

Great Ming 751

Chapter 751 The Bandits Are Here

With a single swing of the graduate student's hammer—

Clang!

—the indicator light on the photovoltaic system instantly went dark.

At almost the same moment, far below the hill, outside Gao Family Fortress, the workers who had been sitting neatly watching Shi Kefa's Legal Education suddenly erupted into noise.

"Hey! Hey! Something popped up on the Divine Mirror!"

"There's a line of text blocking the screen!"

"What does it say? We can't read it!"

The discussion instantly turned chaotic.

Just then, a primary school student sitting near the front suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Oh no!" he shouted. "It says: Low battery, please charge!"

So that was the reason.

The tablet had been running continuously from morning until evening. Under normal circumstances, Li Daoxuan would have already taken it out to recharge it in the heavens.

But today, because the photovoltaic system had just been installed, he had grown complacent.

The solar panels hadn't had enough time to charge the tablet properly, and then a group of overly enthusiastic little people had decisively smashed the switch.

Naturally, the tablet ran out of power.

Up on the hillside, Song Yingxing heard the commotion below. He turned his head to look at the restless crowd, then calmly turned back toward the graduate student.

"Try pressing the 'on' side again."

The graduate student raised the hammer once more.

Thunk!

The indicator light lit up again.

Below the hill, the crowd immediately quieted.

"Oh! The words are gone!"

"Good, good! Keep watching!"

"Don't interrupt the lecture!"

Song Yingxing was overjoyed.

"That's it! It really is a switch."

Bai Gongzi laughed softly.

"Hehehe. Then things just got much easier."

He rubbed his hands together excitedly.

"Let's hurry back and dig out the section on electricity in the physics book. We'll review it carefully. Then we'll build every device mentioned inside."

He lowered his voice conspiratorially.

"Late at night, when no one is watching the show, we'll come over, switch off the immortal solar generator, strip the rubber insulation, and tap into the power."

Song Yingxing nodded vigorously.

"I'll try making a light bulb."

Bai Gongzi added,

"I want to experiment with parallel circuits."

Wang Zheng clasped his hands together solemnly.

"As for me, I respect the gods and buddhas. I have not participated in any discussion involving damage to divine artifacts. Hallelujah. Mazu protect us. Amen. Dao Xuan Tianzun is benevolent."

Song Yingxing glanced at him.

"Old Wang, didn't you bring up magnetic fields last time? Don't you want to try electromagnetic fields?"

Wang Zheng stiffened.

"Oh! This... this is different..."

He hesitated for a moment, then suddenly grinned.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has a vast and generous heart! Hahaha! Electromagnetic fields—here I come!"

Led by the three of them, a group of graduate students immediately joined in. Middle schoolers and self-taught high school students crowded forward to help.

Sleeves were rolled up.

Eyes gleamed.

An unprecedented scientific conspiracy began to take shape.

In truth, Li Daoxuan had already heard everything.

He had originally intended to intervene if the little people attempted anything dangerous involving electricity. But to his surprise, they were extremely cautious—even thoughtful.

They knew to turn off the power.

They knew about insulation.

They feared electric shock.

There was no need for intervention at all.

Let them do it.

No—"do it" wasn't quite right.

Let them advance by leaps and bounds.

With that settled, Li Daoxuan switched perspectives once more.

He swept across several regions.

Nothing unusual.

Then—

Luoyang City.

The instant his vision stabilized, a shrill scream tore through the air.

"They're here! They're here!"

"The bandits have arrived!"

"Commander Meng Hu and Commander Du Hu are leading the rebel army!"

"They're approaching Luoyang—almost at the city walls!"

Chaos exploded across the walls.

Zhu Changxun let out a scream like a pig being slaughtered.

"They're here! Ahhh! The bandits are here!"

"What do we do?! What do we do?!"

"Protect me! Quickly, protect this prince!"

His panic instantly infected his five hundred personal guards.

Half of them remained on the walls, but the other half rushed back, colliding with one another as they scrambled to surround Zhu Changxun.

The militia organized by Fan Shangzheng fared no better. Orders dissolved into shouting. Formations collapsed into scattered clusters.

Henan was not Shaanxi.

Nor Shanxi.

In Shaanxi and Shanxi, bandits had raged for years. Soldiers and militia there had long been hardened by blood and fire.

Henan had not yet endured such a baptism.

The moment real war arrived, its defenders froze.

But amidst the chaos—

The Gao Family Village arquebusiers burst forth from the concealed defensive tunnels.

They moved like flowing water.

No shouting.

No hesitation.

They sprinted directly toward the city walls.

Only now did Zhu Changxun understand why these men had insisted on assigning positions in advance.

Because the positions were already fixed, there was no need to panic.

As soon as they emerged, they ran straight to their designated spots.

Those with weaker memories simply followed the charcoal marks they had drawn earlier.

In the time it took to blink a few times—

Two thousand arquebusiers were in place.

Zhu Changxun stared.

"Oh?"

"Huh?"

"Eh?"

He turned to look at his own guards—still bumping into one another, shouting, blocking each other's paths.

The contrast was painfully obvious.

Bai Yuan walked up beside him, smiling.

"Five taels of silver per man. Was it worth it?"

Zhu Changxun swallowed.

"Well... from the current perspective, it's temporarily not worth it..."

He hesitated.

"Maybe two taels per man would be more reasonable."

Bai Yuan smiled without replying.

"They're here! We can see them!"

A cry rose up.

Everyone looked east.

Beyond the city walls, a dark tide rolled forward—dense, endless, swallowing the land itself.

At a glance, their numbers were impossible to estimate.

Zhu Changxun's legs nearly gave out.

"It's over... we're finished..."

"So many... far too many..."

"Luoyang is doomed... Henan is doomed... we're all doomed..."

His guards turned pale.

The militia trembled.

Fan Shangzheng fared slightly better. He had already seen two hundred thousand bandits outside Huaiqing Prefecture. Compared to that, he could still think.

He turned to Bai Yuan.

"Master Bai, what is your assessment?"

Bai Yuan calmly unfolded his folding fan. On it was written a single word:

Gentleman.

He raised the fan to cover half his face.

"There is no need for concern. Though the bandits are numerous, they are nothing more than earthen chickens and tile dogs."

Li Daoxuan added calmly,

"Although the scoundrels have appeared outside the east gate, scouts must be deployed at the south, north, and west gates as well. Guard against a feint."

Fan Shangzheng jolted.

"Understood!"

He immediately dispatched men.

As Luoyang made its preparations, the bandit army outside was also busy.

Small handcarts rolled forward.

Bandits shoveled earth and stones, loading them quickly.

Zhu Changxun frowned.

"What are they doing?"

Fan Shangzheng replied gravely,

"They're preparing to fill the moat. Once the battle begins, they'll push those carts forward under arrow fire and dump the earth in."

The real battle was about to begin.

Chapter 752 Worth Four Taels, Nine Mace

The moment Zhu Changxun heard those words, his entire body felt unwell, as though his internal organs had all shifted out of place.

"The moats!" he cried out. "My Luoyang moats! How could they be filled so easily?"

Fan Shangzheng answered patiently, as if explaining something obvious to a child.

"Your Highness, a small force could not manage it. But tens of thousands of rebels can. Just a thousand cartloads of earth and stone dumped into the river would be enough to form a foothold."

Zhu Changxun's face turned white.

"Ahhh! Then it's over! Quickly, protect this prince!"

His personal guards reacted instantly, closing in around him in a tight ring.

Everyone nearby exchanged glances, none of them daring to speak.

Fan Shangzheng sighed inwardly and tried to calm him.

"Your Highness, there's no need to be so frightened. As long as we do not allow them to push their carts close to the moat, they won't be able to dump anything in."

Zhu Changxun's eyes lit up.

"That's right! That's right!"

He waved his hand energetically.

"Shoot them! Fire muskets! Rain arrows on them! Kill every single rebel pushing a cart!"

Then, as an afterthought, he shouted,

"No need to protect me right now! Go! Go shoot arrows!"

His personal guards scattered immediately.

Just then—

The rebels pushed forward several hastily assembled contraptions.

Mounted on four wooden wheels, thick planks were lashed together into crude mobile walls. One by one, they rolled forward, seven or eight of them connected together, forming a long, creeping barricade.

Bai Yuan raised his eyebrows.

"Oh? These rebels are getting smarter every time. Each time I see them, they've learned something new."

Zhu Changxun's face went from pale to ashen. He grabbed his guard captain.

"Arrows and muskets... they can't pierce those wooden boards, can they?"

The guard captain nodded stiffly.

"They cannot."

Zhu Changxun let out a shriek.

"Ahhh! Then we're doomed! With those things, they'll reach the moat for sure! Guards! Stop shooting! Come back! Protect this prince!"

The guards immediately abandoned their positions and rushed back.

Once again, everyone exchanged glances.

Li Daoxuan, standing nearby, smiled faintly.

"Your Highness, could you perhaps not fear death quite so much? As a man, one should show at least a little backbone."

Zhu Changxun snorted.

"If I weren't afraid of death, I would've fought for the throne long ago. Do I look like someone who wants the throne?"

Silence fell.

The logic was flawless.

This Prince of Fu had once been among the strongest contenders for succession, yet he had never dared to move even a step toward it. Staying alive had always been his first priority.

At that moment, a thunderous roar erupted from outside the city.

The main rebel force began to advance.

Shield carts in front.

Handcarts behind.

A dense sea of rebel soldiers surged forward, pressing relentlessly toward Luoyang City.

In the early years of the Chongzhen Emperor's reign, rebel armies rarely assaulted major cities. At most, they harassed small counties.

But in the last two years, everything had changed.

They had besieged Zezhou.

They had attacked Liaozhou.

They had breached prefectural cities.

They had even dared to test Taiyuan and Huaiqing.

Now, they stood before Luoyang.

Zhu Changxun screamed again, voice cracking.

"Shoot! Shoot them! Why are you all just standing there?"

Fan Shangzheng replied calmly,

"They are not within range yet. Stop shouting."

Zhu Changxun shut his mouth.

At that moment, Bai Yuan extended his hand to the side.

"The rifle."

A Bai family retainer immediately stepped forward and placed a Chassepot rifle into his hands.

Bai Yuan lifted the rifle with practiced ease and smiled at Zhu Changxun.

"Your Highness, allow me to perform a small magic trick."

Zhu Changxun stared blankly.

Bai Yuan continued unhurriedly,

"I intend to shoot the face of the rebel visible between the third and fourth shield carts."

Zhu Changxun looked as though he'd heard a madman speak.

He was no stranger to muskets. Their accuracy was infamous. From hundreds of paces away, even hitting a man was difficult—let alone threading a bullet through a narrow gap between moving shields.

"Impossible!" Zhu Changxun snapped. "Absolutely impossible!"

Bai Yuan shrugged.

"Your Highness doubts me too much. I take the Archery among the Gentleman's Six Arts quite seriously."

Zhu Changxun scowled.

"This is no time for boasting! I—"

Before he could finish—

Crack!

The rifle barked.

Zhu Changxun jumped in fright and hurriedly looked toward the gap between the third and fourth shield carts.

A rebel collapsed.

Whether the bullet struck his face or not was unclear—but the man was undeniably down.

Zhu Changxun sucked in a sharp breath.

"He... he actually hit it?"

Bai Yuan threw his head back and laughed.

"In mathematics, my son has surpassed me. But in archery? No one in Gao Family Village can match me!"

This time, it wasn't bragging.

Bai Yuan was the undisputed best marksman in Gao Family Village.

Unfortunately, as a commander, he couldn't lie prone like a true sniper and quietly harvest enemy lives. His talent was impressive—but not always usable.

His single shot signaled the beginning.

Another musketeer fired.

Crack!

The bullet struck a shield cart instead, leaving only a shallow dent in the thick planks.

More shots followed.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Only the most confident marksmen fired. The rest held back, conserving ammunition.

Some bullets slipped through gaps.

Some were stopped cold by wood.

Rebel soldiers fell, one after another.

Zhu Changxun was dumbstruck.

"Your musketeers... how can they shoot so far? So accurately?"

Bai Yuan did not explain rifling or barrel grooves.

He merely unfolded his fan, covering half his face.

"Well then, Your Highness—are they worth five taels now?"

Zhu Changxun coughed.

"Ahem... perhaps the price can be raised a little."

He hesitated.

"Four taels, nine mace. No more."

Bai Yuan tilted his head.

"Your Highness, have you ever heard of ducks?"

Zhu Changxun frowned.

"Of course. Who hasn't?"

Bai Yuan leaned closer.

"Even after a duck dies, its beak stays hard."

Zhu Changxun fell silent.

The gunfire continued intermittently.

The shield carts kept advancing.

Two hundred meters.

One hundred.

Eighty.

Seventy.

Fifty.

Seeing how close they were getting, Zhu Changxun's panic returned in full force.

"They're coming! They're coming!"

"The musketeers are powerful, but they can't break the shields!"

"What do we do?!"

"Quickly—protect this prince!"

The real test had arrived.

Chapter 753 Quickly Protect This King

By this point, the shield carts had already pushed to within fifty meters of the city wall.

Among the rebel ranks, a number of powerful archers stepped forward and began shooting arrows upward toward the ramparts. However, shooting uphill greatly reduced their strength and accuracy. Most of the arrows struck the stone walls or fell short, clattering harmlessly against the battlements.

Only the occasional stray arrow managed to clear the parapet.

Even then, it posed little real danger.

Zhu Changxun's personal guards, though utterly useless in actual combat, were at least dressed in splendid armor. Standing along the wall, they unexpectedly became human shields. Arrows striking their armor barely made a sound, much less caused injury.

Despite this, the guards were still frightened out of their wits.

Their faces drained of color, hands shaking as they clutched their weapons, they stood stiffly on the wall like wooden statues.

Zhu Changxun himself had already turned into a quivering mass.

If the city fell, others might be able to flee.

But not him.

As Prince of Fu, the furthest he was allowed to escape was Ying'en Temple just outside the city gates. Any farther required a personal imperial decree.

There was nowhere to run.

Li Daoxuan looked at Zhu Changxun's performance and shook his head slightly. He truly had no desire to save such a man.

But then his gaze shifted past the prince.

Behind him, the people of Luoyang were trembling as well.

The local militia organized by Fan Shangzheng crouched behind the crenellations, clutching large stones and kettles of boiling water, their hands shaking uncontrollably.

They were afraid too.

Across the city, countless civilians hid inside their homes, burning incense and whispering prayers, begging the rebels to leave quickly.

Li Daoxuan spoke calmly.

"Grenades."

The command was immediately relayed.

"Grenades!" a captain shouted loudly.

The firearms troops, who had remained silent until now, reached into their pouches and drew out small black spheres. They lit the fuses and hurled them forward with practiced motions.

Gao Family Village had once maintained a dedicated Armored Grenadier Battalion, led by Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu. But after the Chassepot rifle was perfected, the limited throwing range of grenades became a weakness.

The special battalion was dissolved.

Instead, nearly every soldier was issued hand grenades, while the former grenadiers were reassigned as riflemen.

And so—

At the command, those soldiers confident in their throwing strength were the first to act.

Hundreds of grenades arced through the air.

They sailed cleanly over the tops of the shield carts and fell into the dense rebel formations behind them.

Zhu Changxun stared.

"What are they doing? Throwing stones?"

He had barely finished speaking.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

A chain of violent explosions erupted.

Thick smoke billowed upward as hundreds of grenades detonated almost simultaneously.

Zhu Changxun screamed.

"Ahhh! What was that? Quickly, protect this king!"

His guards leaned over the battlements and shouted excitedly,

"Your Highness! The rebels have been blown apart!"

Zhu Changxun gathered what little courage he could and cautiously poked his head out.

Only then did he see that the thunderous blasts came from those small black spheres thrown by Bai Yuan's men. Having cleared the shield carts, they exploded directly amid the tightly packed rebels.

Screams filled the battlefield.

Limbs flew.

Bodies collapsed.

Through the gaps between the shield carts, large numbers of rebels could be seen falling one after another. Even the men pushing the carts dropped to the ground, and the carts themselves came to a dead stop.

With the shield carts immobilized, the entire rebel advance stalled.

Zhu Changxun sucked in a breath.

"Amazing! What kind of terrifying method is this?"

A guard replied,

"Those black spheres... they must be gunpowder packed together."

Zhu Changxun was stunned.

"Gunpowder... can be used like that?"

At this moment, the rebel army outside the city erupted in fury.

Their commander, Meng Hu, beat his war drum with all his strength and roared,

"Damn it! It's only a few dozen yards now! Abandon the carts! Charge! Kill the Prince of Fu—Zhu... Zhu what?"

Du Hu shouted back,

"Brother, it's Zhu Changxun!"

Meng Hu yelled,

"Yes! Kill Zhu Changxun! His wealth will be ours!"

Yet when the order reached the front ranks, no one moved.

The grenades had shattered their courage.

The sight of mangled corpses lying everywhere filled the rebels with terror. Many of the hardened veterans instinctively took a step back.

Meng Hu's command echoed—but the front lines remained frozen.

Then, the reserves surged forward.

Fresh rebels poured in from the rear, using sheer numbers to push aside the shield carts. Raising their shields, they launched a second desperate charge.

Others seized the handcarts and began hauling earth and stones toward the moat.

If even a few hundred cartloads could be dumped into one spot, the moat could be filled in moments.

Behind them, another group appeared carrying long wooden planks.

If earth and stone weren't enough, they would bridge the moat instead.

These tactics had worked well at Zezhou, Liaozhou, and Huaiqing.

But this time—

They failed completely.

With the shield carts gone, the firearms troops finally unleashed their full power.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Gunfire roared.

The rebels' raised shields were laughably inadequate. Most were little more than rough wooden boards, utterly incapable of stopping bullets from breech-loading rifles.

Shields shattered.

Rebels fell.

Those pushing handcarts hunched low, hiding their heads, sprinting desperately forward. But from the city wall above, their backs were fully exposed.

Crack!

A single shot struck squarely between a rebel's shoulders.

He collapsed instantly, his handcart overturning beside him.

The rebels' charge disintegrated as quickly as it had formed.

Most terrifying of all was that the rifles did not pause.

They fired again.

And again.

And again.

As though reloading took no time at all.

Zhu Changxun stared in utter shock.

Only now did he truly understand how the Xiaolangdi water bandits—who had plagued the region for over a thousand years—had been wiped out so effortlessly.

So this was the true strength of Bai Yuan's firearms troops.

At last, the rebels' morale completely collapsed.

The front ranks refused to advance.

The rear ranks refused to push.

The invisible thread holding them together snapped.

With a chaotic howl, the rebel army broke and fled.

No matter how hard Meng Hu beat his drum, not a single man turned back.

The rebel forces retreated.

Meng Hu glanced at Luoyang's towering walls and understood that the city was beyond him. This had only been a test. He was not foolish enough to smash his head against stone.

Calling Du Hu, he gathered the defeated troops and withdrew to rendezvous with Chuang Wang and Chuang Jiang, continuing south toward Huguang.

"The rebels are retreating!"

"They're fleeing!"

Cheers erupted throughout Luoyang.

Zhu Changxun looked left and right, confirmed the danger had passed, then burst into loud laughter.

"Insignificant wretches! Utterly outmatched, yet daring to assault Luoyang? Hahaha! With this king personally present, how could such petty criminals ever breach the city walls?"

His courage had finally returned.

Just a little late.

Chapter 754 Immediate Dismissal

Luoyang was safe—for now.

Standing atop the city walls, Li Daoxuan watched the rebel forces retreat into the distance. Yet instead of relief, a heavier unease settled in his chest. The direction of their withdrawal was wrong.

They were not retreating east toward Kaifeng Prefecture.

They were veering slightly southeast.

That single deviation told him everything.

Li Daoxuan turned, went down from the wall, and immediately had a map brought before him. He spread it across the table and traced the rebels' route with his finger.

"Kaifeng... Luoyang... southeast..."

His finger stopped.

"The main rebel force is southeast of Luoyang," he said slowly. "Which means they came southwest from Kaifeng. If they continue like this..."

Fan Shangzheng, Governor of Henan, followed his gesture and inhaled sharply.

"The intersection of Henan, Hubei, Shaanxi, and Sichuan."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Once they reach that border, we lose initiative entirely. Imperial troops are bound by provincial jurisdiction. Each side will wait for the other to act. Officials will argue over authority, logistics, responsibility. By the time they finish arguing, the rebels will already be entrenched."

Fan Shangzheng let out a long sigh. "This is precisely how disasters spread."

Li Daoxuan said, "Anticipation alone is meaningless. We need early obstruction."

He turned to Bai Yuan.

"Write a letter," Li Daoxuan ordered. "Send it to Sichuan—Wan Shou Zhai. The homeland of the White Pole Soldiers. Tell them to prepare immediately. Even if they cannot destroy the rebels, they must block entry into Sichuan."

Bai Yuan cupped his hands. "I will see to it at once."

Next, Li Daoxuan turned back to Fan Shangzheng.

"Governor Fan, I lack standing in officialdom. I must rely on your channels. Write to Regional Commander Zhang Yingchang. Urge him to pursue relentlessly. He must not allow the rebels to reach the four-province border."

Fan Shangzheng nodded at once. "I will draft the letter today."

In his heart, however, he knew Zhang Yingchang would never catch them.

Li Daoxuan continued, "Also write to the Yunyang Grand Coordinator. Have him lead troops out of Xiangyang and establish defenses along the border zone. If one direction fails, another might hold."

"I understand," Fan Shangzheng replied solemnly.

Henan, Hubei, Sichuan—arrangements could be made.

That left Shaanxi.

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly.

He had no personal connection with the Shaanxi Governor, Wang Shunxing. However, Wu Shen and Shi Kefa were both men of integrity and reputation. If they spoke, their words would carry weight.

He was just about to mention this when laughter rang out behind him.

"Ha! Hahaha!"

Zhu Changxun, Prince of Fu, came striding over, his face flushed with excitement. The terror he had displayed on the walls earlier had vanished entirely, replaced by swelling confidence.

He clasped his hands toward Bai Yuan.

"Master Bai! When we partnered in business before, I already knew you were capable. But today—today I have truly seen it. Your Gao Family Village militia... astonishing! Astonishing!"

He laughed again.

"This prince spent five taels of silver per man. Five taels! What a bargain. Each of them is worth at least ten—no, twenty taels!"

Bai Yuan snapped open his folding fan, revealing the character Gentleman.

"Your Highness," he said mildly, "you may as well speak plainly."

Zhu Changxun leaned closer, lowering his voice.

"Rebels are everywhere. They've plagued the realm for years. There's no guarantee they won't return. I am permitted only five hundred personal guards, and the local garrison troops are worse than useless."

He straightened.

"I wish to ask you—will you train more militia in Luoyang? My safety... depends entirely on you."

Bai Yuan shook his head with a wry smile.

"This single unit has already drained my family's coffers dry. Training more? I truly cannot afford it."

Zhu Changxun waved his hand dismissively.

"Money? Is that all? This prince will provide it. If my silver is destined to be looted by rebels anyway, it's better spent protecting my life."

Bai Yuan's expression turned cautious.

"Your Highness, if word reaches the Emperor that you are privately raising troops, I fear—"

Zhu Changxun stiffened, then quickly said, "Let me be clear. I provide money only. Nothing more. This militia is not mine. Not in name, not in command. It belongs entirely to you. I will not touch it."

Bai Yuan smiled inwardly.

"Since Your Highness insists, it would indeed be discourteous to refuse."

Zhu Changxun laughed heartily.

With this, he thought, this prince has nothing left to fear.

Meanwhile—

Dao Xuan Tianzun, accompanied by Wu Shen and Shi Kefa, entered the Shaanxi Governor's yamen.

Governor Wang Shunxing was a man of restrained temperament.

Since taking office in Shaanxi, he had neither pursued military glory nor sought political distinction. Instead, he focused on steady governance: restoring agriculture, reopening markets, repairing roads and canals, rebuilding bridges and temples, and personally composing inscriptions for public works.

On one such stele, he had written:

Cao Cao was a traitor to the Han; Sun Quan even more so. Guan Yu was loyal not merely to Liu Bei, but to the Han itself.

At this moment, he sat at his desk, drafting a memorial regarding tax collection.

His brush moved slowly.

"After the desolation of war in Shaanxi, tax collection has become arduous across all prefectures, though conditions are somewhat less severe in Pingyang, Qingyang, and Yan'an.

Among these, Yan'an is particularly dire.

The Grand Coordinator has already petitioned for a delay in collection, hoping that the autumn harvest might compensate for earlier losses. Yet this year's summer was parched, the fields cracked, and there are no signs of abundance.

Yan'an spans a thousand li of barren land; its condition is worse even than Pingyang and Qingyang."

He paused, then added:

"The people have no grain. The storehouses are empty. All possible means of collection have been exhausted."

After a long silence, he wrote the final lines.

"Shaanxi cannot collect taxes. There are none. Absolutely none.

If lives are required, then take them.

But there is nothing to collect.

Your Majesty may decide."

Only then did he set down the brush.

At that moment, footsteps sounded.

Wu Shen entered first, followed by Shi Kefa and Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Wang Shunxing looked up. "Gentlemen, what brings you here?"

Shi Kefa spoke bluntly. "Your Excellency, the rebels have crossed from Kaifeng, bypassed Luoyang, and are moving southwest. They are likely heading for the intersection of Henan, Hubei, Shaanxi, and Sichuan."

Wang Shunxing's face changed. "That is disastrous."

Shi Kefa said urgently, "Shaanxi must prepare in advance. We should order Regional Commander He Renlong to return from Shanxi and establish defenses at the border."

He Renlong—known as "Madman He"—had been appointed Regional Commander of Shaanxi but had remained stationed in Shanxi, pursuing the rebels and preventing their return.

Wang Shunxing nodded decisively.

"Very well. I will issue a hand-order immediately."

He lifted his brush.

Before he could write more than ten characters, a messenger rushed in and knelt.

"Your Excellency! A dispatch from the Ministry of Personnel."

Wang Shunxing's hand paused midair.

He accepted the document, unrolled it, and read.

"Governor of Shaanxi, Wang Shunxing, during his tenure, failed to collect adequate taxes and demonstrated poor administrative performance.

For speaking nonsense and deceiving His Majesty, he is hereby immediately dismissed from office."

The brush slipped from his fingers.

The ink spread slowly across the paper.

Wang Shunxing said nothing.

Chapter 755 Let Shi Jian Help You

Wang Shunxing slowly folded the dismissal document, placed it on the table, and let out a long, heavy sigh.

"This part about insufficient tax collection and poor administrative results," he said calmly, "I have no objection to. Shaanxi truly has no taxes to collect. But this charge of 'spouting nonsense and deceiving His Majesty'..."

He shook his head, baffled.

"Where did that come from? When have I ever spoken nonsense? When have I deceived the Emperor?"

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa exchanged glances. They were just as confused.

Wang Shunxing waved his hand, his expression easing instead of tightening. "Forget it. Forget it. Whether I did it or not no longer matters. The decision has already been made. Once the Ministry of Personnel issues a dismissal, arguing is pointless."

He leaned back slightly and even chuckled.

"To be honest, it's not all bad. From today on, I no longer need to call myself 'this official.' Calling myself 'this venerable one' instead—doesn't that sound rather dignified? Hahaha."

Wu Shen grew anxious and stepped forward. "Sir, now is not the time for jokes. That transfer order—ordering He Renlong to return to Shaanxi—"

Wang Shunxing interrupted him with a sigh.

"It's useless."

He tapped the folded document lightly.

"Even if I finish writing the order now, by the time it reaches He Renlong, the news of my dismissal will already have spread. Do you think he would still obey an order from a dismissed governor?"

Silence fell over the room.

What Wang Shunxing said was painfully true.

In officialdom, when a wall collapses, everyone rushes to push it down. While one holds office, doors open everywhere; once dismissed, even a sealed document becomes worthless. Any order issued now would be ignored by clerks, delayed by runners, and quietly shelved by subordinates. Nothing would move until a new governor formally took office.

Wu Shen suddenly grabbed the messenger by the shoulder.

"Who is the new governor?" he demanded. "Has he taken office yet? Where is he now?"

The messenger stiffened, looking miserable. "This humble one only delivered the document... I truly don't know."

Wu Shen released him, his face pale.

"This is bad."

Very bad.

Li Daoxuan had remained silent the entire time, watching the exchange. Now he sighed softly.

Without a Shaanxi governor, without an enforceable transfer order, and with the rebels advancing toward the four-province border, the situation had slipped into a dangerous gap—one of authority, timing, and jurisdiction.

Did he really have to deploy the Gao Family Village Militia again?

But the four-province border was far from Gao Family Village. Sending them that far required a reason—an excuse that would hold up under scrutiny.

The three men exited the governor's office and walked slowly down the street.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa were both deep in thought, their expressions grim, neither speaking.

Li Daoxuan, meanwhile, was thinking about excuses, pretexts, and leverage.

At that moment, a voice called out.

"Master Wu! Master Shi! What a coincidence to meet you here."

They looked up.

A man in plain traveling clothes approached, his posture straight despite the weariness on his face.

Li Daoxuan narrowed his eyes slightly.

Luo Xi.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa recognized him immediately as well.

"General Luo?" Wu Shen asked in surprise. "Weren't you suppressing bandits in Yansui? Why are you in Xi'an?"

Luo Xi gave a bitter smile. "I've been dismissed. I'm returning to my old home in Sanyang County to live out my days. I passed through Xi'an looking for a meal and didn't expect to run into you two."

Shi Kefa was stunned. "Dismissed? But you eliminated Xue Hongqi, Yizuo Cheng, Yizi Wang, and recently even Wang Chenggong. Those are solid achievements. Why would you be dismissed?"

Luo Xi grimaced.

"I don't understand it either. Although most of those victories were actually General Shi Jian's doing, I never falsely claimed credit. My memorials were all truthful. But the Ministry of War said I was 'spouting nonsense and deceiving the Emperor.' Then they dismissed me."

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa exchanged a look.

The same charge again.

Luo Xi sighed. "Ah, forget it. Going home isn't so bad. At least I won't dream about bandits every night anymore."

As he spoke, Li Daoxuan suddenly said, "General Luo, you mentioned Sanyang County?"

Luo Xi nodded. "Yes. Why?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "If I remember correctly, Sanyang County lies at the junction of four provinces, doesn't it?"

"That's right," Luo Xi said. "Deep in the mountains. A no-man's-land. Every few years someone becomes a bandit near my home. It's both infuriating and ridiculous."

Li Daoxuan's smile deepened. "Then what a coincidence. You've barely started home, and someone truly powerful is about to set up as a bandit near your house."

Luo Xi laughed. "If it were before, my old man would be terrified. But now that I'm going back, with my 150 household guards, any bandit who dares show up will be crushed."

Li Daoxuan clapped lightly. "Excellent. Then the task of eliminating the Chuang Wang falls to you, General Luo. We await news of you grinding him to dust."

Luo Xi froze.

"...Who did you say?"

"The Chuang Wang," Li Daoxuan replied calmly.

Luo Xi's face drained of color. "The... same alias?"

"No," Li Daoxuan said. "The real one."

Luo Xi turned to Wu Shen and Shi Kefa.

They both nodded.

"The Chuang Wang," Shi Kefa confirmed, "leading tens of thousands of rebels. He is advancing toward the four-province border."

Luo Xi staggered.

"I'm finished!" he shouted. "I need to go home—now! I must take my old man and run!"

He turned to flee.

Li Daoxuan reached out and seized his shoulder.

Luo Xi struggled, but the grip was like iron. He couldn't move.

"Let me go!" Luo Xi shouted. "If I don't run, my family will be wiped out!"

Li Daoxuan said coldly, "Running won't save you."

"If I don't run, I'll die!"

"If you run," Li Daoxuan replied, "your family fortress will be destroyed, your lands seized, your wealth scattered. You'll be a dismissed officer with nothing left. The Luo family will never recover."

Luo Xi stopped struggling.

Li Daoxuan continued evenly, "There is only one way left."

"...What way?"

"Write to Shi Jian. Ask him to help you."

Luo Xi shook his head weakly. "Without a Ministry of War transfer order, he won't dare move troops."

Li Daoxuan snorted. "Who told him to move imperial troops? He can send his own household guards. Does lending a few guards require approval from the Ministry of War?"

Luo Xi's eyes lit up—then dimmed again.

"But... Shi Jian may not help me. We're not that close."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"He will."

"Why?"

"Because his uncle, Shi Laosi, publishes books through my bookstore," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "If I say he'll help, he'll help."

Luo Xi stared at him, stunned.

Only now did he realize—

This man had already prepared the path forward.

Chapter 756 Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi

Luo Xi had long heard that Shi Jian's private army was sustained by the wealth his so-called "uncle," Shi Laosi, earned from publishing books. Back then, when he had discussed it with Yansui Governor Chen Qiyu, the two of them had been filled with disbelief and awe—after all, who in this world could truly amass such wealth merely by writing books?

Yet Luo Xi had never imagined that he would encounter the true master behind Shi Laosi's fortune right here in Xi'an.

He fixed his gaze on Li Daoxuan's face, studying it carefully. The longer he looked, the stronger the sense of familiarity became. Suddenly, realization struck him like lightning.

"Ah? You—!" Luo Xi blurted out. "You're the one! The one whose likeness is embroidered on the chests of Shi Jian's soldiers!"

No wonder the face had felt familiar.

Only now did Luo Xi finally understand. Every soldier under Shi Jian bore this man's portrait stitched onto their uniform. Before, Luo Xi had never grasped its meaning. He had assumed it was some strange symbol or military custom.

But the truth was simple.

This man was the true patron.

Shi Laosi had grown rich through publishing because of him, and out of gratitude, had ordered his benefactor's image embroidered onto the soldiers' clothing—so that every man in the ranks would remember who fed them, armed them, and paid them.

Overwhelmed, Luo Xi's eyes instantly reddened. Without another word, he rushed forward and clutched Li Daoxuan's leg tightly.

"Esteemed Sir! Please, you must save my Luo family!"

"Enough, enough—stand up," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "There's no need to rush back just yet. The rebel army won't reach you so quickly. Remain here in Xi'an. Shi Jian's men will arrive soon."

Luo Xi felt as though a mountain had been lifted from his chest. Overjoyed, he repeatedly bowed. "Thank you! Thank you! May I ask how I should address you?"

"My surname is Li," Li Daoxuan replied. "Everyone calls me Master Li."

Meanwhile, in the capital, Shi Jian received an imperial appointment—he was promoted to Brigade General.

Emperor Zhu Youjian had always been generous to civil and military officials who rendered meritorious service in suppressing bandits. In earlier years, Hong Chengchou had leapt directly from Grain Intendant to Yansui Governor on the strength of his achievements.

Now, Shi Jian was experiencing a similar meteoric rise.

Zhu Youjian dismissed Brigade General Luo Xi from his post and, without hesitation, promoted Shi Jian in his stead. Along with the appointment came a detailed list of rebel leaders currently active in the region—names that had already appeared in earlier memorials.

Handing the list over, Zhu Youjian said earnestly, "These rebels crossed the river from northwestern Shanxi and have now returned to Shaanxi. I entrust this matter to you, my beloved Shi. Wipe them out completely, and you will not go unrewarded."

After reading through the list, Shi Jian could only smile bitterly.

At that moment, the Dao Xuan Tianzun, who had been standing near Dragon Gate Ferry, once again lowered his hand and descended from the mountaintop.

Shi Jian immediately stepped forward and saluted respectfully. "Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun. What are your instructions?"

Li Daoxuan explained the situation in detail—the Rebel King's advance toward the border of four provinces, and how Luo Xi's name could be used to mobilize the Gao Family Village Militia stationed there.

Shi Jian pondered briefly, then asked, "If this humble general personally goes to Shanyang County, what of Northern Shaanxi?"

"Split your forces," Li Daoxuan said without hesitation. "You will go to Northern Shaanxi to deal with the rebels who crossed the river. Have Zheng Gouzi lead a detachment to Shanyang County."

Shi Jian and Zheng Gouzi replied in unison, "As you command."

They immediately began organizing their troops.

Shi Jian took seven hundred seasoned veterans along with one thousand three hundred newly recruited soldiers and marched toward Northern Shaanxi.

Zheng Gouzi, meanwhile, was assigned the same number—seven hundred veterans and one thousand three hundred recruits—and ordered to proceed to Shanyang County.

Fortunately, the recent movie screenings had proven extremely effective. Young men from Gao Family Village had flocked to enlist, eager and enthusiastic. Manpower was no longer scarce. Otherwise, splitting the forces would have been impossible, and they might even have needed reinforcements from Shanxi.

Zheng Gouzi led his two thousand men onto the train. Along the way, the soldiers ate hot pot, sang songs, and joked loudly. Before they even realized it, they had arrived in Xi'an.

The moment Zheng Gouzi stepped off the train, he spotted a familiar figure waiting on the platform.

His face lit up instantly.

"Flat Rabbit!" he shouted.

Flat Rabbit burst into laughter. "Doggy!"

The two charged toward each other and—thud!—simultaneously punched each other in the stomach. Both men doubled over in pain, curling up like cooked shrimp as they groaned for quite some time.

Once the pain subsided, they struggled back to their feet, laughing heartily.

"Old friend," Zheng Gouzi said, "long time no see!"

Flat Rabbit grinned. "I heard you're leading troops to Shanyang to fight the rebels."

"That's right," Zheng Gouzi replied.

"Hehehe," Flat Rabbit chuckled. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun has graciously allowed me to go along. That's why I've been waiting here for you. With this Flat Rabbit joining the army, we could face a hundred thousand enemies without fear, hahahaha!"

Zheng Gouzi was genuinely delighted—but his words came out differently. "With you coming along, our combat strength will drop by a hundred thousand men!"

They both burst into laughter again.

Zheng Gouzi then asked, "If you leave Xi'an, who'll manage the businesses here?"

Flat Rabbit waved his hand casually. "Of course Wang Tang—Old Wang's adopted son. That kid's getting more capable by the day. To be honest, all I do is cause trouble. He handles everything else."

Zheng Gouzi laughed. "That's true. You're an uneducated illiterate who knows nothing. I never understood why the Dao Xuan Tianzun put you in charge of Xi'an's businesses."

Flat Rabbit guffawed loudly. "That's because this Flat Rabbit is a great hero, you see! With sleeves clean as the wind, I walk through a garden of desires and emerge unstained. This Flat Rabbit can suppress all evil influences in Xi'an City!"

"All you do is talk big," Zheng Gouzi scoffed.

As they joked, Wang Tang—who had accompanied Flat Rabbit—thought silently to himself:

Flat Rabbit isn't just boasting this time. He really can resist corruption. If he hadn't taught me that lesson back then, I might have already fallen into bribery and rot.

Wang Tang stepped forward and clasped his hands respectfully. "Flat Rabbit, Uncle Doggy, I wish you both a smooth journey and swift victory. You can safely leave Xi'an Prefecture to me."

Zheng Gouzi frowned. "Hold on—something's wrong with that. How did I suddenly drop a generation? He's 'Master,' and I'm 'Uncle'?"

Wang Tang quickly explained, "The 'Master' in Flat Rabbit's name is just part of his title, not a generational rank. Even the Dao Xuan Tianzun sometimes calls him Flat Rabbit."

Zheng Gouzi wiped his brow nervously. "That won't do. From now on, you'll call me Master Doggy."

Wang Tang laughed. "Alright, alright—Master Flat Rabbit, Master Doggy. Please rest assured and set out."

The two old friends, truly delighted to see one another again, wrapped their arms around each other's shoulders and walked out of the train station together.

Waiting outside were Wu Shen, Shi Kefa, and Luo Xi.

Luo Xi, who already knew Zheng Gouzi, was overjoyed. "Brother Zheng! You've finally arrived!"

Zheng Gouzi clasped his hands politely. "Brigade General Luo."

Luo Xi looked embarrassed. "Don't call me that anymore. I've been dismissed—now I'm just a commoner. Call me Brother Luo."

Zheng Gouzi nodded. "General Shi bears imperial orders to suppress the rebels in Northern Shaanxi. He dispatched me to assist you."

"I understand," Luo Xi said quietly. "Without a Ministry of War transfer order, he can't move freely. He can only send his private soldiers."

Lowering his voice, Luo Xi asked anxiously, "Brother Zheng... how many men did you bring? A thousand? Five hundred? Please don't tell me it's only two or three hundred..."

Zheng Gouzi smiled and gestured behind him. "Look at the train."

Luo Xi turned—and his breath caught.

Soldiers were pouring out of every single carriage. All were armed with flintlock rifles. Their numbers seemed endless, filling the entire platform.

For the first time in a long while, Luo Xi felt genuine hope.

Chapter 757 So It's You

Huanglong Mountain Prison received yet another batch of newly assigned labor reform prisoners.

This time, it was Wang Chenggong—and the two thousand men who followed him.

At Wangjia Fork Fortress, the thunder of cannons and the cold muzzles of muskets had crushed their will to resist. Before the smoke had even cleared, they had surrendered completely. Shi Jian accepted their capitulation under a single, simple pretext:

"I need manpower to build Dragon Gate Fortress."

Regional Commander Luo Xi personally escorted them to Yan'an. After Governor Chen Qiyu of Yansui conducted a brief inspection, the entire group was handed over and marched straight toward Huanglong Mountain.

Along the way, unease gnawed at all two thousand men.

No one knew what awaited them.

Some feared mass execution. Others worried they would be worked to death in mines or construction camps. Whispers spread constantly through the ranks, growing darker by the mile.

Among the two thousand, quite a few were already secretly plotting escape—or even rebellion.

As the escort column advanced, one of Wang Chenggong's trusted subordinates leaned in close and whispered, "Brother, once we enter Huanglong Mountain, there should be plenty of chances to escape. I've heard the mountain is vast—steep peaks, dense forests, ravines everywhere. If we scatter into the woods, even ten or twenty thousand government troops wouldn't be able to find us."

Wang Chenggong nodded slowly. "I've heard the same. Huanglong Mountain is known as an excellent place for rebels to gather."

His eyes flickered with calculation.

"These fools are actually escorting us straight into it," he said coldly. "They're delivering fish back to water."

He lowered his voice further. "Pass the word. Everyone wait for my signal. Once I shout, dive into the forest immediately. Scatter and hide. When the troops withdraw, I'll gather everyone again."

The subordinate's eyes shone. "Understood."

The message spread quickly.

Within moments, all two thousand bandits had received the order. Each man walked with tense anticipation, muscles coiled tight, waiting only for Wang Chenggong's command.

Not long after, a voice called out from the front.

"Brother! Look ahead! There's a strange cave!"

Wang Chenggong raised his head.

Ahead of them stood a peculiar structure. It wasn't like a natural cave at all—long, perfectly rounded, with smooth gray walls. A wide concrete road ran straight through it, from one end to the other.

Above the entrance hung a wooden sign, bearing five characters:

Huangqiu Terrace Tunnel

Most of the bandits were illiterate and couldn't read it, but Wang Chenggong could.

He frowned. Tunnel?

"That's not a cave," he muttered. "What does 'tunnel' mean?"

Unable to hold back his curiosity, he turned to one of the musketeers escorting them.

"Brother," Wang Chenggong asked politely, "what do these two characters—'tunnel'—mean? Why isn't it called a cave?"

The musketeer laughed. "Caves form naturally. Tunnels are dug."

"Dug?" Wang Chenggong sucked in a breath.

He looked again. The tunnel was long—terrifyingly long—and wide enough for carts to pass through easily. One could see light at the far end.

This thing... was dug?

"How could that be possible?" he blurted out.

The musketeer pointed upward casually. "The immortals in the heavens dug it."

Then he tapped his own chest. "That immortal right there—Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Wang Chenggong fell silent.

The claim was absurd. Completely unbelievable.

Yet... the tunnel stood right in front of him.

Believe it or not, his feet still carried him forward.

The column passed through the tunnel and officially entered Huanglong Mountain.

Every man held his breath.

This was supposed to be it—the moment of escape.

But the moment they laid eyes on the mountain interior, all two thousand men froze in shock.

There were no wild paths.

No tangled forest roads.

Instead, winding concrete highways stretched deep into the mountains, branching again and again. Observation posts dotted the ridgelines. Bus stops stood at intervals along the road.

The deeper they walked, the busier it became.

People came and went. Supplies were transported. It felt... livelier than even parts of northern Shaanxi.

A subordinate edged closer, his voice low and uneasy. "Brother... something's wrong."

Wang Chenggong nodded grimly. "Very wrong."

Huanglong Mountain was supposed to be remote and ominous—perfect for bandit strongholds. Yet what lay before them felt disturbingly organized.

The subordinate hesitated. "Should... should we still try to escape?"

Wang Chenggong snorted. "Escape? Look around you. Roads everywhere. Observation posts everywhere. Where would you even hide?"

The subordinate said nothing more.

"Don't rush," Wang Chenggong said. "Let's keep going. I refuse to believe Huanglong Mountain has nowhere to hide."

So they marched on.

Step by step.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly.

Eventually, the terrain grew more complex. The concrete road descended into a valley. From the outside, the valley's interior was hidden by overlapping mountain ridges and thick forest, making it appear secluded and isolated.

Wang Chenggong's eyes lit up.

"This is it," he whispered urgently. "Everyone listen. Once we're inside, find dense cover and scatter immediately. I guarantee they won't be able to capture us all!"

The men murmured in agreement, nerves tightening, hearts pounding.

They crossed into the valley—

—and collectively gasped.

There were no wild trees.

No rocky wasteland.

Instead, a bustling town lay before them.

Rows of neat, square concrete houses lined orderly streets. People moved between buildings in steady flows. Smoke rose from kitchens. Tools clanged. Voices echoed.

It was a town.

A fully functioning town.

The last remnants of rebellion drained from the men like water from broken jars.

Two thousand stunned faces stared blankly ahead.

"This..." someone muttered. "This isn't a place to hide..."

The musketeer escorting them chuckled. "Go on in. This is where you'll live for a while."

He paused, then added cheerfully, "Many years, most likely. Best get used to it."

Wang Chenggong entered the valley slowly, his steps heavy.

At the entrance stood a signboard.

He read it aloud:

Thirty-Two Labor Reform Valley

His back went cold. "There are... many valleys like this?"

"Of course," the musketeer replied lightly. "Huanglong Mountain has over a hundred thousand labor reform prisoners now. Different tasks, different management. There are hundreds of valleys like this, each with its own industry."

He gestured around. "This one is closest to Yan'an, so it focuses on road construction and reclaiming barren mountain land."

Wang Chenggong's jaw dropped. "Over a hundred thousand men..."

"My job ends here," the musketeer said. "If you have questions, ask the old-timers inside."

Wang Chenggong could only stare.

In the end, he led his men obediently into the valley.

The moment they stepped inside, a sharp whistle cut through the air.

Turning around, Wang Chenggong saw a group of men in cotton clothes. Their garments were decent—far better than common prisoners' rags—but they were unarmed.

Labor reform prisoners.

Just like him.

One of them whistled again, grinning. "Well, well. Fresh meat. Where you from?"

Wang Chenggong straightened instinctively. "Wang Chenggong of Hengshan."

The man burst into laughter. "So it's you! Wang Chenggong of Hengshan! I've long admired your name."

He slapped his thigh. "What a coincidence—I'm also from Hengshan. Later I joined Wang Jiayin. In the jianghu, they called me Flying Rat."

Wang Chenggong froze.

"You're Flying Rat?" he exclaimed. "I heard of you even before I joined the rebellion! The leader of the Flying Rat bandits—killed eighteen officials with a butcher's knife in a single uprising, rallied a hundred men with one call!"

Flying Rat grinned wider.

"Looks like we're old acquaintances, then."

Wang Chenggong finally understood.

So... it's you.

Chapter 758 Ask Him All Your Questions

Feitian Shu laughed, a rough, unrestrained sound.

"Ha! I've been out of the jianghu for years now. Didn't expect my name to still be floating around."

Wang Chenggong stared at him, momentarily at a loss for words.

He truly hadn't expected to meet such a senior rebel from Hengshan here—someone whose name he had heard long before he himself took up arms. A surge of admiration welled up in his chest, rising like floodwater breaking through a dam.

"Brother Feitian Shu," Wang Chenggong said at last, unable to hide his curiosity, "after you joined Wang Jiayin's main force, you vanished completely. Everyone thought you were dead. Who would've imagined... you'd be here?"

Feitian Shu's expression dimmed slightly.

"It's a long and unlucky story," he said slowly. "Back then, I followed Wang Jiayin into Hequ County. When we attacked the city, I was right at the front, climbing the walls."

Wang Chenggong nodded instinctively. "That sounds like you."

Feitian Shu let out a dry chuckle. "I was wounded badly. Too badly. For months, I couldn't even get out of bed."

His voice grew calmer, flatter.

"Then the imperial army surrounded Hequ. Wang Jiayin broke out with his men... and left me behind. I was injured, immobile, lying there waiting to die."

Wang Chenggong opened his mouth, then closed it again. "This..."

Feitian Shu continued, as if recounting someone else's misfortune.

"I mixed in with the tens of thousands of old people, women, and children who couldn't escape. The officials saw I was weak and sick, assumed I was just another useless mouth, and handed us all over to Censor Wu Shen."

He paused.

"Wu Shen then transferred us to Shi Kefa. We marched and marched... and eventually arrived here."

Only then did Wang Chenggong truly understand.

"So you've been here a long time?" he asked.

Feitian Shu scratched his head. "A few years. One, two... bah, who cares. It's been several years."

Wang Chenggong hesitated, then lowered his voice. "Brother... your injuries—are they still not healed?"

"They healed ages ago," Feitian Shu replied casually.

"Then why didn't you escape?" Wang Chenggong blurted out. "This place doesn't look very heavily guarded."

Feitian Shu stared at him as if he'd heard something ridiculous.

"Escape?" He laughed. "Why would I escape?"

He gestured around. "There's food. There's shelter. Life's stable. Why would I go back to wandering the mountains, eating bark and dodging troops?"

Wang Chenggong's eyes widened. "Good food? Good shelter? Isn't this a labor reform camp? I heard if you don't work hard enough, they shoot you in the head with a flintlock."

Feitian Shu looked genuinely confused. "Who told you that?"

"Regional Commander Luo Xi," Wang Chenggong replied. He quickly recounted what had been said during their surrender and transfer.

Feitian Shu burst out laughing.

"That?" he said. "That was Shi Jian's lie."

"Lie?" Wang Chenggong froze.

"He made it up," Feitian Shu explained. "If he didn't scare Luo Xi into believing you were already doomed, the court would've demanded your execution. That story saved your life."

Wang Chenggong's mind went blank. "Saved me?"

"Of course," Feitian Shu said. "Didn't Shi Jian ask why you didn't charge alongside the Mongols? Your answer pleased Dao Xuan Tianzun. That's why you're still breathing."

Wang Chenggong stood there, completely stunned.

Before he could ask more, Feitian Shu suddenly straightened and waved toward the distance.

"Warden Zhong's coming."

A group of guards approached, led by a middle-aged man with calm eyes and an easy gait.

Feitian Shu leaned in and whispered, "That's Zhong Gaoliang. He treats people well. Everyone here respects him. Don't offend him—if you do, the other prisoners will deal with you first."

Wang Chenggong felt his head spin.

Prisoners... protecting their warden?

Zhong Gaoliang stopped in front of them and spoke plainly. He asked a few questions, then nodded.

"Wang Chenggong," he said, "you and your two thousand men are new here. I don't yet know your individual skills, and you're unfamiliar with this place. For now, I'll assign you to land reclamation."

He pointed toward the slopes beside the valley.

"These hills are being cleared. The soil will be prepared and planted with corn, sweet potatoes, and potatoes. You don't know how to plant yet, so your task is to prepare the land. Feitian Shu's group will handle planting."

Feitian Shu smiled. "No problem."

Wang Chenggong stood stiffly, not knowing how to respond.

Feitian Shu gave him a light shove. "Answer him."

"Huh? Yes! Alright!" Wang Chenggong said hurriedly.

Zhong Gaoliang smiled faintly. "I know you have many questions. Ask Feitian Shu. He's been here a long time—he knows everything."

With that, he left.

Only then did guards arrive to arrange housing.

More than two thousand men were assigned rooms, eight per room. Hundreds of rooms were opened in orderly rows.

Wang Chenggong stared in disbelief.

Only now did he realize just how vast the Thirty-Two Labor Reform Valley was. So many rooms had been allocated with ease—and there were still many left unused.

Feitian Shu grinned proudly. "Impressive, right? My people built all this. Back when we fought, we threw our lives away without hesitation. Now we build houses with the same attitude."

Wang Chenggong could only laugh awkwardly.

Suddenly, a deep, rhythmic sound rolled across the valley.

Thump—thump—thump.

Wang Chenggong stiffened. "What's that noise?"

"Oh, it's time for the news," Feitian Shu said.

"News?" Wang Chenggong echoed. "What's that?"

"Gaojia News," Feitian Shu explained. "Entertainment, information—it's how we know what's happening outside. Come on, gather your men."

Wang Chenggong did so.

People poured out of every dormitory, merging together. Soon, more than five thousand people gathered and moved toward a large plaza.

At the center stood an enormous object—a massive Immortal Treasure Mirror.

Wang Chenggong stopped short. "What... is that?"

Feitian Shu chuckled. "A Divine Mirror. Sent down from the Heavenly Palace by Dao Xuan Tianzun. It lets you see events a thousand li away."

Wang Chenggong stared. "You're joking."

Before he could say more, Zhong Gaoliang stepped forward. He swiped his finger across the mirror's surface. Strange square icons appeared. He tapped a few.

The mirror lit up.

An enormous image filled the screen.

Gao Yiye.

Her figure loomed larger than life.

Wang Chenggong gasped. "By the heavens—this must be a goddess!"

Feitian Shu corrected him calmly. "She's the Saintess."

Gao Yiye began to speak.

"Today is the nineteenth day of the sixth month, in the sixth year of Chongzhen. First, news from Huanglong Mountain..."

Her voice echoed across the plaza.

"All labor reform prisoners from Valley Eighteen, united in purpose, have completed the breakthrough of the 'Hard-to-Reach' Great Steep Slope, driving a cement road straight through it and turning a natural barrier into a thoroughfare..."

Wang Chenggong stood frozen.

For the first time in his life, he realized—

This world was nothing like he thought.

Chapter 759 News Broadcast

As Gao Yiye continued her explanation, the scene on the Immortal Treasure Mirror shifted.

A vast panorama of Huanglong Mountain unfolded.

A concrete road—wide, solid, and unmistakably artificial—wound its way upward, spiraling along a steep slope like a gray dragon clinging to the mountainside. It climbed higher and higher, cutting through the rugged terrain, before finally cresting the summit.

At the mountaintop, a group of labor reform prisoners stood holding hoes, picks, and measuring tools. Their clothes were dusty, their faces darkened by sun and sweat.

For a brief moment, there was silence.

Then someone shouted.

"We succeeded!"

Another voice followed immediately.

"It's built!"

"The Heaven-Defying Highway is finally complete!"

Cheers erupted. The prisoners raised their tools toward the sky, laughing, shouting, some even wiping tears from their eyes.

The image shifted again.

This time, the scene was indoors.

The same group of labor reform prisoners now stood neatly in rows. Their clothes had been cleaned, and each person wore a large red flower pinned to their chest.

Standing before them was Warden Zhong Gaoliang.

He spoke loudly and clearly.

"Thank you for your contributions to the development of Huanglong Mountain. Your spirit of unyielding struggle and defiance of hardship has greatly inspired those who will follow."

He paused, then continued.

"To commend your efforts, the Gao Family Village Committee, after deliberation, has decided to grant you early release. From this day forward, you are free citizens, enjoying the same rights and treatment as all ordinary residents of Gao Family Village."

For a heartbeat, the hall was silent.

Then—

Cheers exploded.

The former prisoners shouted, laughed, some embraced one another, others clenched their fists in excitement.

Warden Zhong Gaoliang raised his hand.

"Now," he said, "please let your representative step forward and speak."

A man from the Thirty-Two Labor Reform Valley stepped forward. His eyes were red, his voice trembling with emotion.

"I thank Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said loudly.

"I thank the Gao Family Village Committee.

I thank Warden Zhong Gaoliang.

I thank my parents and my fellow inmates!"

He took a deep breath.

"It is because of your support that I can stand here and speak these words."

His voice steadied.

"What I want to say now is this: after I am released, I will put the skills I learned in the labor reform valley to good use. I will become a glorious technical worker."

His eyes shone.

"My dream is that one day, I can wear a Blue Hat, lead a team of Yellow Hats, and struggle on the front lines of building Gao Family Village!"

"Whoosh!"

Thunderous applause filled the hall.

His fellow inmates shouted encouragement.

"Go for it!"

"You can do it!"

Wang Chenggong stared at the Treasure Mirror, completely dumbfounded.

"What... what exactly is going on here?" he muttered.

Feitian Shu clapped him on the shoulder and laughed.

"This is exactly what you're seeing," he said. "Every scene shown on this Treasure Mirror actually happened somewhere else."

Wang Chenggong felt his head spin.

There was simply too much information.

Even he—someone who had studied for a few days—felt utterly lost. As for his two thousand illiterate subordinates, they watched with mouths hanging open, as if witnessing a divine myth.

The screen shifted again.

Gao Yiye reappeared, smiling.

"Next is our second news item," she said. "West Steel No. 1 Factory has received a major order."

"The Prince of Qin's household has decided to fund the construction of a railway line from Xi'an to Yan'an Prefecture. This railway will require a huge quantity of rails, as well as a train."

She continued calmly.

"West Steel No. 1 Factory is currently working tirelessly, putting in overtime to fulfill this grand order."

The image cut to the interior of the steel factory.

In the casting workshop, a worker carefully observed molten iron pouring into molds. Hearing movement, he suddenly turned his head toward the camera.

"Oh my!" he exclaimed. "Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

From off-camera, the calm voice of the Dao Xuan Tianzun's Test03 series sounded.

"Come. Face this way and introduce the technology you are currently using to our viewers."

The worker straightened immediately, energized.

"Before," he explained, "all our rails were hand-forged. It was slow, and the quality often varied. We had to compare, re-hammer, and even re-melt them again and again."

"But now," he said proudly, "our steel quality has been optimized. We can use casting molds to mass-produce rails in a single process."

"My workload has been greatly reduced. Now I just need to carefully monitor the molds."

The camera zoomed in, focusing on the bright red molten iron flowing smoothly into the molds. The scene was strangely mesmerizing.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice spoke again.

"Ensure construction safety. Strictly follow the operating manual."

The worker nodded firmly.

"Understood!"

The image shifted back.

Gao Yiye continued, "Next is our third news item."

"The Gao Family Village Militia, during the defense of Luoyang, displayed remarkable discipline and overwhelming momentum. They routed the siege forces led by Meng Hu and Du Hu, sending them fleeing in disarray, crying for their mothers."

She added evenly, "Due to the overly graphic nature of the scenes, frontline footage will not be broadcast."

"Over five hundred rebel soldiers were captured outside Luoyang. They will soon be escorted to Huanglong Mountain and assigned to the Thirty-Two Labor Reform Valley."

Wang Chenggong jumped.

"What? Meng Hu and Du Hu attacked Luoyang?"

"They were defeated too?"

"And five hundred of their men are being sent to our valley?"

Before he could recover, Gao Yiye continued.

"Next, entertainment news."

"According to information personally provided by Dao Xuan Tianzun, the Flower World Star Agency is currently preparing a new film titled A Foot Soldier from Daling River Border Army."

"The plot remains confidential. However, General Lao Nanfeng himself will star as the male lead."

"Filming locations have been selected in Han City."

The screen shifted.

An aerial view of Han City appeared.

For common people who had never seen a city from above, the sight was overwhelming. Gasps echoed through the crowd.

Gao Yiye's voice continued.

"This is Han City, where General Lao Nanfeng's team is currently filming. Nearly half of the city's population is participating as extras."

The camera zoomed in.

Common folk appeared filthy and disheveled, as if they had gone days without bathing, their faces etched with exhaustion and hardship.

The plaques above Han City's gates had been removed, replaced with new ones bearing the characters:

Daling River City.

Large formations of Gao Family Village Militia, clad in standard Ming armor, stood as defenders.

Chen Qianhu—his face perpetually grim—wore Ming official robes, portraying Zu Dashou.

The image cut back to Gao Yiye.

"The clips shown were from A Foot Soldier from Daling River Border Army," she said. "To avoid spoilers, no further footage will be broadcast. Those interested should await the official release."

Wang Chenggong blurted out, "What kind of play mobilizes half a city?"

"Even imperial corvée labor wouldn't dare do this!"

Feitian Shu laughed.

"If it's something Dao Xuan Tianzun wishes to do," he said, "no one is unwilling. Everyone respects Him from the bottom of their hearts."

Wang Chenggong lowered his voice.

"What exactly has Dao Xuan Tianzun done... to make everyone like this?"

Before Feitian Shu could answer—

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Feitian Shu chuckled.

"Dinnertime. We eat right after the news broadcast. Come on."

Wang Chenggong followed, thinking grimly that the food would likely be thin gruel.

But when the meal box was placed in his hands—

He was utterly bewildered.

Utterly bewildered.

Chapter 760 The New Governor Takes Office

The newly appointed Governor of Shaanxi, Lian Guoshi, had arrived.

He traveled with a sizable retinue, his expression composed and his spirits outwardly high as he prepared to assume office.

Along the journey, Lian Guoshi had repeatedly reminded himself of one principle: when writing memorials to the emperor, he must be absolutely truthful. He would not embellish, exaggerate, or fabricate matters merely to curry favor.

His predecessor, Governor Wang Shunxing, had been dismissed precisely because of memorials filled with bizarre, unreliable claims—stories about enormous iron tracks and giant iron carriages capable of transporting over a thousand people at once.

Utter nonsense.

At least, that was what the court had judged.

Lian Guoshi had no intention of following Wang Shunxing's path. He resolved that every word he submitted would be accurate and restrained, leaving no room for suspicion.

"Master," one of his attendants said excitedly, pointing ahead, "Xi'an City's walls are in sight! We've traveled for days from the capital—at last we've arrived."

Lian Guoshi exhaled slowly. "Indeed. This journey has not been easy."

He had entered Shaanxi through Tongguan Pass, the traditional route for imperial officials. By chance—or perhaps fortune—this path allowed him to completely bypass the territory controlled by Gao Family Village.

As a result, he had yet to personally experience any of Gao Family Village's much-rumored peculiarities.

Just as he was thinking this—

"Eh? Master!" the attendant suddenly cried out. "Look over there! There's a strange road beside us. It's paved with wood... and large iron blocks."

Startled, Lian Guoshi leaned out of the carriage.

To the right of the road, not far away, lay something truly unusual. Wooden sleepers were laid at regular intervals, with two long iron tracks resting upon them. The structure extended in a straight line, running from the northeast toward the eastern outskirts of Xi'an City.

Lian Guoshi dismounted and walked over, cautiously reaching out to tap the metal.

It rang solidly.

Iron.

His breath caught.

"Good heavens..." he murmured. "Could this be the 'giant iron tracks' that Wang Shunxing mentioned in his memorial?"

A chill ran through his spine.

Could it be that Wang Shunxing had not been deceiving the emperor at all?

Beside the tracks stood a wooden signboard bearing clear characters:

"Railway Danger. Please Do Not Approach."

The attendant laughed when he saw it. "Master, they even put up a warning. What danger could there be? Just some wood and iron blocks. They're clearly trying to scare people."

Before the words had fully left his mouth—

The iron tracks trembled.

A faint vibration traveled through the ground.

Someone pressed an ear closer and frowned. "Master... I hear something."

From afar came a rhythmic sound.

Chug... chug... chug...

Lian Guoshi's expression changed instantly.

"Everyone away from the tracks!" he shouted. "The iron carriage is coming!"

Several attendants who had been standing directly on the rails scrambled away in panic, retreating to the roadside.

The sound grew louder.

Closer.

Then—

A massive iron vehicle came into view.

It was enormous.

Though its speed was not faster than a galloping horse, its sheer size was overwhelming. The colossal body rolled forward with unstoppable momentum, steam hissing and iron clanking as it passed.

A powerful gust of wind followed in its wake.

The attendants stumbled backward, some nearly falling, their faces pale with fear, terrified that a single misstep would drag them beneath the wheels.

Lian Guoshi stood frozen.

His face was drained of color, his eyes wide as he stared at the iron monstrosity rumbling past.

Only after an attendant shook him repeatedly did he regain his senses.

"My heavens..." he whispered. "That iron carriage... truly exists."

His entourage erupted into anxious chatter, voices overlapping as they discussed the terrifying sight.

But in Lian Guoshi's mind, only one thought remained.

A memorial.

Such a thing absolutely had to be reported.

And yet—

Another memory surfaced immediately.

"Wang Shunxing spoke wild nonsense, deceived the emperor, and was dismissed."

Lian Guoshi's heart clenched.

How did I come to be governor?

Because Wang Shunxing wrote about an iron carriage... and lost his post.

Realization struck like a hammer.

This memorial must not be written.

No—no, that was wrong.

He had already sworn not to deceive His Majesty. The truth must be reported.

But what if telling the truth leads to dismissal?

The contradiction crushed him.

Lian Guoshi slumped to the ground, completely dispirited.

"Master! Master, what's wrong?"

His attendants rushed to help him up.

Lian Guoshi gasped for breath, his chest tight with anguish.

He was a descendant of a founding meritorious minister. For eight generations, the Lian family had produced upright officials loyal to the Great Ming.

If his term ended in disgrace...

How could he face his ancestors?

He clenched his teeth.

"Follow the tracks forward," he said hoarsely. "This official intends to see for himself what this contraption truly is."

Thus, the weary procession continued along the railway.

Before long, they arrived at Xi'an Train Station.

The iron carriage that had thundered past earlier was now stopped within the station. One by one, common folk disembarked from its carriages.

Lian Guoshi estimated silently.

At least a thousand people.

Wang Shunxing's memorial had not contained a single lie.

But it did not matter.

The truth was simply too unbelievable.

An emperor confined within palace walls would never believe such a thing existed in the world.

Even Lian Guoshi himself, seeing it with his own eyes, still felt as though he were dreaming.

As he pondered this, a group of people exited the station and walked toward him along the tracks.

The man at the front wore splendid robes, his bearing noble. His face struck Lian Guoshi as strangely familiar.

That jawline...

So similar to the Imperial Ancestor's.

Royal blood.

Realization dawned instantly.

Zhu Cunji—the Prince of Qin's heir.

In Xi'an, who else could possess such bearing, attire, and entourage?

Before Lian Guoshi could speak, the man smiled and called out, "Judging by your retinue, you must be the new Governor, Lian Guoshi?"

Lian Guoshi straightened. "And you are, sir?"

"This heir is Zhu Cunji."

Lian Guoshi immediately bowed deeply. "Your humble subordinate greets Your Highness, the Heir Apparent."

Zhu Cunji waved his hand dismissively. "Enough of that. How many civil officials truly respect this prince? You call yourself a subordinate, but in your hearts you think yourselves superior."

Lian Guoshi fell silent.

Zhu Cunji snorted. "Let me tell you, this prince is not some idle wastrel. I am currently engaged in a serious undertaking."

Lian Guoshi looked puzzled.

Zhu Cunji ignored him and crouched down beside the tracks, running his hand over the wooden sleepers.

"These sleepers," he said, turning to his subordinates, "they shouldn't be difficult to make, correct?"

One subordinate nodded. "Our carpenters can manage that."

Zhu Cunji tapped the iron rails. "And these?"

"If forged hammer by hammer, it can be done," the subordinate replied. "But casting them directly from molten iron, like Mr. Li's people do—we cannot manage that."

Zhu Cunji frowned slightly, deep in thought.

Lian Guoshi stood nearby, watching in silence, his heart heavy.

The iron carriage.

The railway.

The memorial.

For the first time since taking office, he realized that governing Shaanxi might be far more terrifying than he had ever imagined.