

Great Ming 741

Chapter 741 An Unexpected Guest

Wang Chenggong's forces were fully prepared.

Rolling logs and boulders had been hauled into place. Buckets of boiling liquid were set aside. Even molten metal had been prepared, ready to pour down on any attackers foolish enough to approach the walls.

Everything was ready.

Yet, to their surprise, the government troops showed no intention of advancing.

They halted far away from the fortress, maintaining a distance that felt... strange.

Wang Chenggong frowned.

"What in the world are these government troops doing?"

A seasoned fighter beside him stood on tiptoe and squinted into the distance.

"It looks like... they're waiting for something?"

"Waiting?" Wang Chenggong sneered.

"What could they possibly be waiting for?"

Before he could say more, a wave of startled cries rose from the battlements.

"Cannons!"

"Big cannons!"

"What?" Wang Chenggong jolted and hurried forward, also standing on tiptoe to look.

Through a gap in the government formation, five massive cannons were slowly pushed into view.

Three of them gleamed with a strange silvery luster, forged from some unknown metal he had never seen before. The other two were darker, familiar bronze cannons—the kind he recognized.

The moment he laid eyes on them, Wang Chenggong's heart sank.

This was bad.

"Prepare yourselves!" he shouted.

At the artillery battalion commander's command, five groups of artillerymen moved at once.

Years of drilling finally came into play.

Powder was poured.

Shells were hoisted.

Ramrods plunged again and again into the barrels.

Fuses were inserted.

"Aim!"

"Raise it a little."

"Higher."

"Good. Hold it there."

"A bit to the left."

"Fire!"

With slightly trembling hands, the artillerymen lit the fuses.

As sparks raced along the fuse toward the barrels, the excitement surging in their chests was impossible to suppress.

Luo Xi stared in disbelief.

"Where did these artillerymen come from? They look like clumsy new recruits on their first battlefield."

Shi Jian replied calmly,

"They are new recruits."

Luo Xi fell silent.

"BOOM! BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!"

The cannons roared one after another.

The opening salvo struck squarely at the center of Wangjia Fork's gate.

That thick wooden gate, which could resist battering rams and ladders, was completely helpless before cannon fire.

With a deafening crack, a massive hole was blown open.

A moment later, a cannonball smashed into the nearby wall. Brick and packed earth exploded outward, dust and debris flying everywhere. The wall swayed violently, as if struggling to stay upright.

Before it could settle—

Thump.

Another cannonball struck the same section.

Wangjia Fork was no great stronghold like Xi'an, Nanjing, or the capital. It was merely a small border fortress.

How could it possibly withstand such bombardment?

With a low, tortured rumble, the wall finally collapsed, tearing open another breach.

The rebels stationed there, who had been clutching stones and logs in anticipation, suddenly felt the ground vanish beneath their feet. They tumbled down along with the crumbling wall.

Dust surged into the air.

When it cleared, a large group of rebels lay sprawled in the rubble, dazed, filthy, and coughing.

Wang Chenggong stood frozen, staring at the scene.

"Are you kidding me?" he cursed.

"Where did these government troops get cannons like this? Damn it... the soldiers in Northern Shaanxi can barely feed themselves—how could they afford such weapons?"

The answer came from the enemy lines.

"It hit!"

"It hit!"

The artillerymen were ecstatic.

"My first live shot—and it landed!"

"With a target that big, missing would be embarrassing, wouldn't it?"

The artillery battalion commander roared,

"What are you standing around for? Was all that training for nothing? Reload! Second volley!"

"Huh?"

The artillerymen snapped back to their senses.

They cleaned the barrels, reloaded powder and shells, adjusted the angles again—

After a full minute or two of frantic movement, the second round was ready.

"Fire!"

"BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!"

Five more cannonballs screamed through the air.

The unfortunate Wangjia Fork fortress hadn't even finished "breathing" before it was struck again.

With a thunderous crash, two more sections of the wall collapsed.

Only then did Wang Chenggong fully understand.

The government troops had no intention of storming the city.

Their thousand-odd soldiers stood far away, relaxed, simply watching as the cannons dismantled the fortress piece by piece.

They were waiting for the walls to be flattened.

Only then would they move.

Wang Chenggong clenched his teeth.

"Pass down the order! We can't stay here. Prepare to charge! Once we close the distance, those cannons will be useless. We'll drive off the government troops and seize their artillery!"

The rebels began moving.

No longer did they cling to the walls. Instead, they withdrew inward, regrouping in the open ground behind the main gate, forming ranks for a charge.

Meanwhile...

In a mountain gully northeast of Wangjia Fork, another force was also preparing to move.

A cavalry unit.

They belonged to the Mongolian Wushen Tribe.

These were the same riders who had been raiding the Hetao region for days, giving Supreme Commander Hong Chengchou and Regional Commander Wang Cheng'en endless headaches.

Mongolian cavalry were fast—so fast that infantry found it nearly impossible to pin them down.

Like the rebels, they avoided strong cities, slipping past defenses to raid settlements instead, burning, killing, and plundering before vanishing.

To counter them, Zhu Yuanzhang had once built countless fortresses along the Nine Borders, weaving them into a defensive network that barely kept such raids in check.

But now...

With Ming finances collapsing in the late dynasty, soldiers went unpaid. Desertions were rampant. Fortresses were abandoned or seized by rebels.

The once-dense defensive net had been torn full of holes.

This Mongolian cavalry unit had been watching the battle for quite some time.

They were happy to sit back and enjoy the spectacle.

Then they saw the cannons.

Those cannons.

The cavalry captain's eyes lit up.

"I want those cannons."

He raised his whip and shouted,

"While the Ming army is busy dealing with the rebels, we charge in, slaughter them, and seize the cannons!"

The cavalry roared in response.

"Seize them!"

"BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!"

Another volley fired.

The cavalry captain cracked his whip.

"Charge!"

With a thunderous roar, the Mongolian cavalry burst out of the gully.

They surged forward like a violent gale, covering hundreds of meters in the blink of an eye, a sharp blade slashing straight toward Shi Jian's flank.

At this moment, Wang Chenggong's rebels were still finalizing their plan to charge.

Just as he was about to issue the order, he heard sudden shouts of battle from outside.

He turned—and saw Mongolian cavalry pouring out from nowhere, charging straight at the government troops.

Wang Chenggong was stunned.

"What the—damn it!" he cursed.

"The Mongolians chose now to appear? Damn those barbarians! They let us draw the cannon fire, then charged during the reloading gap!"

A rebel shouted urgently,

"Boss! What do we do?"

Wang Chenggong clenched his jaw.

"We wait and watch. We're not joining forces with the Mongolians. If we move, it'll be when they're gone."

Chapter 742 Right Turn! Open Fire!

The cavalry of the Wushen Tribe burst out from concealment, hooves pounding like thunder.

They were fierce, fast, and confident—an overwhelming force that seemed impossible to stop.

They feared infantry least of all.

Especially infantry like this.

From their perspective, the Ming unit ahead looked completely unprepared, its attention fixed entirely on Wangjia Fork fortress. Musketeers standing idle, artillery crews focused forward—everything suggested negligence.

A sudden flank charge like this was guaranteed to succeed.

The instant the cavalry appeared, Luo Xi's face drained of all color.

"Mongol cavalry!" he screamed hoarsely.

"It's Mongol cavalry! We're finished—completely finished!"

"Finished?" Shi Jian laughed lightly.

"What's finished? We've known they were here all along."

As he spoke, Shi Jian raised his hand.

"Right turn!"

The command rang out.

The thousand soldiers moved as one.

In perfect unison, they pivoted to the right, their formation shifting smoothly from facing Wangjia Fork to facing the Mongol cavalry charging toward them.

Not a single man hesitated.

What Luo Xi did not realize was that every musket had already been loaded.

Shi Jian's voice followed immediately, calm and steady.

"Tiered volley fire. Then—open fire at will."

At the same moment, Zheng Gouzi roared,

"Tiered volley fire! Then, open fire at will!"

The order rippled outward.

"Tiered volley fire! Then, open fire at will!"

Mid-ranking officers shouted it.

Low-ranking officers shouted it.

The words echoed through the formation as if the army itself were speaking.

Luo Xi stood there, stunned.

When did they prepare?

No discussion, no scouts reporting back, no visible signal...

How did they know the Mongols were here?

He could not possibly know.

High above, the Heavenly Lord hovered in the reconnaissance balloon, long since having spotted the Mongol cavalry. Through the subtle co-sensing link, the information had spread quietly—like ripples through water—to the Cotton Thread Heavenly Lords embedded in the soldiers' armor.

Orders were transmitted in voices so low that only those nearby could hear.

Li Daoxuan understood infantry's weakness well.

Musket units were slow. They could not charge. They could not pursue. If cavalry discovered them too early, the riders would simply turn and leave, and the infantry could do nothing but watch.

So long ago, he had set down a tactic:

Feign ignorance. Feign ignorance.

Lure the cavalry into a charge. Lure the cavalry into a charge.

Then annihilate them with gunfire.

The militia soldiers performed their roles flawlessly.

They pretended not to see the Mongols.

They pretended to be engrossed in the artillery barrage.

Yet beneath that act, cartridges were already being slid into chambers, and firing lines had been quietly aligned toward the Mongols' concealed approach.

By the time the cavalry burst out, the trap was complete.

The Mongol riders saw the Ming formation turn—perfectly, simultaneously.

Then the muskets rose.

"Fire!"

A deafening volley erupted.

Gunfire cracked through the air like tearing silk.

In northern Shaanxi, sandstorms were fierce. Traditional matchlock muskets were notoriously unreliable—priming powder blown away the moment the pan was opened, ignition failing, reloads painfully slow.

That was why Mongol cavalry feared such weapons so little.

But now—

They realized they were wrong.

Terribly wrong.

Not a single musket misfired.

Every weapon discharged instantly, cleanly, decisively.

And the range—

It was far beyond what matchlocks could achieve.

The Mongol riders still believed themselves safely out of reach.

Then the front ranks collapsed.

Men and horses fell together, crashing into the ground.

Those behind roared in alarm.

"While they reload! Charge!"

But during that single shouted sentence, the Chassepot riflemen were already moving.

Breeches snapped open.

Spent paper scraps were flicked away.

Fresh cartridges slid in.

Breeches snapped shut.

Muskets rose again.

Another volley thundered out.

More riders fell.

The Mongols were stunned.

What kind of cursed weapons fire this fast?

Before, Ming armies fired once—once—and then we cut them down!

How have they already fired twice?

Before the thought could finish—

A third volley erupted.

Gunfire tore through the charging mass.

More riders pitched from their saddles.

In just moments, three thousand bullets had been fired.

Three to four hundred Mongol warriors lay dead or dying.

For the Wushen Tribe, this was not a loss.

It was a disaster.

Their tribe was not large. Losing hundreds of young, able-bodied men in the span of a dozen breaths meant only one thing: annihilation.

The tribe leader's eyes burned crimson.

"Retreat! Retreat immediately! We can't charge any farther!"

A fourth volley roared.

Another wave of riders fell.

At that moment, the chief understood.

The Wushen Tribe was finished.

"Retreat! Retreat!"

The surviving cavalry reined in their mounts and fled northward in chaos, not daring to look back.

"Tch."

A Cotton Thread Heavenly Lord muttered softly.

"Too many escaped. Infantry can't pursue cavalry—an unavoidable flaw."

Luo Xi finally snapped out of his stupor, laughter bursting from him.

"They're finished! The Wushen Tribe is finished! Hahaha! Four or five hundred men lost in one battle! Their tribe is ruined! They'll be swallowed by other tribes for sure!"

Shi Jian glanced at him.

"What's so interesting about them being absorbed by other tribes?"

"It's only interesting if our Great Ming absorbs them."

Luo Xi blinked.

"Huh? Why would we absorb Mongols?"

Shi Jian shrugged.

"You wouldn't understand."

He turned back toward Wangjia Fork and pointed.

"The Mongols are dealt with. We continue. Eliminating the rebels is the priority."

The soldiers chuckled softly, then turned back in perfect order.

Their guns lowered.

Their attention returned to the fortress.

Luo Xi stared in disbelief.

So many Mongols lay dead nearby—yet not a single soldier rushed forward to loot, to claim heads, to cut ears.

No greed.

No excitement.

No disorder.

Only obedience.

Such discipline was priceless.

Just then, from within Wangjia Fork fortress, a burly, rough-faced man emerged.

He ran forward several steps, raised his saber high with both hands—

—and knelt.

He remained there, unmoving.

Luo Xi sucked in a sharp breath.

"That's Wang Chenggong! Is he... surrendering?"

From inside the fortress, voices rang out clearly:

"We surrender!"

"No more fighting!"

"We surrender!"

Chapter 743 Put to Hard Labor

Wang Chenggong surrendered.

After witnessing the Mongol cavalry charge in full force, only to be decisively shattered by the Ming soldiers' firearms, he immediately understood one thing—

He was no match.

Just moments earlier, he himself had been preparing to lead his men out in a charge. If not for the sudden appearance of the Mongols, he would already have been halfway through that assault.

Yet those Mongols, charging on horseback, had been mowed down mid-stride by disciplined firing lines.

Wang Chenggong knew his limits.

Two human legs could not compare to four horse legs.

If even the Mongol cavalry could not break through, then what chance did he have?

He did not need to analyze further. Even instinct alone told him the outcome.

If he continued resisting, death was certain.

So he stopped struggling with the decision.

He chose to surrender—cleanly and decisively.

The moment Wang Chenggong knelt, Commander Luo Xi exploded.

"This man surrendered once already and then rebelled again!" Luo Xi roared.

"A man like this cannot be spared! Execute him! Execute him immediately!"

At the same time, the artillerymen suddenly became animated.

"What? He surrendered before?"

"No way!"

"Get him back inside the fortress!"

"Let us fire a few more rounds—ten rounds!"

"Fine, eight rounds is enough!"

"Even five rounds would do, just let us shoot a little more!"

Shi Jian hesitated.

Killing a man who had already surrendered...

No matter how he thought about it, it felt improper.

Just then, the embroidery on his chest stirred, and a low voice spoke—calm, unhurried.

"Do not attack.

Let him come forward.

Speak with him for a moment, then decide."

It was the voice of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Shi Jian's heart steadied at once.

With instructions from Dao Xuan Tianzun, there was nothing to worry about.

He immediately raised his voice. "Cease attack!"

The militia soldiers lowered their firearms.

Seeing that the Ming army truly had no intention of attacking, Wang Chenggong raised both hands high, clearly showing that he was unarmed, and began walking forward step by step.

After walking for quite some time, he finally reached the officers.

Luo Xi stamped his foot furiously.

"Wang Chenggong!" he shouted.

"The imperial court treated you generously! After you surrendered last time, you were given grain and allowed to farm garrison land in northern Shaanxi! Who would have thought that at the slightest trouble, you'd rebel again?"

He pointed straight at Wang Chenggong.

"You, a man with such fickle loyalty, still dare to surrender a second time? If I were you, I'd cut my own throat right now! At least then you'd look like a man!"

Wang Chenggong's face flushed.

He knew his conduct was shameful, yet he still forced out a defense.

"The court only gave us two months of grain," he muttered.

"Then they left thousands of my brothers in a desolate place and expected us to survive on our own. How were we supposed to live?"

Luo Xi was about to continue—

"But even so—"

Shi Jian raised a hand.

Luo Xi immediately stopped speaking.

A third-rank commander yielding to a fifth-rank garrison commander—it should have looked ridiculous.

Yet no one present felt it was inappropriate.

Not even Luo Xi himself.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice sounded again, soft and even.

"Ask him why he did not seize the opportunity to charge together with the Mongol cavalry.

That was his best chance."

Shi Jian nodded and repeated the question.

Wang Chenggong's expression darkened.

"Though I, Wang Chenggong, am no hero," he said slowly,

"I would never ally myself with the Northern Barbarians. I refuse to lose face in such a way."

Dao Xuan Tianzun replied calmly,

"Those who achieve great things do not fuss over trivial matters.

If you had swallowed your pride earlier, even briefly, you might have won and saved your life."

Shi Jian repeated the words.

Wang Chenggong sneered.

"Are you mocking me?"

"If I die, then I die. This life isn't worth keeping if it means acting so disgracefully."

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled lightly.

"Is rebelling again after surrendering once not disgraceful?"

Who in this world tolerates a man of such wavering loyalty?"

Shi Jian repeated this as well.

Wang Chenggong sighed deeply.

"In any case," he said,

"I know my life cannot be spared. The court will never accept me again."

He bowed his head.

"Just kill me. I only ask that you spare my brothers in Wangjia Fork. The drought returned, and they had no way to survive. They followed me out of desperation. They are merely accomplices."

Luo Xi exploded again.

"Execute them all!"

"Kill all two thousand rebels!"

"Save us the trouble of them rebelling again and again!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun had no intention of killing anyone.

The fact that Wang Chenggong had refused to coordinate with the Mongols—even when it was clearly his best chance—meant that this group still retained a trace of salvageable humanity.

Without further discussion, Dao Xuan Tianzun issued a quiet instruction.

"Take them back.

Put them to labor reform."

After speaking, he fell silent.

Shi Jian immediately understood.

Smiling, he turned to Luo Xi.

"General Luo, calm yourself, calm yourself. Anger harms the body."

Luo Xi nodded hastily.

"General Shi speaks wisely. One should not anger oneself unnecessarily."

Shi Jian continued smoothly.

"As you know, I am under orders from the Ministry of War to guard the Longmen Yellow River Bridge. There is much work to be done there—building fortifications, digging trenches, hauling stone, carrying earth."

"In past years, these tasks were handled through corvée labor," he went on.

"But now, commoners are scarce."

Luo Xi nodded.

"Indeed. Years of rebellion have emptied Shaanxi and Shanxi. Nine out of ten households are gone. It's hard to find anyone for corvée work."

Shi Jian sighed.

"Exactly. I simply cannot find enough hands."

Luo Xi's eyes lit up.

"General Shi... are you saying you'll take these men?"

Shi Jian nodded.

"I'll point firearms at them. Anyone who refuses to work gets a bullet through the forehead."

Luo Xi laughed loudly.

"Excellent! That's exactly how these scoundrels should be handled!"

At once, Luo Xi stopped shouting about executions.

The superior officer needed laborers. As a subordinate, he naturally supported the plan enthusiastically.

He pointed at Wang Chenggong.

"Fine. I'll give you another chance. Go work for General Shi. Don't even think about causing more trouble."

Thus, the surrender was settled.

Afterward, Luo Xi went to draft his official report.

Naturally, he did not mention how his troops had collapsed at the first encounter.

Instead, he wrote of a fierce battle lasting three hundred rounds, in which the rebels relied on a strong fortress and his soldiers were exhausted from a long march, suffering a temporary setback.

Then, at a critical moment, General Shi Jian arrived with reinforcements.

With General Shi's assistance, morale was restored and a great victory achieved.

As for the Mongol cavalry, Luo Xi did not dare claim credit. He knew better than to grasp at merit he did not deserve.

He truthfully recorded:

General Shi led one thousand firearms troops.

They fired rotating volleys.

In four rounds, taking no more than ten breaths, the Mongol cavalry was utterly routed and fled in disarray.

Chapter 744 Are They All Writing Novels Now?

In the sixth year of Chongzhen's reign.

Inside the Imperial Study of the capital, the Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, was still reading memorials.

He had never understood why this was so.

He was already an emperor known for diligence. He rose early, slept late, personally reviewed state affairs, and yet the memorials never ended.

No matter how many he read, more would always be waiting.

Endless. Truly endless.

He opened one at random and skimmed it.

Bad news.

Zijing Liang was leading a large rebel force, marching south, active around Weihui Prefecture north of the Yellow River.

Weihui lay at the intersection of Shanxi, Henan, and Hebei. The rebels would appear in Shanxi today, slip into Henan tomorrow, and then dart into Hebei the day after.

The governors and commanders of the three provinces were busy shifting responsibility. Each insisted that the bandits were not within their borders and therefore not their problem.

Zhu Youjian's mood sank straight down.

He opened the next memorial.

An official from the Ministry of War wrote that Henan had failed to block the Taihang Mountain passes, allowing the bandits to enter, and could not escape blame.

He opened another.

Still the Ministry of War.

This one stated that the officials and gentry of Henan had jointly petitioned, requesting that Hong Chengchou, Supreme Commander of the Three Borders, also take charge of military affairs in Shanxi and Henan.

The Ministry of War praised the proposal as excellent.

Unifying command would prevent mutual shirking of responsibility and allow for coordinated encirclement and suppression.

They further suggested that Hong Chengchou relocate to Tongguan Pass, located at the junction of the three provinces, to supervise the governors of Shanxi and Henan, as well as the regional commanders Cao Wenzhao, Deng Qi, and Zhang Yingchang.

Zhu Youjian frowned.

Hong Chengchou was capable, that much he admitted.

But granting one man such sweeping authority, and stationing him at Tongguan—such a critical choke point—

It felt dangerous.

What if Hong Chengchou rebelled?

After pondering for a long time, Zhu Youjian picked up his brush and issued an edict:

"Military ineffectiveness must stem from generals' lack of dedication.

I hereby dispatch eunuchs Chen Dakui, Yan Siyin, Xie Wenju, and Sun Maolin as inner military supervisors, to serve as army superintendents for the garrisons of Cao Wenzhao, Zhang Yingchang, Zuo Liangyu, and Deng Qi."

He nodded to himself.

As long as eunuchs were watching them, those generals would surely fight properly.

It had to be so.

Just as this thought settled, a eunuch rushed in from outside.

"Your Majesty! Wonderful news! Truly wonderful news!"

Zhu Youjian brightened.

"Speak quickly."

The eunuch said, "Deng Qi, the Sichuan Regional Commander, had a general named Yang Yuchun, who while pursuing Zijing Liang fell into an ambush and was killed—"

Zhu Youjian slammed the table.

"You dog! How is that wonderful news? Are you trying to anger me to death?"

The eunuch broke out in cold sweat.

"Your servant... your servant hasn't finished speaking..."

"Continue!"

The eunuch hurriedly said, "Deng Qi led his troops to avenge Yang Yuchun, drew his five-stone great bow, and from two hundred paces shot an arrow through Zijing Liang's throat, killing him on the spot!"

Zhu Youjian's spirits soared.

For two full seconds.

Then suspicion crept in.

"A five-stone bow?" he asked coldly.

"Two hundred paces? Through the throat?"

Sweat poured from the eunuch's face.

"That... that's what the memorial says."

Zhu Youjian exploded.

"All of you are scoundrels! These memorials read like novels! Tell me—did Zijing Liang really die or not? Is this report even real?"

The eunuch's back was soaked.

"Your servant... does not know."

"Investigate!" Zhu Youjian barked.

"Investigate thoroughly! I want the truth. No more lies!"

The eunuch retreated at once.

Before the door had even closed, another eunuch entered.

"Your Majesty, Governor Chen Qiyu of Yansui submits an urgent military memorial."

"Bring it."

Zhu Youjian opened it.

His eyes widened.

The memorial read:

"According to Commander Luo Xi: General Shi led one thousand arquebusiers. They fired in rotating volleys. In four volleys, taking only ten breaths of time, the Mongol cavalry was completely routed and fled in disorder."

Zhu Youjian stared.

Then he overturned the desk.

"Four volleys in ten breaths?!"

What kind of arquebus fires that fast?

Is it a child's slingshot?!"

"If Mongol cavalry could be destroyed in ten breaths, why did Qin Shi Huang bother building the Great Wall?!"

The eunuchs dropped to their knees, scrambling to gather memorials from the floor.

Zhu Youjian was livid.

"This is getting more outrageous by the day!

Outrageous!

You're all trying to anger me to death!"

Another eunuch appeared hesitantly.

"A report... the Governor of Shaanxi, Wang Shunxing, has submitted a memorial—Ah! Your Majesty, what are you doing?"

"Bring it!" Zhu Youjian snapped.

"Wang Shunxing is a steady man. He wouldn't write nonsense."

The memorial was presented.

Zhu Youjian read:

"Governor Wang Shunxing reports that a certain Squire Li has constructed a railway outside Xi'an, stretching a thousand li, passing dozens of prefectures and counties, directly to Hedong City. On this

railway runs an iron carriage weighing hundreds of thousands of catties, capable of carrying a thousand people at once and traveling a thousand li in a single day."

Zhu Youjian choked.

He exhaled heavily, then screamed:

"Aiya—aiya—aiya!

That old scoundrel Wang Shunxing!

How dare he write such absurd nonsense?!"

"They've all gone mad! Every single one of them!

I can't read one truthful memorial anymore!

They're all just scribbling lies to fool me!"

"Your Majesty, calm your anger!" the eunuchs cried.

Zhu Youjian slammed the desk.

"Dismiss Commander Luo Xi!

Dismiss Governor Wang Shunxing!

Replace them all!"

The eunuchs panicked.

"Your Majesty, Commander Luo Xi may be dismissed, but Governor Wang Shunxing has governed Shaanxi well. The region has stabilized greatly, and even the rebels have quieted down."

Zhu Youjian sneered.

"That's not his merit! The rebels simply fled into Shanxi!

Dismiss him!

Appoint... Lian Guoshi!"

Thus, Lian Guoshi—eighth-generation descendant of Lian Zining, early Ming pillar minister and venerable elder of the dynasty—took office at lightning speed.

After venting his anger, Zhu Youjian looked around.

The Imperial Study was in chaos.

Memorials lay scattered everywhere as eunuchs hurried to collect them.

He felt a trace of embarrassment.

As emperor, overturning furniture in anger was unseemly.

A ruler should restrain himself.

Control your temper.

He picked up another memorial.

It read:

"The Shanxi bandits: Jieshan Hu, Liu Daozhi, Jin Chipeng, Xue Rengui, Yitiao Long, Hei Shashen, Ren Zhonghu, Wu Yanwang, Ma Shangfei, Wang Denghuai, Man Tianfei, Man E, Huang Canaryo, Zhang Cong, Fan Dengke, Fan Jirong, Yikuai Tie, Chuanshan Jia, Lao Jiangjun, Er Jiangjun, Man Tianxing, Shang Shanhu, Sao Dihui, Pa Dihui, Kuo Tianfei, Tiao Shanhu, Xin Laijiang, Jiu Digun, Xiao Huangying, Fang Ritu, Jia Zongguan, Bi Shangtian, Xiao Hongqi, Cao Shangfei, Yizhi Hu, Yichi Fei, Sidan Wang, Du Weilang... and others, have re-entered northern Shaanxi through northwestern Shanxi."

Zhu Youjian exclaimed,

"These ruffians—why are their names all so disgraceful?"

Cao Huachun said, "Your Majesty, the main point!"

Zhu Youjian snapped back to attention.

"The main point... so many bandits have returned to Shaanxi?"

He clenched his fist.

"Who in Shaanxi can still fight them?"

Cao Huachun answered calmly.

"Shi Jian."

Chapter 745 Trending Short-Form Dramas

May, sixth year of Chongzhen.

Zijing Liang, also known as Wang Ziyong, succumbed to the compounded effects of wounds and illness after being struck by a stray arrow during a battle in Henan against Deng Qi, the Grand General of Sichuan.

With Zijing Liang's death, the rebel forces once again lost their leader.

After brief internal wrangling, command of the rebel army fell into the hands of Chuang Wang, Gao Yingxiang.

Once Gao Yingxiang assumed leadership, he immediately adopted the strategy proposed by Chuang Jiang, Li Zicheng.

The plan was simple in concept, yet ruthless in execution: cross the Yellow River.

The rebels first staged a feint, spreading rumors and movements that suggested a withdrawal toward Shanxi. Imperial forces took the bait, reinforcing western defenses and shifting troops accordingly.

Then, without warning, the rebels revealed boats and bamboo rafts that had been prepared long in advance. At a ferry north of Kaifeng, they crossed the Yellow River en masse.

In one decisive maneuver, the strategic balance shifted.

Early that same morning.

Li Daoxuan rose with the sun.

After stretching lazily, he ordered breakfast through a food delivery app: fried dough twists soaked in soup.

Sitting at his table, he ate while scrolling idly through his phone, feeling rather content.

Just then, QQ Messenger flashed.

Queen of a Thousand Faces M:

"Xuanzi! We made money! Hahahaha! We really made money!"

Li Daoxuan paused mid bite and replied:

"Huh? I haven't checked on that short series in days. Was it successful?"

Queen of a Thousand Faces M was practically vibrating through the screen.

"A massive hit! Not number one overall, but we exploded in our niche. Excellent reviews, strong ticket sales. After settling accounts with the platform, total profit comes to 3.32 million yuan!"

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Mm. Not bad."

Having seen far larger sums flow through his diorama projects, three million did not particularly move him.

For Queen of a Thousand Faces M, however, it was a historic victory.

"As per the contract," she said quickly, "I take twenty percent, you take eighty. I'll transfer 2.656 million to you shortly. Remember to declare it for tax on your phone!"

"Alright," Li Daoxuan replied casually.

There was a pause.

"That's it?" Queen of a Thousand Faces M said. "You don't sound excited at all."

Li Daoxuan sighed.

"I see other short dramas. Revenge fantasies. Soldier kings returning. Domineering CEOs falling in love. They pull in hundreds of millions. We only made a little over three million. What's there to celebrate?"

"That's completely different!" she protested. "Our Mu Guiying project is based on an old story. Everyone already knows the plot. The only reason it made money at all was because the fight scenes felt real."

"Oh," Li Daoxuan said.

"If we want bigger money," she continued, "we need a better script. Let me give you an example."

Li Daoxuan felt a bad premonition.

"You're actually the son of the world's richest man. One day, you decide to experience life as a commoner, so you go work as a car washer at a tiny subsidiary of your family's conglomerate. Then—"

"What kind of lunatic rich kid does that?" Li Daoxuan interrupted.

"Listen first!" she snapped. "A stunning heiress drives up in a Ferrari. While you're washing the car, she gets a call. Her parents pressure her to marry. If she doesn't, her inheritance goes to her cousin."

"What kind of parents are those?" Li Daoxuan muttered.

"So she looks at you," Queen of a Thousand Faces M continued, unfazed, "and suddenly gets an idea. She grabs your arm and says, 'Handsome, want to make some quick money?'"

"No," Li Daoxuan said flatly.

"That's not your line!" she snapped. "You're supposed to look confused and ask how. Then she says, 'Let's get married. We'll sign a prenup. My money is mine, yours is yours.'"

"Are you insulting the audience's intelligence?" Li Daoxuan asked.

"Anyway," she barreled on, "you get married. She thinks you're poor. She brings you into high society. Then her cousin shows up, furious because you stole his inheritance, and pressures the car wash to fire you."

Li Daoxuan raised a hand.

"Stop. I know the rest."

"I reveal I'm insanely rich. I humiliate him. She's shocked. Then she worships me. I teach her how to run a company. Her business skyrockets. She becomes obedient and devoted. End."

Queen of a Thousand Faces M cheered.

"Yes! Exactly!"

"Please give me ten minutes," Li Daoxuan said calmly, "to recover from that."

"Hey, don't be like that," she said. "Cringe doesn't matter. Money does."

"No," Li Daoxuan replied firmly. "I'll stick with action films."

"Fine," she conceded. "Honestly, I'm already thrilled. My share is over six hundred thousand. I haven't made that much in twenty years. Xuanzi, film something else. I'll handle editing, effects, marketing."

"Alright," Li Daoxuan said. "I'll contact you once I've shot something."

He closed QQ.

Leaning back, he felt equal parts amusement and despair.

Are all popular short dramas like this now?

That was truly horrifying.

Thinking of short dramas made him think of the Stars Performing Arts Agency.

While finishing his soup, he opened the interface and switched his view to Puzhou.

The perspective descended.

He activated the focus function.

Inside the Stars Performing Arts Agency, Tie Niaofei stood respectfully before Lao Nanfeng, holding a thick stack of scripts with both hands.

"Lao Nanfeng," Tie Niaofei said, "these are the scripts Master Sun Chuanting has prepared."

"Sun Chuanting?" Lao Nanfeng chuckled. "The scholar from Daizhou who likes writing stories?"

Tie Niaofei smiled. "Although Master Sun writes at home, his grasp of military affairs is excellent."

Lao Nanfeng smiled faintly and said nothing.

He took the scripts, flipped open the first page, and read the title:

A Junior Soldier of the Dalinghe Border Army

After skimming several pages, the smile on his face slowly faded.

"This story," he said, "is about events from two years ago. Zu Dashou's surrender. He Kegang's death. The protagonist is a low ranking soldier under He Kegang."

Tie Niaofei nodded eagerly.

"Yes. The Battle of Dalinghe."

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun said the story should be closer to the present," Tie Niaofei added. "Only then will it truly resonate with the common people."

Lao Nanfeng closed the script.

"...Interesting."

Chapter 746 I'll Mobilize Them

Lao Nanfeng's hand trembled slightly as he held the script.

The title alone—"A Soldier of the Daling River Border Army"—made his heart stir.

Before he had become Commander Lang's deputy, before he held authority or command, he too had been nothing more than a nameless soldier stationed at the frontier. He had climbed his way up step by step, bleeding and surviving, relying on nothing but stubbornness and fate.

Those five characters struck straight at his memories.

As he continued reading, his breathing gradually slowed.

Sun Chuanting's depiction of Daling River Border City was astonishingly detailed. The climate, the barracks, the morale of the soldiers, the uneasy calm before battle—it all felt vivid, as though the man himself had once stood on those walls, staring into the frozen northern plains.

Even Lao Nanfeng, who had fought on the frontier, found it hard to fault.

At the same time, Li Daoxuan was reviewing the script through the co-sensing interface.

After reading it through, he couldn't help but comment quietly:

"This man truly lives up to his reputation as an expert in border affairs. Even without having personally been to Daling River, he can reconstruct the place with such precision. That's not something you can do by imagination alone."

"He must have gathered an enormous amount of information."

Lao Nanfeng nodded unconsciously, then frowned.

"I can personally take on the lead role," he said slowly. "That part isn't a problem. The real issue is this—where do we film Daling River City?"

That question brought the room to a brief silence.

Filming a movie required a suitable location. Last time, when they shot Mu Guiying, they had barely managed by borrowing Li Xianggui's courtyard and passing it off as Tianbo Mansion.

But this time was different.

Daling River Border City was not some private residence. It was a major frontier stronghold. You couldn't just build a short wall, hang a banner, and pretend it was real.

Puzhou City was immediately ruled out.

Its atmosphere was too scholarly, too commercial, too peaceful. It simply didn't possess the harsh, martial character of a northeastern border city that stared daily into enemy territory.

Tie Niaofei thought for a moment, then said,

"What about Han City?"

Seeing Lao Nanfeng turn his gaze toward him, Tie Niaofei continued.

"Han City's scale is close to that of Daling River City. It's part of the Tongguan Circuit—military administration runs deep there. The city itself has a heavier, sterner atmosphere than Puzhou. More importantly, it's close to Gao Family Village."

He hesitated briefly, then added,

"If needed, we could even mobilize the residents of Han City to assist with filming."

The moment those words left his mouth, Lao Nanfeng broke into a cold sweat.

"Mobilize... the entire city?" he said weakly. "My Flower World Star Agency doesn't have that kind of authority. Do you have any idea how much that would cost? Even if we sold out every seat, we'd never make the money back."

At that moment, the door creaked open.

A familiar figure stepped inside, smiling.

"Han City it is," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "Your Flower World Star Agency doesn't need to mobilize anyone."

"I will do it."

Lao Nanfeng and Tie Niaofei were startled and immediately bowed.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Lao Nanfeng straightened and said earnestly,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, for you to mobilize the people of an entire city just so your humble subordinate can make a film... this is far too much favor. I truly don't know how I could ever repay it."

Li Daoxuan waved a hand dismissively.

"Don't flatter yourself," he said. "This isn't for your agency."

"This is so the common people can see what the northeastern battlefield is truly like. So they can understand the weight of the times they live in."

"It's for enlightenment."

Hearing this, Lao Nanfeng grinned.

"Heh. Either way, your humble subordinate profits."

With the Dao Xuan Tianzun's words, Lao Nanfeng's spirits soared.

This film had to be done properly now.

If the Dao Xuan Tianzun was personally mobilizing Han City, then this production would no longer be constrained by resources. No reused footage, no patchwork editing like before.

They were going big.

Lao Nanfeng immediately turned his gaze to Zao Ying, who had returned together with Tie Niaofei.

"Instructor Zao," he said, "the Battle of Daling River involves fighting the Manchu forces. We'll need cavalry. Your Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion will have to assist."

Zao Ying's expression stiffened.

"You want me to play a Manchu?" she snapped. "Not happening."

Lao Nanfeng laughed.

"Relax. You won't be acting. There are no female generals on the Manchu side anyway. We just need your cavalry soldiers to fill the roles."

Zao Ying folded her arms.

"They probably won't want to play Manchus either."

Lao Nanfeng countered smoothly,

"Commander Chen sacrificed himself not long ago to play Xiao Tianzuo. What's wrong with your men playing Manchus for a bit?"

Zao Ying narrowed her eyes.

"I heard Commander Chen gets chased by children with bamboo water guns every time he goes out now."

Lao Nanfeng went silent.

Nearby, Commander Chen let out a long, miserable wail.

Lao Nanfeng quickly patted his shoulder.

"Don't worry, don't worry. This time, I'll arrange for you to play a proper Great Ming general. We'll restore your reputation."

Commander Chen's eyes lit up.

"Really? Who do I play?"

Lao Nanfeng said cheerfully,

"Zu Dashou."

"PFF—!"

Commander Chen nearly spat out a mouthful of old blood.

"No! Brother Nanfeng! You can't do this to me!"

Li Daoxuan burst into laughter.

"Commander Chen," he said, "what can you do? You just have the face of a notorious villain. Accept your fate."

Commander Chen protested bitterly,

"What does 'face of a notorious villain' even mean? Dao Xuan Tianzun, please stop mocking me. I'm already miserable enough—people point and laugh at me in the streets!"

Amid laughter and argument, the project "A Soldier of the Daling River Border Army" officially entered preparation.

Casting.

Rehearsals.

Logistics.

Mobilization.

This was no longer a small production.

It drew in Lao Nanfeng's militia, Zao Ying's Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion, and even the residents of Han City.

A true super-scale production.

Meanwhile—

The entire city of Luoyang fell into panic.

A dire piece of news had just arrived.

Chuǎng Wang, leading a rebel force exceeding a hundred thousand, had crossed the Yellow River at Kaifeng Ferry. After bypassing Kaifeng Prefecture, the rebels swept southwest, burning, killing, and looting as they advanced.

Zhang Yingchang, Regional Commander of Henan, led his army across the Yellow River in pursuit—but he was already two days behind.

Government troops marched thirty li a day.

The rebels marched fifty.

There was no catching them.

All of Henan's usable forces were under Zhang Yingchang's command. If he failed, no one else could stop the rebels.

Luoyang lay less than four hundred li from Kaifeng.

In other words—the rebels could arrive at any moment.

Prince of Fu, Zhu Changxun, had barricaded himself inside the Governor's office, refusing to leave.

"Governor Fan!" he shouted. "The safety of my Prince of Fu Residence rests entirely on your shoulders!"

Governor Fan Shangzheng forced a bitter smile.

"Your Royal Highness," he said, "this official has no troops. All forces are under General Zhang Yingchang."

Zhu Changxun's voice shot up.

"Then what are we supposed to do? If the rebels come, am I to defend Luoyang with my own head?"

Fan Shangzheng muttered,

"That might not be impossible."

Zhu Changxun roared,

"What did you say?!"

Fan Shangzheng pretended to hear nothing.

Zhu Changxun seethed.

"I see it now! If the rebels attack, you'll run! Henan is your jurisdiction—you can flee anywhere and claim you were organizing militias. But I can't run! My fief is here. You want to sell me out!"

Fan Shangzheng sneered inwardly, but said nothing.

At that moment, the door opened.

Bai Yuan walked in with a smile.

"Oh?" he said. "You're both here? Perfect."

Chapter 747 Shaking Him Down for Silver

As Bai Yuan slipped in, Fan Shangzheng and Zhu Changxun were both simultaneously taken aback.

Then, their faces lit up with joy.

Fan Shangzheng exclaimed, "Master Bai is here!"

Bai Yuan smiled. "Indeed, I happened to be in Luoyang procuring supplies. I've heard the city abuzz with rumors that rebels are approaching. Panic has seized the city; countless villagers from the surrounding areas, dragging their children, have flooded into the city. Now, every street and alley is teeming with refugees."

Fan Shangzheng sighed. "Yes, the common folk from outside the city have surged in. What's interesting, though, is that the wealthy merchants and prominent families within the city have opened the west gate and are fleeing towards Tongguan."

Behind Bai Yuan, another figure emerged. It was none other than the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, Model 03, who remarked with a smile, "Those outside the walls yearn to enter, while those within frantically seek to escape. Such is human nature, isn't it?"

Fan Shangzheng was ecstatic. "Ah? So, the Marvelous Hero Xiao is here too!"

In truth, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun Model 03 was now in mass production. The skilled artisans of Gao Family Village had discovered that the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun Model 03 already integrated all the technology they currently possessed, making it impossible to upgrade with new functions for the time being.

They had therefore simply created models numbered 03-01, 03-02, and so forth, to be placed in various cities.

A place as strategically vital as Luoyang naturally warranted a unit.

The moment Fan Shangzheng saw Li Daoxuan, a sense of calm settled over him. The Marvelous Hero Xiao was, in his estimation, the most formidable knight-errant he had ever encountered, a master of swift, decisive action, leaving no trace in his wake. Aside from that rather chilling "Ice Soul" technique he cultivated—which was a little unnerving—everything else about him was impeccable.

With him present, he felt significantly more confident in facing the rebels.

Zhu Changxun, however, had never met Li Daoxuan. He only recognized Bai Yuan, and now regarded Li Daoxuan with an air of curiosity.

Fan Shangzheng said, "Seeing Master Bai and the Marvelous Hero Xiao, this official feels a considerable easing of tension in his heart. Ah! To be frank with you both, His Royal Highness, the Prince of Fu, and I are currently discussing matters concerning the approaching rebels."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Are you discussing which direction to flee?"

Zhu Changxun was speechless.

That was incredibly awkward. Who speaks like that?

Fan Shangzheng, a high-ranking civil official, harbored a particular disdain for the imperial clan, so he didn't feel the need to spare the Prince of Fu any courtesy. He chuckled. "Before you arrived, His Royal Highness was just lamenting that Luoyang was his fiefdom. If the rebels breached its walls, he would have nowhere to run, and he was quite anxious about it."

Zhu Changxun bristled. "You, Fan, watch your tongue."

Fan Shangzheng shrugged. "Oh, but this official is only stating facts."

Zhu Changxun seemed poised to erupt again, but a moment's reflection caused him to sigh instead. "Go ahead and laugh," he said. "I was born into an imperial household. Though I've enjoyed immense wealth and prestige, I am forbidden to leave my fiefdom for even a single step, condemned to live and die within these Luoyang walls. Laugh all you want. I've grown accustomed to it. After all, if I perish, Luoyang is doomed to fall. And if Luoyang falls, every single civilian in this city will serve as my funerary sacrifice. We'll all die together; the journey to the Yellow Springs won't be a lonely one for me then."

Fan Shangzheng's laughter abruptly died. A hint of awkwardness flickered across his face. If the rebels truly slaughtered every last person in Luoyang, how could he bear the thought? His tenure as governor would be over, undoubtedly culminating in his own execution.

Both men turned their heads in unison, looking at Bai Yuan.

Bai Yuan spread his hands. "Why look at me? I'm merely a weak, pathetic, helpless gentry scholar. With a rebel army of two hundred thousand marching this way, I'm quite terrified myself."

Fan Shangzheng pressed, "Master Bai, you command a considerable number of flintlock riflemen, do you not? This official is well aware of that. How about deploying them here to assist in Luoyang's defense? After all, the rebels are approaching from the east; they won't reach Xiaolangdi. Your personal guards wouldn't need to remain stationed there."

Zhu Changxun quickly chimed in, "Precisely! Precisely! I've also heard that when you recaptured Xiaolangdi, you deployed numerous flintlock riflemen, and when defending Hejin City against rebels crossing the Yellow River, you again mobilized a large contingent of them. Bring them here swiftly, to guard Luoyang's city walls! I will summon my royal guards, and Governor Fan can organize some civilian militias. Together, we might just be able to hold Luoyang."

Bai Yuan sighed dramatically. "Ah, but I am a merchant. A merchant won't rise early without profit, and defending Luoyang brings me no advantage..."

Zhu Changxun didn't hesitate for a moment, and immediately declared, "I'll pay!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly. Exactly, he thought. My whole purpose in coming was to fleece you of your money.

While Li Daoxuan could infinitely airdrop resources into the box, for a feudal magnate like the Prince of Fu—a wealthy man who hoarded vast sums of money instead of using it—it was imperative to find every possible way to extract some of that wealth.

This was different from merely airdropping supplies.

Bai Yuan asked with a smile, "How much are you offering?"

Zhu Changxun declared, "Two thousand taels!"

Bai Yuan shook his head. "Only two thousand taels? That's nowhere near enough. The Prince of Fu's mansion is so lavish; if the rebels were to pillage and burn it, your losses would surely exceed five hundred thousand taels, wouldn't they? For me to mobilize such a large force to protect your mansion, a task of such magnitude, only to earn two thousand taels? That is certainly insufficient."

Zhu Changxun gritted his teeth. "Five thousand taels!"

Bai Yuan simply said, "Still not enough."

Zhu Changxun flared up. "Don't be unreasonable! For five thousand taels, I could recruit countless local militias and martial heroes to serve me!"

Bai Yuan countered, "Even if you recruit legions of rabble, they might not be able to defeat two hundred thousand rebels. You can't possibly recruit two hundred thousand disorganized commoners and expect them to stand against an equally large, battle-hardened foe, can you?"

That was obviously a rhetorical question.

Zhu Changxun certainly couldn't recruit two hundred thousand disorganized men. Setting aside whether he even had the funds for such a massive recruitment drive, if he truly amassed such a large personal army, what would be the difference between that and outright rebellion?

At that point, the Chongzhen Emperor would undoubtedly temporarily halt all bandit suppression efforts and order the entire Ming army to prioritize annihilating the Prince of Fu.

Zhu Changxun was practically sputtering with rage. "What exactly do you want, then?"

Bai Yuan stated calmly, "Twenty thousand."

Zhu Changxun exploded. "You might as well become a rebel yourself! It would be quicker to just rob me!"

Li Daoxuan, witnessing the scene, was immensely entertained. What a show.

It was Fan Shangzheng who finally couldn't stand it any longer. He interjected, "Master Bai, that's quite enough. It's commendable that the Prince of Fu is willing to contribute funds, but the primary responsibility for defending Luoyang ultimately rests with this official. Consider it a favor to me, then..."

The third-party mediator had arrived.

Bai Yuan, knowing when to quit while he was ahead, declared, "Alright, then, ten thousand taels, and not a single coin less. Pay first, and my men will enter the city. If I don't see the silver, my men will remain at Xiaolangdi, enjoying the spectacle from afar."

Zhu Changxun was shaking with indignation. "Fine, you can have it, you can have it!"

He sprang to his feet in a huff, and with a furious flick of his sleeve, stalked back towards his mansion.

As for the actual transfer of silver, that, of course, would be handled by his retainers. It couldn't possibly be done on the spot.

Once he was gone, Fan Shangzheng turned to Bai Yuan. "Master Bai, I've observed you consistently distributing porridge and aiding the populace in Xiaolangdi and Hejin County. You don't strike me as someone consumed by greed. So why were you so insistent on extracting silver from the Prince of Fu today?"

Bai Yuan smiled. "Shaking this silver out of him, and then distributing it among the refugees who have flooded into the city—wouldn't that be far better?"

Fan Shangzheng burst into hearty laughter. "You speak wisely. Indeed, very wisely."

Chapter 748 Let's Be Casual About It

Luoyang City, East Gate.

The city wall was cold beneath him.

Zhu Changxun sat there in silence, legs dangling over the inner edge of the battlements, his expression dark and restless. Behind him stood his five hundred personal guards — not five hundred more, not five hundred less. Every single one of them had been counted, registered, and approved by the court.

He knew that number by heart.

Five hundred.

Not a symbolic figure. Not an estimate. A hard ceiling.

Outside the city, the wind carried dust from the east. Kaifeng lay in that direction, and beyond Kaifeng, the rebels were stirring again. Everyone knew it. Messages came daily. Scouts rode in and out like ants fleeing a flooded nest.

If the rebels attacked, they would come from the east.

Which was why Zhu Changxun had transferred all five hundred of his personal guards here, stacking them tightly along the East Gate. Fan Shangzheng had also mobilized local militias and forcibly conscripted villagers, filling the gaps in the defenses with men who barely knew how to hold a spear straight.

Zhu Changxun stared at the horizon, teeth clenched.

In his heart, he cursed his ancestors.

Not the Great Ancestor, of course. Never the Great Ancestor.

Emperor Taizu, Zhu Yuanzhang, had treated his descendants generously. Princes were enfeoffed in key cities, stationed at strategic locations, given soldiers, supplies, and authority. The Zhu clan had once stood like iron pillars across the empire.

Back then, a prince was a prince.

But everything changed after Emperor Yongle.

The Jingnan Campaign had proven one thing with terrifying clarity: a prince with an army was a threat to the throne.

So the later emperors began to strip them, layer by layer.

First the command authority.

Then the troop numbers.

Then the right to recruit.

Then the right to train.

By the time it reached Zhu Changxun's generation, the so-called Prince of Fu — stationed in Luoyang, the "Center of the World" — was allowed exactly five hundred guards.

No more.

Not even one.

"If only I had as many soldiers as Old Ancestor Zhu Di did when he was enfeoffed in Yanping..." Zhu Changxun ground his teeth. "Why would I be afraid of a bunch of starving rebels?"

His resentment surged.

Princes of this generation lived worse than dogs.

And as if that weren't enough, he had even been swindled out of ten thousand taels of silver by a mere gentry member.

At the thought of this, Zhu Changxun turned sharply toward Fan Shangzheng.

"Governor," he said stiffly, "that fellow surnamed Bai took my money. Why isn't he here yet?"

Fan Shangzheng, standing to the side with his hands folded in his sleeves, replied calmly, "They're here already. Your Highness, look."

Zhu Changxun followed his gaze.

And froze.

From the distance, a formation approached.

Two thousand men.

Their footsteps were synchronized, steady, and heavy, producing a low, rolling sound that echoed faintly against the city walls. The formation was clean — not the loose, chaotic clumps of villagers or militia, but something disciplined, deliberate.

They wore no visible armor.

At least, not the kind Zhu Changxun was accustomed to seeing.

Plain cloth garments. Tight sleeves. Simple boots. Each man carried a firearm slung over his shoulder, with an ammunition pouch secured at his waist. Their faces were relaxed. Some even smiled faintly as they marched.

They advanced openly, without hesitation, straight toward the city.

Then, as if rehearsed countless times, they dispersed and began taking up defensive positions along the wall.

Zhu Changxun's expression cracked.

"A mere gentry member..." he thought wildly, "...dares to raise two thousand armed men? All with firearms? In the open?"

Yet he — a prince of the imperial clan — dared not command more than five hundred guards.

"What kind of world is this?" he cursed inwardly.

Envy.

Resentment.

And an unwilling spark of admiration.

They tangled together in his chest.

Unable to restrain himself, Zhu Changxun muttered aloud, "Isn't he afraid the court will accuse him of rebellion? Raising so many firearm troops?"

Fan Shangzheng lowered his voice. "The court stopped caring about that long ago, Your Highness. Didn't you know?"

Zhu Changxun turned sharply.

"Along the coast," Fan Shangzheng continued, "there's Zheng Zhilong. Former pirate. He openly buys firearms by the shipload. Cannons, muskets — whatever he wants. And what did the court do?"

Zhu Changxun didn't answer.

"They appointed him a Mobile Corps Commander," Fan Shangzheng said flatly. "Allowed him to raise troops, buy ships, purchase artillery."

Zhu Changxun went silent.

For a moment, it felt as if something heavy had slammed into his chest.

He slowly raised his hand, palm facing the sky, fingers spread, as if asking the heavens themselves.

"So... only princes aren't allowed to do this?" he said bitterly. "Everyone else can? Even thieves? But not us?"

Fan Shangzheng glanced at him, his expression unreadable.

That look said everything.

Zhu Changxun laughed dryly and waved the matter away. Complaining too much about this was dangerous. He changed the subject.

"I paid him ten thousand taels," he said. "And he sends only two thousand men. Five taels per head. Isn't that expensive?"

"That's because you haven't seen how formidable these men are," Fan Shangzheng replied.

"How formidable could they be?" Zhu Changxun scoffed. "They're just bird-guns."

He waved his hand.

A personal guard immediately stepped forward and presented a bird-gun.

Zhu Changxun took it, weighing it in his hands with casual familiarity.

"I've even used this thing to hunt birds," he said smugly.

Fan Shangzheng noticed the phrasing.

Used it, not hit anything.

"This thing doesn't shoot far," Zhu Changxun continued. "It's inaccurate. After one shot, reloading takes forever. It's a toy."

He glanced again at Bai Yuan's two thousand men and shook his head.

"Ten thousand taels for soldiers like these? Not worth it."

Fan Shangzheng nearly replied — but stopped himself.

There was no need to argue.

If the rebels came, Zhu Changxun would understand.

Outside Kaifeng City, in the rebel encampment.

A roughly drawn map lay spread across a table.

It depicted Henan Province — crude lines, uneven proportions, but every major river and city was marked. For rebels, this was already a luxury.

The Chuǎng Jiang stood nearby, having drawn it himself.

The Chuǎng Wang looked at the map, then nodded. "We've broken through the Yellow River defenses. As the Chuǎng Jiang suggested, we should bypass Luoyang and move southwest into Huguang."

Before he could say more, two generals stepped forward.

Brothers.

Meng Hu and Du Hu.

"Brother Chuǎng Wang," Meng Hu said loudly, "why bypass Luoyang? That's the Center of the World! Rich city! And there's even a prince inside. What's his title again?"

"Prince of Fu," Du Hu supplied.

"Right! Prince of Fu!" Meng Hu slapped his thigh. "Such a fat lamb, and we just walk around it?"

The Chuǎng Wang hesitated.

The Chuǎng Jiang frowned. "Luoyang is easy to defend and hard to attack. You all know this."

"We do," Meng Hu retorted. "But not even trying? I can't swallow that."

He scratched his head. "Is it a mule—"

"A horse," Du Hu corrected patiently.

"Right! Mule or horse, you have to ride it to know!"

The Chuǎng Jiang's face darkened. "Xiaolangdi is right next to Luoyang. Have you forgotten who stopped us at the Yellow River?"

"That was water!" Meng Hu snorted. "And northerners can't sail. This time it's land. What am I afraid of?"

"The gentry member," the Chuǎng Jiang snapped.

"What gentry member?" Meng Hu scoffed. "Bai... something."

"Bai Yuan," Du Hu said.

"That's the one!" Meng Hu waved dismissively. "Why fear him?"

"Enough," the Chuǎng Jiang said coldly. "I oppose attacking Luoyang."

"And who are you to decide?" Meng Hu shot back. "You're not the boss here."

The camp fell silent.

All eyes turned to the Chuǎng Wang.

The Chuǎng Wang felt his scalp tingle.

He wasn't a decisive man. Never had been. That was why he had survived this long.

After a long pause, he sighed.

"Fine," he said. "Those who want to scout Luoyang can go. Those who don't can bypass it."

He forced a smile.

"Let's be casual about it."

Chapter 749 A Waste of Money

Zhu Changxun gradually noticed something that didn't sit right with him.

The two thousand militia brought by Bai Yuan, after climbing onto the walls of Luoyang, did not behave like soldiers he was familiar with. They didn't crowd together, nor did they randomly pick spots along the battlements.

Instead, they split into small units.

Each arquebusier squad walked to a specific section of the wall as if following an invisible map. They paused, checked distances, exchanged a few quiet words, and then—most baffling of all—marked the city wall.

Some took out small pieces of charcoal and drew symbols or numbers directly onto the stone.

Others scratched lines.

A few even wrote characters.

Zhu Changxun stared.

"These walls belong to me," he thought irritably. "When did they start letting people scribble on them?"

Unable to hold back, he asked aloud, "What exactly are they doing?"

At some point, Bai Yuan and Dao Xuan Tianzun had already walked up to the watchtower. Dao Xuan Tianzun stood quietly to one side, gaze unfocused, clearly uninterested in Zhu Changxun or anything happening around him.

Bai Yuan, however, was in a good mood.

Seeing Zhu Changxun finally ask, he smiled and replied, "Arranging positions."

Zhu Changxun frowned. "Arranging what positions? When the fighting starts, won't they just stand on the wall and shoot? Why the fuss?"

Bai Yuan shook his head. "That won't do at all. If everyone rushes to the wall at the last moment, it becomes chaos. People argue over space, block each other's firing angles, waste time shouting. Preparing in advance prevents panic."

Zhu Changxun looked at him sideways, unconvinced.

Before he could say anything else, something even stranger happened.

After confirming their assigned positions, the arquebusiers... left the wall.

One unit after another descended from the battlements and disappeared into the defensive shelters behind them.

Zhu Changxun's eyelid twitched.

"Hey—hey!" he snapped.

Bai Yuan explained calmly, "We don't know when the bandits will arrive. There's no need for soldiers to stand on the wall all day, freezing in the wind. Let them rest properly. When the bandits come, they'll have strength."

Zhu Changxun stared at him as if he were hearing nonsense.

"Are these soldiers," he demanded, "or are they your revered fathers?"

Bai Yuan only smiled, saying nothing.

That smile made Zhu Changxun even more uncomfortable.

Still, this was not the moment to explode. He swallowed his temper and waved his hand sharply.

"You!" he barked at his own men. "Go guard the walls! If bandits arrive and we're caught unprepared, I'll skin the lot of you!"

The five hundred personal guards immediately obeyed.

They climbed onto the walls in neat ranks, lining both sides of the East Gate.

Though their combat strength was nothing special, they were extremely well-dressed. Polished armor gleamed. Helmets were adorned. Sashes were tied just right. Standing tall on the wall, they looked imposing, dignified, unmistakably princely.

Dao Xuan Tianzun glanced over and thought mildly, What a shame my Field of View hasn't expanded here yet. Otherwise, these aerial shots might be useful someday.

He didn't know when the bandits would arrive.

Or whether they would arrive at all.

After waiting for a few minutes, he grew bored.

He walked to a quiet corner, sat down cross-legged, and with a soft whoosh, his consciousness slipped away.

His Co-sensing jumped elsewhere.

This movement once again caught Zhu Changxun's attention.

He pointed at Dao Xuan Tianzun. "What exactly is this man here for?"

Bai Yuan replied readily, "He's here to help. And he's very, very formidable."

Zhu Changxun snorted. "Formidable? I don't believe it."

He stood, strode over, and looked down at Dao Xuan Tianzun with all the authority of a prince.

"Hmph. I hear you're a martial arts master," he said. "Show this Prince your skills."

Dao Xuan Tianzun, whose consciousness was currently elsewhere, did not react at all.

Zhu Changxun's face darkened. "This Prince is talking to you!"

No response.

He grew angrier. "Pretending to be deaf?"

He reached out and shook Dao Xuan Tianzun's shoulder.

With a dull thump, Dao Xuan Tianzun toppled sideways and collapsed onto the ground.

Zhu Changxun jumped back in fright.

"Why is he so stiff?!" He crouched, checked for breathing, and panicked. "Dead? No—no, impossible! I barely touched him! I didn't kill him! I'm not a murderer!"

He stumbled backward and slammed straight into Fan Shangzheng.

Fan Shangzheng quickly steadied him. "Your Highness, don't panic. Master Xiao practices a cultivation technique called Ice Soul Condensation Qi Gong. While cultivating, he appears lifeless. You'll get used to it."

Bai Yuan nearly laughed.

Such a ridiculous name, and you remembered it exactly. As expected of a governor.

Meanwhile, Dao Xuan Tianzun was happily touring the world.

Xi'an.

Gao Family Village.

Puzhou.

Shi Jian's troops.

Tie Niaofei's caravan.

He hopped from place to place, checking if anything required intervention.

Nothing did.

Satisfied, he withdrew his consciousness.

Back in the real world, he opened a food delivery app and ordered a strawberry milk pudding.

Soon—ding-dong.

The villa's electronic doorbell rang.

He glanced at the camera feed and froze.

Not a delivery rider.

A cargo van.

The solar power systems had arrived.

"Perfect timing," he said happily.

He rushed downstairs, opened the door, and was greeted by a smiling driver.

"Your solar power systems are here. Fifteen sets in this truck. Three more trucks will arrive shortly. Where should we stack them?"

"The basement," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied.

The unloading took a long time.

When it was done, the basement was stacked high with equipment.

Dao Xuan Tianzun carried one set upstairs and placed it beside the box.

The box had grown enormous now—five meters long, three meters wide, dominating the room.

He measured the solar panel.

Perfect fit.

He selected Puzhou on the box.

The Field of View shifted.

An empty rocky plot outside the city.

He followed the manual carefully, step by step, connecting frames, panels, wires, batteries.

Finally, he ran a cable all the way into the city, through the Flower World Star Agency's grand theater—

Click.

The tablet lit up.

A lightning icon appeared.

Charging.

Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded in satisfaction.

Chapter 750 Haha, I Can Read!

The photovoltaic system was finally installed.

Li Daoxuan felt quietly pleased.

From now on, he would no longer need to keep carrying the tablet in and out of the box just to recharge it. That tedious cycle—take it out, charge it, put it back—was finally over.

However, once the excitement settled, a new problem surfaced.

The wiring.

Dragging an exposed cable directly from outside the city walls was far too risky. Anyone with eyes could see it. If it were discovered, the result would range from mass panic to full-blown worship chaos.

So Li Daoxuan adopted a familiar solution from his own era.

He dug trenches.

Outside the city walls, this was easy. He simply carved a long trench into the earth and buried the cable neatly beneath it.

Inside Puzhou City, however, things became... complicated.

The cable had to pass through residential courtyards, public streets, and even straight across the main drill ground of the Puzhou garrison.

In Li Daoxuan's own world, a project like this would require endless paperwork, permits, negotiations, and compensation. Construction crews would argue. Residents would protest. Someone would inevitably lie down in front of the trench.

But here?

Here, Li Daoxuan merely appeared.

The moment his figure manifested, the city erupted.

"Wow! Dao Xuan Tianzun has appeared!"

"What is Dao Xuan Tianzun doing this time?"

"Ah! He's digging again!"

"Look! That trench is heading straight into my courtyard!"

"Hahaha! My house has been personally blessed by Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

A trench was carved straight through the city.

No one complained.

Not a single person objected.

Horse carts were forced to detour, but instead of cursing, their drivers stopped, climbed down, and craned their necks to watch.

Children squatted by the trench, counting how many times Dao Xuan Tianzun lifted the soil.

Even shopkeepers leaned against their doors, hands clasped, faces glowing with pride, as if the trench were a personal honor.

The trench did not stop at one destination.

It split.

One branch ran toward the Puzhou Grand Theater.

The other extended to the marketplace square.

Puzhou City had two tablets, and both needed power.

Dao Xuan Tianzun buried a thick, long, black cable into the trench. At the branching point, he split the cable cleanly into two. When everything was in place, he filled the trench back in.

The roads were restored.

The courtyards returned to normal.

Only the slightly different color of the soil betrayed that the ground had ever been disturbed.

Thus, the tablets at the Grand Theater and the marketplace square were successfully supplied with power.

After confirming that everything worked, Li Daoxuan paused, thought for a moment, and shifted his view again.

This time, he returned to Gao Family Village.

On a small hill beside the Gao Family Village commercial district, he erected another photovoltaic system.

That evening, as the sun slowly dipped below the horizon—

On the large screen outside Gao Family Fortress, the program "Shi Kefa Legal Education" was playing.

Workers who had finished their shifts sat neatly arranged in rows in the plaza, snacking, chatting, and learning about the law with surprising enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, on the small hill nearby—

Song Yingxing.

Bai Gongzi.

Wang Zheng.

Along with senior technical engineers, graduate students, middle school students, and a group of so-called "knowledge pioneers" who had long since graduated middle school and were self-studying high school curricula.

All of them stood together.

All of them looked up.

Above their heads loomed an immense photovoltaic system.

To Li Daoxuan, it was nothing more than a few metal frames and panels.

To the little people below, it was a divine construction of unimaginable scale, something no human hands could ever hope to move.

Song Yingxing pointed upward.

"Everyone, look carefully. These panels are the same type as those installed on our Solar Cars. The only difference is that Dao Xuan Tianzun has laid them out on a scale far beyond anything we imagined."

Bai Gongzi nodded vigorously.

"There's no doubt about it. This converts sunlight into electricity. We've studied electricity in our physics textbooks... but we've never actually used it."

Everyone nodded.

Through the Physics Heavenly Books bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun, they had already completed middle school physics, and some had even begun high-school level material.

They understood electricity.

They understood circuits.

They understood theory.

What they lacked was practice.

Song Yingxing's voice trembled slightly with excitement.

"This divine machine can provide electricity. That means everything we learned but couldn't test before... can finally be realized!"

Bai Gongzi grew animated.

"In third-year middle school physics, there was a chapter called How to Light a Lightbulb. I read it over and over, but without electricity, it was meaningless. Now we can finally try!"

Wang Zheng coughed lightly.

"Gentlemen... let us not rush. This is a divine artifact bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. If we secretly draw power from it for experiments, might we anger him?"

Song Yingxing laughed.

"Old Wang, you arrived too late to Gao Family Village. You don't know Dao Xuan Tianzun's temperament. He is happiest when we study diligently."

Bai Gongzi nodded.

"Correct. Dao Xuan Tianzun praises us often. He has never scolded us."

Several older students chimed in at once:

"Just do it!"

"Stop hesitating!"

"This is knowledge!"

Wang Zheng clasped his hands together hurriedly.

"Amitābha, Immeasurable Good Fortune, Allāh Akbar, Hallelujah. This discussion has nothing to do with me. I didn't hear anything."

At that moment, Bai Gongzi—always the boldest—stepped forward.

"To draw electricity, we need a wire. Look at this thick cable. If we make our own wire as described in the physics textbook and connect it—"

"We'll have to cut the insulation."

"The insulation looks thick, but it's soft."

"Wait," someone said nervously, "if our knife touches the metal core... we'll get shocked."

"Getting shocked means death!"

A wave of alarm rippled through the crowd.

Song Yingxing raised his hand.

"Don't panic. All divine artifacts provided by Dao Xuan Tianzun share one characteristic."

"What is it?" several voices asked.

"They have a large switch."

The crowd froze.

Then erupted.

"Master Song has enlightened us!"

Everyone rushed toward the electrical box.

And sure enough—

There it was.

A massive switch.

On it were two words:

ON / OFF

Everyone fell silent.

"...We can't read this."

"What if pushing the wrong side causes disaster?"

"Perhaps one side means 'Ascend to Heaven' and the other means 'Vanquish Evil Spirits'."

At that moment, Wang Zheng burst out laughing.

"Hahahahaha! I can read this!"

Everyone turned.

"These are Western characters," Wang Zheng said proudly. "'On' means open. 'Off' means close."

The crowd exploded with joy.

"Old Wang is actually useful!"

"But why are there Western characters on a divine artifact?"

Wang Zheng explained solemnly,

"As I've said before, many divine artifacts are borrowed from other deities. This one may belong to Jesus or the Virgin Mary. Hence the Western script. At times like this, we should say—Hallelujah!"

"Get lost!"

Despite the ridicule, the crucial information had been delivered.

A graduate student climbed onto the box, raised a large hammer—

Clang!

He struck the OFF switch.