongol tribes intensified their raids, sweeping through Lingzhou, Hengcheng, Yansui, Xichuan, and surrounding regions.

In an instant, Northern Shaanxi plunged back into chaos.

At this very moment, Shi Jian's unit was preparing for deployment.

Their formation remained unchanged: seven hundred seasoned veterans leading three hundred newly recruited soldiers.

Before setting out, every man carefully inspected his equipment. Soldiers sat in rows, meticulously wiping down their rifles, checking mechanisms, counting ammunition, and adjusting straps.

Meanwhile, at the western bridgehead of Dragon Gate Ferry, a ragged and travel-worn man trudged forward with great difficulty.

This man was named Li Yuan.

He was the same courier previously sent by Chen Qiyu to seek reinforcements—the one who had personally experienced the legendary phrase, "86, go up the mountain."

After witnessing the exceptional rich of the Gao Family Village militia, Li Yuan had been unable to stop thinking about it. The idea of "jumping ship" had taken root in his mind, and he turned it over again and again.

After days of painful hesitation, he finally made up his mind.

He would desert.

He had no family, no dependents. If he ran, no one else would be implicated.

Even so, desertion was no simple matter.

Li Yuan disguised himself, avoided official checkpoints, and relied on his accumulated experience traveling official roads. After countless close calls, he finally made it through and arrived at Dragon Gate Ferry.

Standing before the towering Dragon Gate Bridge spanning the Yellow River, Li Yuan let out a long breath.

He reached into his pocket.

Two copper coins.

That was all he had left.

If he had arrived a single day later, those two coins likely wouldn't have been enough to buy even half a meal.

Li Yuan quickened his pace and headed toward the eastern bridgehead.

A massive cement fortress stood there, imposing and unyielding.

From atop the fortification, a sentry shouted loudly, "Who goes there?"

Li Yuan quickly looked up.

"It's me! It's me! A courier from Yan'an Prefecture! Just a few days ago, I came here to ask for help!"

The sentry peered down for a moment, then recognition dawned.

"Oh? Last time you came riding a horse, looking quite spirited. What happened to you today?"

Li Yuan raised his voice.

"I deserted! I don't want to serve in Yan'an Prefecture anymore. I've come to join Commander Shi Jian!"

The sentry blinked.

"Oh?"

The two sentries exchanged glances, then burst into laughter.

"So that's how it is!" one of them said. "Congratulations, brother, on abandoning the darkness and choosing the light!"

One sentry climbed down from the fortress and led Li Yuan inside, taking him straight to Shi Jian.

As Li Yuan entered the camp, he immediately realized that Shi Jian's unit was deep in pre-deployment preparations. Soldiers moved back and forth, checking supplies, organizing equipment, and transporting crates of provisions.

Li Yuan couldn't help remarking, "Ah... It seems I've come at an inconvenient time."

Shi Jian smiled.

"Wang Chenggong, the surrendered rebel from Xichuan, has rebelled again. He attacked and plundered Shuanghui and is now stationed at Wangjia Fork. I assumed you were here to deliver this news. Why do you look so surprised?"

Li Yuan scratched his head awkwardly.

"When I deserted... that news hadn't reached me yet."

Shi Jian laughed.

"Hahaha, I see. Then you must be quite familiar with the terrain around Xichuan, yes?"

Li Yuan's eyes lit up immediately.

"Yes! This humble one knows the terrain and local customs there like the back of his hand!"

Shi Jian nodded.

"Excellent. Then your timing is perfect. You can serve as a guide for this expedition. Someone—get Brother Li a set of equipment... ah, wait."

He paused briefly.

"You haven't learned how to use a rifle yet. We can't issue one casually. Give him a set of retired hand crossbows and waist knives instead."

Hearing the words "retired equipment," Li Yuan subconsciously assumed it would be subpar.

But when the quartermaster brought the gear over, Li Yuan froze.

Before him was a full set of thick cotton armor, a finely forged steel saber, and a well-crafted hand crossbow.

Every item was of excellent quality.

After putting it on, Li Yuan immediately felt different—like an elite soldier. This level of equipment was something even personal guards of military officials might not enjoy.

And that wasn't all.

The quartermaster handed him another bag.

Inside were portable military rations.

Li Yuan recognized them instantly—these were the very same foods Shi Jian's unit had so flamboyantly eaten in front of Chen Qiyu and Luo Xi's troops last time.

"Here," the quartermaster said. "Your share."

Li Yuan's eyes widened.

Elite treatment, right from the start.

Switching sides had absolutely been the right choice.

His spirits soared, and a deep sense of being valued surged in his chest.

As the saying went, a man will die for one who appreciates him. In that moment, Li Yuan felt that even risking his life would be worth it.

Fully equipped and carrying his rations, Li Yuan returned to Shi Jian and clasped his fists deeply.

"Master," he said.

Shi Jian raised an eyebrow.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Li Yuan explained earnestly,

"From now on, I'm your personal guard. Naturally, I should call you Master. Calling you General would make me sound like an outsider."

Shi Jian burst out laughing.

"No, no, that won't do. Gao Family Village doesn't follow the personal-guard system. All militia soldiers serve under Dao Xuan Tianzun's banner."

He continued,

"Your equipment and rations are distributed by the village committee on behalf of Dao Xuan Tianzun, not from my personal funds."

Li Yuan blinked.

"Oh?"

Shi Jian tapped his own chest.

"Look. Dao Xuan Tianzun is right here—and on your clothes too."

Li Yuan looked down.

Sure enough, on the chest of his cotton armor was a gleaming heart-guard mirror. Just above it, embroidered into the fabric, was the image of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Li Yuan had heard the name "Dao Xuan Tianzun" many times before—during his previous visit, and from others who claimed that even the bridge outside had been built by the venerable Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

So he accepted this matter without much resistance and clasped his fists again.

"General Shi," he said, "since you wish for me to guide this expedition, this humble subordinate has a few words to offer."

Shi Jian nodded.

"Oh? Speak."

Li Yuan said,

"You mentioned earlier that Wang Chenggong's rebel forces are stationed at Wangjia Fork."

Shi Jian replied,

"That is what our intelligence reports indicate."

Li Yuan continued,

"I've been to Wangjia Fork before. There's an ancient fortress there—likely dating back to the Hongwu era—constructed by the imperial court to resist Mongol incursions. It's extremely sturdy and easy to defend, difficult to attack."

He added,

"Nearby is a dangerous mountain called Gebo Valley. The terrain is treacherous and equally difficult to traverse."

Shi Jian frowned slightly.

"Are you saying we may face both a siege and a mountain assault?"

Li Yuan nodded.

"Exactly."

He gestured with his hands, outlining the shape of a fortress.

"The rebels will certainly defend the ancient stronghold. If they can't hold it, they may retreat into Gebo Valley, using the terrain to resist us. This expedition may require a direct assault on fortified positions."

After a brief pause, he added cautiously,

"Musketeers are extremely effective in defensive battles. But when attacking fortifications... especially if we're forced into street-by-street fighting inside the fortress... they may be somewhat... disadvantaged."

Shi Jian nodded immediately.

"At a disadvantage in close combat."

Chapter 737 The Artillery Battalion Deploys

Li Yuan's intelligence was extremely important.

Shi Jian frowned deeply.

In the past, the Gao Family Village militia had always fought bandits and rebels either in open terrain or from defensive positions.

Flintlock riflemen were exceptionally well-suited for defense. They could hide behind walls or barricades, line up neatly, fire a volley, and then watch enemies collapse in waves.

Fighting in open ground was even simpler. With their range advantage, it often became little more than target practice—one shot, one kill, from hundreds of meters away.

But this time, the situation was different.

Completely different.

Now, the enemy actually had a city.

The roles of attacker and defender had been reversed.

If the bandit soldiers hid behind walls and fortifications, the flintlock riflemen would be unable to hit them at all.

What about grenades?

That idea was quickly dismissed.

Throwing grenades meant exposing the grenadiers. Against arrows raining down from city walls, that would turn into a one-sided slaughter. The risk was far too great.

Especially during the final stage—once the city gates were breached and fighting spilled into the streets—the advantages of flintlock riflemen would almost completely disappear. Casualties would skyrocket.

Of course, flintlock riflemen were equipped with bayonets.

But...

Charging with bayonets meant abandoning their greatest strengths. It was a method to be used only when absolutely forced—never a preferred choice.

Shi Jian was still pondering this dilemma when a head suddenly popped out from the side.

It was Zheng Gouzi.

"Old Shi," he said casually, "if we're dealing with a siege, why don't we just bring out the cannons? Blast that damn old fortress apart."

Shi Jian's eyes immediately lit up.

"That's right!"

Having spent so long fighting defensive battles, he had almost forgotten that Gao Family Village possessed artillery.

They had always fought mobile rebels, never proper sieges. As a result, the cannons had been left gathering dust.

Shi Jian straightened and gave orders decisively.

"Have Qichuan Ferry send the cannons by river. Once they land, switch to horse-drawn transport and move them to Wangjia Fork. We'll blow that place to pieces!"

Zheng Gouzi laughed.

"Once the cannons fire a few rounds, the bandit soldiers inside won't have the nerve to keep hiding. They'll either run or surrender. No need for street fighting at all."

Li Yuan, who had overheard everything, stood there dumbfounded.

"Uh... General Shi," he asked hesitantly, "do we... do we really have cannons?"

Shi Jian grinned.

"Of course we do."

Li Yuan wiped a bead of cold sweat from his forehead.

"Are we... really that powerful?"

Shi Jian and Zheng Gouzi both burst out laughing.

"Just wait and see, kid," Shi Jian said. "You'll realize we've got a lot more tricks than you think."

—

Earlier, when Wang Jiayin had dispatched his navy to attack Qichuan Ferry, Bai Yuan had once used cannons as if they were oversized firearms to repel the assault.

That battle made him realize something important: cannons could not be deployed casually. They required specialized personnel.

As a result, at Bai Yuan's insistence, Gao Family Village officially established an Artillery Battalion.

Thus, the so-called "coldest" battalion was born.

Despite mastering the most advanced weapons available, they were genuinely cold.

Cold because they had nothing to do.

Day after day, all they did was train.

Training, drills, repetition—endless repetition.

Their schedules were packed solid with practice, with no combat missions in sight.

None of the commanders—Cheng Xu, Xing Honglang, Bai Yuan, Shi Jian, or Wang Xiaohua—had ever found a chance to deploy them.

And it wasn't negligence.

There simply hadn't been a suitable opportunity.

Rebels moved too quickly. They fired a shot, scattered, and vanished into the countryside. When would cannons ever have a chance to roar?

So when Shi Jian finally requested the artillery battalion...

The entire artillery camp at Qichuan Ferry exploded with excitement.

"We've got work!"

"Do you know how long I've been waiting for this?!"

"Brothers, it's finally our turn!"

The atmosphere was livelier than a festival.

Years of training paid off immediately. Once the order was given, everyone knew exactly what to do.

Some hitched horses to the cannons.

Others carried cannonballs into crates.

Powder charges were prepared and counted.

From receiving the order to being fully ready to move, the entire battalion completed its preparations in astonishing speed.

Large boats carried the artillery battalion upstream along the Yellow River.

The artillerymen were brimming with energy, singing loudly. Gongs and drums rang out nonstop, filling the river with noise.

When the transport ships docked at Dragon Gate Ferry, Li Yuan—waiting on the pier—initially thought a troupe of performers had arrived.

But when he looked closer, his heart nearly jumped out of his chest.

One massive cannon after another was unloaded.

And they came in two clearly different types.

One type gleamed with a silvery sheen—stainless steel cannons personally bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun from beyond the box.

The other type was dark and dull—bronze-iron alloy cannons cast by the people of Gao Family Village themselves.

Li Yuan stared, counting under his breath.

"One... two... three... five... ten..."

He froze.

"There's more? Still more on the boats?! Are you serious?! We're only dealing with a small band of rebels!"

The artillery battalion commander leapt off the boat, face glowing with excitement, and grabbed Li Yuan's hand tightly.

"Comrade! Are you our guide? Please give us plenty of guidance when the battle begins!"

Li Yuan wiped another cold sweat from his brow.

"That old fortress is tiny," he said hurriedly. "Three to five cannons should be enough. Breach one wall, and the enemy will surrender."

The commander stared at him as if he'd heard a joke.

"Three to five?" he said incredulously. "Are you kidding? My brothers haven't had a real mission in years! We finally get an assignment, and you want only three to five? What about the rest of them? Let them sit at home with cold stoves?"

Li Yuan fell silent.

The commander suddenly grabbed Li Yuan by the shoulders and shook him enthusiastically.

"The enemy has a huge fortress, right? It needs the entire artillery battalion, five days and five nights of bombardment, a thousand shells to flatten it—right? It must be true! Just say it's true!"

Li Yuan could not say a word.

Shi Jian walked over at that moment.

"Li Yuan," he said calmly, "just how big is that old fortress? Don't exaggerate just to comfort the artillery battalion."

Li Yuan coughed awkwardly.

"It's really not big. Three to five... ahem... maybe five or six cannons would be enough."

"Aaaargh!" the artillery commander cried out in despair. "You can't do this!"

Shi Jian raised both hands helplessly.

"Alright, stop howling. Six cannons it is."

The commander immediately pressed his advantage.

"Considering misfires, road damage, and transport losses, how about eight?"

Shi Jian laughed bitterly.

"What is this, a marketplace? Haggling? The more cannons we bring, the more horses we need, and the heavier the logistics. There's no need to waste resources. Honestly, you didn't even ask before dragging all these cannons here—that alone was already unnecessary effort."

The commander drooped, looking utterly crushed.

At that moment, the cotton-embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest suddenly burst into hearty laughter.

"No worries, no worries! This wasn't a waste at all. Receiving intelligence, mobilizing the entire artillery battalion, assembling swiftly, and traveling smoothly from Qichuan Ferry to Dragon Gate Ferry—this itself is an excellent training exercise. A textbook example of effective deployment!"

The artillery commander's face lit up instantly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is truly benevolent!"

Shi Jian sighed helplessly.

"Ah... Dao Xuan Tianzun really does spoil you."

Only Li Yuan remained completely stunned.

He pointed at the embroidery, his voice trembling.

"It... it spoke... Didn't you find that strange? It actually spoke..."

Shi Jian corrected him seriously.

"That is Dao Xuan Tianzun. Calling him 'it' is extremely disrespectful."

Li Yuan let out a shrill cry.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun truly exists?! Aaaah!"

Chapter 738 Custom Solar Power

The poor artillery battalion, despite its overwhelmingly grand mobilization, was ultimately allowed to send only five large cannons to the front lines.

This meant that only five artillery squads would actually participate in combat.

As a result, the artillery battalion conducted a cruel and brutal drawing of lots.

Those who drew winning lots cheered wildly, shouting and celebrating as if they had won the lottery.

Those who failed to draw a slot stood silently to the side, their expressions bleak and lifeless, as though the world had ended.

After that, the troops officially set out.

A formation of one thousand arquebusiers, escorting five heavy cannons and five artillery squads, marched toward Wangjia Fork in northern Shaanxi.

Li Daoxuan knew that this contingent would take several days to reach its destination.

There was no need for him to keep watching them constantly.

Thus, he ended the co-sensing and returned to the world outside the box.

As soon as he came back, he noticed that the avatar of "Queen of a Thousand Faces M" was flashing nonstop on QQ.

He quickly clicked to open the chat.

"Xuanzi," she typed excitedly, "the first episode of our short drama Mu Guiying is getting an incredibly good response."

Li Daoxuan replied, "What are you talking about? I checked it myself. There aren't many views, and there are barely any comments."

"Queen of a Thousand Faces M" responded,

"That's because we haven't done any promotion yet. All those views are organic, either natural traffic or people sharing it with each other. That's actually extremely impressive. And more importantly, every single comment is positive."

Li Daoxuan replied, "Oh? I see. You're the professional here, so I'll take your word for it. What's the next step?"

She answered,

"Next, I'll speed up production of the remaining episodes. Once they're done, we'll start running advertisements."

Li Daoxuan replied, "Alright. I'll leave everything to you."

On the other end, "Queen of a Thousand Faces M" was clearly thrilled.

"We're definitely going to make a fortune this time. Just look at the buzz from the first episode alone. Trust me—this project is going to explode. Just wait and see."

"We're going to make a fortune this time!"

Inside the box, Lao Nanfeng rubbed his hands together enthusiastically as he looked at the account ledger handed to him by the strategist he had hired.

The strategist's face was glowing with excitement.

"The Mu Guiying movie's box office is astonishing. Every single day is a full house, and every day is pure profit. The most important part is that this 'movie' doesn't require actors to perform live. It can be played over and over again—from morning until night—dozens of times a day. If real actors had to perform like that, they'd collapse from exhaustion."

Lao Nanfeng chuckled.

"The Divine Mirror really is a marvelous thing. But it also needs its 'celestial energy' replenished. Every night, Dao Xuan Tianzun has to take the Divine Mirror back to the heavens to recharge it. Otherwise, it won't work the next day."

In reality, Li Daoxuan's customized tablet used a small screen paired with a large battery, which allowed it to last a full day of continuous playback.

However, it still had to be taken out of the box every night to recharge.

Doing this every single night was honestly quite troublesome.

Lao Nanfeng continued thoughtfully,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has to manage the suffering of all beings under heaven. His responsibilities are immense. How could He possibly come every single night just to recharge our Divine Mirrors? This movie won't be shown for very long. Once Dao Xuan Tianzun's enthusiasm fades, it definitely won't be played every day. Only when He remembers to recharge the Divine Mirrors will we be able to show it a few times."

The strategist nodded repeatedly in agreement.

The speaker spoke casually.

But the listener took it seriously.

Li Daoxuan, who had been quietly "observing" their conversation, fell into deep thought.

This really is a problem, he thought.

Right now, I'm still enthusiastic, so I remember to charge the tablets every day. But judging from my experience playing mobile games, repeating the same tedious task day after day inevitably leads to burnout. Sooner or later, I'll go AFK. Charging tablets won't be any different.

No.

This absolutely wouldn't do.

He had to solve the tablet-charging problem once and for all.

The tablets inside the box needed to be able to charge without his constant intervention.

The only solution he could think of was solar power.

The late Ming Dynasty was in the midst of a great drought. The skies were cloudless for miles, sunlight blazing down day after day—perfect conditions for solar energy.

Li Daoxuan opened his browser, searched online, and quickly found a vendor selling photovoltaic power systems.

He typed:

"Hello, do you accept custom orders?"

The vendor replied promptly:

"Of course, dear customer. Most of our products are customized, since every client's power requirements are different. Each system is tailored to ensure maximum satisfaction."

Li Daoxuan typed:

"I want to custom-order a very small photovoltaic system. Also, it needs to be easy to install—something an amateur like me can set up just by following instructions, without requiring your technicians."

The vendor replied:

"No problem at all. Installation will be extremely simple. How small are we talking? Is it for a single household?"

Li Daoxuan answered honestly:

"It's for charging one tablet computer."

"Pfft—!"

The sound of the vendor spitting blood seemed to travel straight through the internet cable.

"Dear customer, you might as well just kill me now. That kind of thing simply can't be made."

Li Daoxuan asked calmly,

"Oh? Then what's the smallest system you can customize?"

The vendor explained,

"The smallest is still household-level. It can power a television, refrigerator, washing machine, and various other appliances."

Li Daoxuan replied without hesitation,

"Alright then. I'll buy one of those to charge my tablet."

"Drip. Drip."

The sound of cold sweat dripping seemed to echo through the chat window.

"Dear customer... wouldn't that be just a little wasteful? Our cheapest system costs at least twenty thousand yuan. Spending twenty thousand yuan just to charge one tablet is... well... that's..."

"Only twenty thousand?" Li Daoxuan was delighted.

"I'll take fifty sets to start."

"Dear customer!" the vendor replied instantly.

"Fifty sets is no joke!"

"No joke," Li Daoxuan confirmed calmly.

"I'll pay the deposit and sign the contract. Let's start with fifty sets for the first batch. There may be more orders later."

His plan was simple.

Each town under his control would have one tablet.

Each tablet would need one photovoltaic system.

Fifty sets was merely a trial run.

The vendor was overjoyed.

"Dear customer! I'll prepare the contract immediately!"

With the photovoltaic systems settled, Li Daoxuan turned his attention back to the box.

Inside, Lao Nanfeng was counting money when Chen Qianhu walked in from outside, his expression filled with grievance.

His hair was damp, and several patches of his clothes were soaked.

"Brother Nanfeng," Chen Qianhu complained bitterly, "I got yelled at in the street again."

Lao Nanfeng asked, puzzled,

"Why?"

Chen Qianhu grimaced.

"A group of kids chased after me, shouting for Xiao Tianzuo to die. One of them even shot me with a bamboo water gun."

Lao Nanfeng burst out laughing.

The strategist laughed as well.

Even Li Daoxuan couldn't help but chuckle.

As the primary villain in Mu Guiying, Chen Qianhu's portrayal of Xiao Tianzuo had been far too convincing.

Brutal. Vicious. Completely unhinged.

He had become a public enemy.

Of course, the adults were rational enough not to attack an "imperial official" over a movie.

But children didn't care.

They simply aimed their bamboo water guns at Xiao Tianzuo and fired without mercy.

Chen Qianhu sighed deeply.

"I never imagined this movie would have such an impact. Back when we had traditional operas and Daoist chants, the common people never reacted like this."

Lao Nanfeng laughed.

"That's because this is too real."

Chen Qianhu looked miserable.

"Forget it. I guess this is my fate. Next time, I'm absolutely refusing to play a villain... Oh, right—Brother Nanfeng, the people of Puzhou City have suddenly begun enlisting in large numbers. Many have voluntarily joined the New People's Militia. Just now, someone reported that we've recruited two thousand new soldiers in a very short time."

Chapter 739 A Junior Soldier of the Daling River Border Army

The militia of Puzhou City expanded at an astonishing rate.

The common people enlisted with enthusiasm!

Upon hearing this news, Li Daoxuan secretly chuckled to himself in satisfaction.

Excellent, he thought. It seems the combined effects of Gao Yiye's speech and the film "Mu Guiying" are finally beginning to show.

Gao Yiye's speech had laid the foundation for recruitment by emphasizing welfare, benefits, and social status.

"Mu Guiying," on the other hand, provided the emotional catalyst. It appealed to sentiment, righteous spirit, and collective emotion.

With these two elements working together, it was only natural that the common people would rush to enlist.

Excellent. Making "Mu Guiying" was absolutely worth it, Li Daoxuan thought again.

But relying solely on "Mu Guiying" isn't enough. That story belongs to the Song Dynasty. It's not the present era, and it's still somewhat removed from people's real lives.

If we could create stories set in the current dynasty, or at least based on recent events, the impact would be even greater.

So—

Where could he find suitable material for stories about the present dynasty, or recent history?

A figure suddenly surfaced in Li Daoxuan's mind.

Someone who loved writing short essays about border affairs.

Someone intimately familiar with everything that happened along the frontier, big or small, and who investigated matters with tireless diligence.

Someone educated, articulate, and skilled with the brush.

Sun Chuanting.

In Daizhou, Shanxi.

Sun Chuanting sat alone in his study, his expression heavy and somber as he wrote a short treatise titled:

"A Memorial on the Vulnerabilities of the Manchu Invaders."

In this essay, he meticulously listed the weaknesses of the Manchu forces and contrasted them with the strengths of the Great Ming, planning to use the latter to counter the former.

Just then—

"Master," an attendant reported as he entered the room, "that merchant, Tie Niaofei, has come again."

Sun Chuanting's eyes brightened immediately.

"Oh?" he said. "Invite him in at once!"

Whenever Tie Niaofei passed through Daizhou while delivering supplies to the border army, he would always visit Sun Chuanting's residence.

Sun Chuanting consistently treated Tie Niaofei as an honored guest.

Over time, a genuine friendship had naturally formed between them.

Before long, Tie Niaofei entered, accompanied by Zao Ying and Zheng Daniu.

The moment Sun Chuanting saw Zheng Daniu, a smile appeared on his face.

He waved his hand and instructed the attendant,

"Go prepare our Daizhou specialties. Bring out Baode Bowl Tofu, Sorghum Noodle-Fish, and Daizhou Sesame Noodles to entertain our guests."

Before the food had even arrived—

Before the attendant had even stepped out—

Zheng Daniu's drool was already dripping onto the floor.

Zao Ying quickly pulled out a handkerchief and gently wiped his mouth.

"Daniu," she scolded affectionately, "don't behave like that. If others see you, they'll think our family is poor and that you've never eaten anything good."

Zheng Daniu mumbled honestly,

"I really am poor. I can barely afford to eat."

Zao Ying laughed.

"Don't worry, don't worry. I have plenty of money. Look—if you sleep in my tent tonight, all my money will go toward buying you food."

Zheng Daniu looked shocked.

"Huh? I thought of you as a buddy, and you're actually trying to sleep with me?"

Zao Ying playfully punched him in the chest.

"What nonsense are you saying? That's not very 'buddy-like' of you. Are you and Gao Chuwu buddies? Have you two ever shared a bunk in the barracks?"

Zheng Daniu scratched his head.

"Yeah... we have."

Zao Ying spread her hands.

"Then there you go. So why can't you sleep with me? Don't you consider me a buddy too?"

Zheng Daniu's face immediately lit up.

"You're right! That makes sense. Then let's do that!"

Sun Chuanting snorted with laughter.

Tie Niaofei smiled helplessly and said,

"Mr. Sun, please don't mind them. Those two are bound to marry sooner or later. I came today because there's something I'd like your help with."

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"Oh? What matter?"

Tie Niaofei carefully presented several books with both hands.

Sun Chuanting accepted them and glanced at the titles:

"Soaring High"

"Tale of a Mortal's Cultivation."

He flipped through a few pages, nodding slightly.

"These books are quite interesting," he said. "Why show them to me all of a sudden?"

Tie Niaofei spoke frankly,

"To be honest, the person who created these books has earned a fortune from them. I'm a merchant, after all... I can't help feeling envious. I'd like to create books like these and make money myself."

Sun Chuanting laughed.

"If you want to publish books for profit, just go ahead and do it. What does that have to do with me? I don't understand business matters."

Tie Niaofei sighed.

"I lack education. I can't come up with good stories. After much thought, I believe I could create stories about border affairs."

"Border affairs?" Sun Chuanting's eyes lit up instantly.

His spirits rose the moment the frontier was mentioned.

Tie Niaofei continued,

"I want the protagonist to be a minor Ming soldier stationed at the Daling River, telling the story of the Battle of Daling River from the perspective of an ordinary soldier."

"It would be similar to 'Soaring High,' which tells Gao Family Village's rise through the eyes of a common person."

At the mention of the words 'Daling River,' Sun Chuanting's expression darkened.

The Battle of Daling River.

It was a deep humiliation for the Ming army.

Sun Chuanting said quietly,

"The Battle of Daling River was a shame for our Great Ming. Wouldn't writing about it simply invite ridicule?"

Tie Niaofei replied calmly,

"Precisely because it was shameful, it must be written down—to serve as a warning to the world. Wouldn't you agree?"

Sun Chuanting pondered for a moment, then nodded.

"That is indeed true."

Tie Niaofei continued,

"I don't know nearly as much about the Battle of Daling River as you do, Mr. Sun. So while writing this story, I hope you can help by explaining the course of the battle and assisting with the plot arrangement."

Sun Chuanting's eyes gleamed.

"Very well."

The two men leaned together and discussed the story at length—from the protagonist's character, to the battle's progression, to the emotional tone—talking for a very long time.

Before they realized it, the attendant had already brought out the prepared food.

Zheng Daniu sat to one side, stuffing pastries into his mouth with one hand and shoveling specialty snacks with the other.

Zao Ying hovered around him busily, handing him drinks and wiping his mouth as needed.

After quite some time, Tie Niaofei finally stood to take his leave.

Zao Ying and Zheng Daniu accompanied him out of Sun Chuanting's residence.

After they had walked some distance away—

The golden embroidered emblem of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Tie Niaofei's chest suddenly spoke:

"Well? How has the story been arranged?"

Tie Niaofei's spirits lifted immediately.

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun, the story has been finalized."

"The title is 'A Junior Soldier of the Daling River Border Army.'"

"It tells the story of a common soldier under He Kegang, fighting desperately against the Manchu invaders. His comrades die one after another. Though the young soldier is terrified, he still forces himself to stand firm, fighting to the death to defend his homeland, his wife, and his children."

"However, the battle goes extremely poorly. The Ming army is at a disadvantage, while the Manchu forces press relentlessly. Daling River is eventually besieged. Zu Dashou, wishing to surrender, even kills He Kegang, who refuses to yield."

"Our protagonist also refuses to surrender. He risks his life to reclaim He Kegang's body and, alone, fights his way out of the encirclement."

"Finally, he buries He Kegang within the passes. Gravely wounded and having lost too much blood, he collapses and dies."

Li Daoxuan replied after listening,

"This story is very stirring. I like it. But the ending won't do."

"Don't kill off the protagonist so casually. That will leave a bad taste in the audience's mouth, and they'll be furious."

"Change it."

"In the end, the protagonist survives his injuries, joins Gao Family Village, dons a mask, lives anonymously, organizes a militia, and swears to one day kill the enemy and repay his country."

Chapter 740 Such a Farce

Wangjia Fork

Wangjia Fork was a modest fortress.

It could hardly be called imposing. Nestled among rolling mountains, it looked old, worn, and unremarkable.

The fortress had been built during the Hongwu era, back when Zhu Yuanzhang was still consolidating the empire. At the time, it had served as one of many small defensive strongpoints meant to guard against Mongol incursions from the north.

Now, however, it had fallen into different hands.

A band of rebels occupied the place.

The bandit chief was named Wang Chenggong. In the early years of the Chongzhen reign, he had joined the peasant uprisings that erupted amid famine, chaos, and rebellion across the northwest.

Years earlier, when the rebel forces surged en masse into Shanxi, those left behind in Shaanxi were quickly isolated and overwhelmed. Wang Chenggong, seeing no other option, surrendered to the authorities and lay low for a time.

But this year was different.

A faction of the Shanxi rebels had crossed the Yellow River from northwestern Shanxi and returned to Shaanxi territory.

At the same time, months had passed without rain. The land was cracking, the crops were dying, and another drought was clearly on the horizon.

Timing. Location. Popular resentment.

Everything aligned.

Wang Chenggong felt that Heaven itself was pushing him forward. If he didn't rebel now, then when would he ever rebel?

So he raised the banner once more.

Calling back his old comrades, he swiftly gathered over two thousand followers and seized the ancient fortress of Wangjia Fork.

Inside the fortress, his recalled subordinates crowded together in dense clusters. They were filthy, thin, and dressed in rags, their miserable condition betraying the hardships they had endured in recent years.

A subordinate edged closer to Wang Chenggong and whispered,

"Boss, we've gathered the men... but who knows when the government troops will show up?"

Wang Chenggong snorted.

"They won't come."

Seeing the doubt on the man's face, he continued confidently,

"Recently, the Mongol tribes have been raiding the border passes. Wang Cheng'en, the Regional Commander of Yansui, had his main forces transferred north to deal with them. Once he's gone, Governor Chen Qiyu is left with nothing but scraps."

No sooner had he finished speaking—

A scout came running in, panting.

"Report! The... the scraps are here!"

Wang Chenggong raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Who is it?"

The scout laughed awkwardly.

"It's Assistant General Luo Xi."

Wang Chenggong broke into a grin.

"Let him come."

He didn't take Luo Xi seriously at all.

Soon enough, a tattered banner bearing the character 'Luo' appeared on the open ground south of the fortress, flapping weakly in the wind. Assistant General Luo Xi had arrived with a little over a thousand soldiers to suppress the rebels.

Wang Chenggong scanned them carefully and immediately recognized the truth.

Most of Luo Xi's troops were garrison soldiers.

Their faces were dull, their armor mismatched, their clothes worn thin. It was obvious they were poorly fed, poorly paid, and utterly lacking in morale.

They didn't look like soldiers preparing for battle.

They looked like men dragged out to die.

Wang Chenggong watched them the way one watched a street performance, relaxed and faintly amused.

At Luo Xi's order, the government troops charged toward the ancient fortress.

They charged half-heartedly.

"Loose arrows!" Wang Chenggong laughed.

From atop the battlements, the rebels released a volley of arrows.

With a shout and a clatter, the garrison soldiers immediately scattered in all directions. Formation collapsed. Discipline vanished.

In the blink of an eye, only about a hundred of Luo Xi's personal guards remained by his side, standing stiffly and staring around in confusion.

Wang Chenggong burst out laughing.

"Useless garrison troops!"

Luo Xi shouted angrily from below,

"You just wait! I, Luo Xi, will be back!"

Wang Chenggong couldn't even be bothered to reply.

He turned away, cheerfully continuing to organize his men, already thinking about practical matters: what two thousand mouths would eat next, and how this force might one day sweep across the realm.

Not long after, the scout returned again.

"Boss, the scraps are back."

Wang Chenggong frowned.

"Hm? Is this Luo Xi fellow not afraid of dying?"

"This time it's someone surnamed Shi," the scout said.

"He looks... much more formidable than Luo Xi."

Wang Chenggong climbed up to the battlements and looked south.

On the plain below, an army had appeared.

Their armor was clean and uniform. Their formations were neat. Every soldier stood straight, weapons held properly, posture steady.

Just one glance was enough.

These were not the same kind of troops.

Wang Chenggong's expression changed.

"Order everyone to prepare for battle!" he roared.

"These ones are hard bones to chew! Hard bones!"

Inside the fortress, two thousand rebels immediately sprang into motion.

Some grabbed bows.

Some dragged rolling logs and boulders into position.

Some heated water.

Others began preparing "golden juice."

Most of these men had rarely defended a city themselves. Usually, they were the ones charging walls, being pelted with stones and scalded by filth.

Now that it was finally their turn to do the pelting, excitement ran high.

One man laughed as he hefted a stone.

"Before, the government troops smashed us with rocks. Now it's our turn! Hahaha!"

"Boss says these government troops are tough."

"Tough my ass," another sneered.

"We've got walls. No matter how tough they are, they still have to climb up. One rock from me and a bucket of boiling water, and they'll scream like pigs."

"And my spear's coated in golden juice!"

"Hahahaha!"

The rebels were smug and relaxed.

After all, the government troops they'd faced recently had been laughably weak. Each victory only inflated their confidence further, dulling any remaining fear of battle.

Meanwhile...

Luo Xi stood before Shi Jian, practically in tears.

"Commander Shi, it's not that I didn't want to fight," he pleaded.

"But those garrison soldiers just wouldn't listen! The bandits fired one volley of arrows and every last one of them ran!"

Shi Jian didn't even look at him.

With a casual wave of his hand, he ordered the musketeers to halt, keeping them far from the city walls. At this distance, arrows couldn't reach them—and neither could muskets reach the enemy.

Shi Jian pulled out a telescope and carefully examined Wangjia Fork. From here, he could only see the battlements, not the interior layout.

"I've been inside that fortress," Luo Xi hurriedly added.

"It's full of narrow, winding passages. Very complicated. Attacking it directly will be difficult. Even Commander Shi's musketeers might—"

Shi Jian nodded.

"Mm. That's why bringing artillery was the right call."

Luo Xi's eyes widened.

"You brought cannons?"

"Yes," Shi Jian replied calmly.

"The artillery moves slower. We'll wait for them."

Luo Xi sucked in a breath.

He ran to higher ground behind the formation and looked back, only to see an artillery unit slowly emerging from a ravine. Several horses strained as they dragged a massive cannon carriage forward, inch by inch.

Luo Xi was utterly baffled.

Did this Commander Shi understand warfare at all?

Musketeers rushing ahead while artillery lagged behind? Wasn't he afraid of the cannons being cut off and ambushed?

Then he noticed Zheng Gouzi, calmly flying a sky lantern on a long string.

Luo Xi shook his head again.

Main force separated from artillery.

Someone flying a sky lantern on the battlefield.

This unit was a farce.

An absolute farce.

And yet...

These ridiculous people were terrifyingly strong.

How could that be?

Everyone waited.

After a long while, the artillery finally arrived.

The artillery battalion commander was grinning from ear to ear.

"We're here! We're finally here! Hahahaha! Is that the thing we're supposed to blow up?"

Shi Jian pointed toward the small ancient fortress.

"That one."

The artillery commander practically glowed.

"Brothers! Target in visual range! Set up the cannons! Quickly!"

The artillerymen cheered.

"Finally! Real combat!"

"I've been dying to blast something!"

"This beats shooting wooden targets any day!"

"Wahahaha! Wangjia Fork! Your artillery grandpas have arrived! Tremble!"

Each of them wore an expression bordering on madness, like lunatics released after ten thousand years of confinement.