

Great Ming 761

Chapter 761 Just Avoid Him

Zhu Cunji frowned slightly, irritation clearly visible on his face.

"Casting technology," he said unhappily. "Why can't we manage it? Isn't it just pouring molten iron into a mold and taking it out after it cools? It's such a simple thing. Even I understand it. Why can't my artisans do it?"

His subordinate grimaced. "As for the specific reasons... this subordinate does not fully understand them either, Your Highness."

At this moment, Lian Guoshi could not help but interject.

"Your Highness," he said cautiously, "iron forged by repeated hammering is far stronger and tougher. Iron cast directly into molds tends to be brittle and easily fractured. It lacks durability."

He gestured toward the railway. "This official just observed that the iron carriage weighs at least several hundred thousand catties and carries over a thousand people. Its weight is extraordinary. Rails made purely by casting would surely not be able to endure such pressure. They would crack and fail."

Zhu Cunji raised an eyebrow. "Oh? You understand metallurgy as well?"

"This official only understands the surface of it," Lian Guoshi replied modestly.

Zhu Cunji snorted. "Then you are mistaken."

He stamped his foot lightly against the rail beneath him.

"The rails you are standing on right now were cast."

Lian Guoshi froze. "Eh?"

Zhu Cunji continued irritably, "That is precisely why this prince is annoyed. Others can cast them, yet my artisans cannot. Explain that to me."

Lian Guoshi fell silent.

He thought carefully for several breaths, then spoke slowly. "Then... it must be the quality of the molten iron itself. This molten iron must be exceptionally pure, allowing even cast iron to possess sufficient strength. That must be the reason."

Zhu Cunji's eyes lit up. "Ah! I see."

He immediately turned to his subordinate. "Then how do we obtain this high-quality molten iron?"

The subordinate shook his head. "We do not know. This technique belongs exclusively to Steward Li's household. Such knowledge is certainly passed only within the family. There is no way for us to learn it."

Zhu Cunji sighed heavily. "So that means I still have to buy everything from them, don't I? I can't make cheaper ones myself."

The subordinate nodded.

Zhu Cunji's lips pursed into a sulk.

Lian Guoshi found this strange. "Your Highness, the Prince of Qin's estate is wealthy enough to rival a small kingdom. If you want something, you simply purchase it. Why insist on producing it yourself? That would be both laborious and time-consuming."

Zhu Cunji looked at him as though he were a fool.

"You look clever, Governor Lian," he said, "but you are actually quite stupid."

Lian Guoshi frowned. "Oh?"

Zhu Cunji pointed at the rail again. "Do you know how much a single section of this costs?"

Lian Guoshi silently calculated the iron content, converted it to the price of raw iron, then to refined iron, and finally to silver. Cold sweat formed on his back.

"I fear... it would cost no less than four taels of silver."

Zhu Cunji shook his head. "Not quite that expensive. Xi'an Prefecture produces far more iron ore than other regions, so iron is cheap here. Steward Li sells a section like this to me for two taels of silver."

Lian Guoshi was startled. "That is quite cheap."

Zhu Cunji nodded. "Cheap per section, yes. But think carefully. From Xi'an Prefecture to Yan'an Prefecture, how many sections of rail will be needed?"

Lian Guoshi's pupils shrank.

The straight-line distance alone was five hundred li. Once curves, gradients, and detours were considered, the total length would be far greater.

Even at two taels per section...

The cost was terrifying.

Now he finally understood why Zhu Cunji was so desperate to cut costs.

Unfortunately, without mastering the casting technology, Zhu Cunji had no choice but to continue purchasing rails from Gao Family Village, unable to save even a single copper. He could only economize elsewhere—on the roadbed, sleepers, stations, and labor.

To that end, Zhu Cunji employed the cheapest possible workforce, including large numbers of refugees who were willing to work simply for food.

Even so, the Prince of Qin's estate still struggled to sustain the expense. Zhu Cunji had even gone so far as to solicit funds from nearby imperial relatives just to keep the project moving.

Lian Guoshi felt deeply unsettled.

"Your Highness," he asked, "why invest such vast sums into iron rails and iron carriages?"

Zhu Cunji straightened, his face glowing with confidence. "To make money, of course."

He began counting on his fingers.

"One carriage can carry a thousand people. Charge each person a small fare, and that's two or three hundred taels in one trip. Run a round trip each day, and that's about five hundred taels daily."

He laughed. "That's fifteen thousand taels a month!"

Lian Guoshi was stunned. "Fifteen thousand... per month?"

"Exactly," Zhu Cunji said proudly. "Once I recover the construction costs, everything afterward is pure profit. Hahaha! I will become unimaginably wealthy. No other princely estate will compare."

Lian Guoshi replied flatly, "You are already the wealthiest imperial vassal in the realm. No princely estate compares to you even now."

Zhu Cunji froze.

"...."

An awkward silence followed.

After several breaths, Zhu Cunji snapped, "You, Governor Lian, are extremely irritating. This prince dislikes you and does not wish to speak with you."

He turned to leave.

Lian Guoshi, however, deliberately followed.

"Your Highness, please do not leave. This official has just taken office and has many matters he does not understand. I wish to consult you."

Zhu Cunji waved him away. "Go away."

"Your Highness, who exactly created these iron carriages? This Steward Li—who is he? Might you introduce me to him?"

"No."

"I merely wish to speak."

"Absolutely not."

"Just a conversation—"

"Go talk to Wu Shen or Shi Kefa. You civil officials are the most annoying people alive."

Several hours later, Lian Guoshi sat alone in the Governor's Yamen, reviewing documents.

The deeper he read, the more alarmed he became.

Around Xi'an City, industry and commerce had developed far beyond agriculture. While farming stagnated due to natural disasters, workshops, factories, and trade flourished unabated.

The reason soon became clear.

All such enterprises were registered under the Prince of Qin's estate.

And enterprises belonging to a princely estate paid no taxes.

Profit distribution was simple: forty percent to the Prince of Qin's estate, sixty percent to Steward Li.

Together, these two controlled nearly all economic activity in Xi'an Prefecture.

More disturbingly, Zhu Cunji's forty percent was quickly spent—on luxuries, entertainment, cultural goods, and the massive expenses of railways and iron carriages—most of which flowed straight back into Steward Li's hands.

In the end, over ninety percent of Xi'an's wealth gathered around a single man.

Lian Guoshi's heart sank.

"Who exactly is this Steward Li?" he muttered. "His influence exceeds even that of the Prince of Qin's estate."

He recalled that Wang Shunxing, the former governor, had neither opposed nor befriended Steward Li.

He had simply avoided him.

After a long silence, Lian Guoshi reached a conclusion.

"Provoking local magnates is dangerous. Colluding with them is equally dangerous."

"The safest course..."

He closed the dossier.

"...is to avoid him."

Chapter 762 We're Definitely Helping

Former Brigade General Luo Xi was currently acting as their guide.

He led a contingent that included one hundred and fifty household guards, Flat Rabbit, Zheng Gouzi, two thousand militia soldiers—and, unexpectedly, an Elder Li.

Yes.

An Elder Li.

Specifically, one of the mass-produced Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, Unit Three.

However, this Elder Li spent most of his time "resting" inside a covered carriage. He was transported by militia soldiers, rarely emerged, and gave no instructions. To anyone unfamiliar with the truth, he appeared like a wealthy but eccentric old gentleman tagging along for reasons unknown.

Luo Xi found this... unsettling.

Lowering his voice, he leaned toward Zheng Gouzi. "Brother Zheng, this Elder Li feels... strange. He must be a person of great status and wealth, correct? Why would someone like that involve himself in something so dangerous? Every important person I've ever known treasures their life above all else."

Zheng Gouzi smiled faintly. "Elder Li is different. He likes to experience life among the common folk."

Luo Xi muttered, "I've seen people 'experience life' before—but never to the point of joining the front lines of a bandit suppression campaign."

As they spoke quietly, Flat Rabbit was in exceptionally high spirits.

He pointed toward the continuous mountain ranges ahead and burst into loud laughter.

"I've been stuck doing desk work in Xi'an for far too long! My bones were practically rotting! Turns out, fighting is what suits this Lord Rabbit best!" He slapped his chest. "Chuang bandits—just wait! This Lord Rabbit will personally take your heads!"

A nearby militia soldier could not help himself. He spoke quietly, but honestly.

"Lord Rabbit, a rebel chieftain's head isn't that easy to take. Most of them can be beaten back, but rarely wiped out completely. It's very troublesome."

Flat Rabbit rolled up his sleeve and flexed his arm, revealing a muscle that... existed, at least in theory.

"That's because you are weak," he said confidently. "Look at this strength! One sword stroke chills forty prefectures! Within a hundred paces, my sword qi slays! Any scoundrel who blocks my path will not escape!"

The militia soldier replied flatly, "Lord Rabbit, that line about 'sword qi within a hundred paces' might have worked a few years ago. But our rifles shoot several hundred paces now. If rifles can't handle an enemy, sword qi won't help either."

Flat Rabbit froze.

He opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

He had no rebuttal.

From a distance, Luo Xi glanced over, then whispered to Zheng Gouzi, "Brother Zheng... your companion, Flat Rabbit, seems rather unreliable. He speaks endlessly, but not a word of it sounds solid."

Zheng Gouzi chuckled. "You've learned quickly. That phrase—'mouth runs like a train'—you picked it up fast."

Luo Xi stiffened. "...I did."

"That's his real talent," Zheng Gouzi said. "He confuses people by sheer volume."

Luo Xi hurriedly clapped a hand over his mouth. This was bad. Very bad. Ever since seeing the giant iron trains in Xi'an, strange phrases had started slipping into his speech.

If this continued, who knew what nonsense he'd start saying next?

As the group continued forward, a large manor gradually appeared at the foot of the mountains ahead.

Luo Xi's eyes brightened. "We've arrived. That's my home."

The Luo family estate lay at the foot of Tianzhu Mountain, in Shanyang County, Shaanxi.

The Luo family were local gentry. As the saying went: Scholarship for the poor, martial arts for the rich. A man who had risen to the rank of third-grade Brigade General could not possibly come from a poor household.

The fertile fields spreading across the mountain's base all belonged to the Luo family. Tenant farmers cultivated the land, and over time, villages clustered around the estate, forming a bustling settlement.

The place was called Luojia Gully.

As Luo Xi returned, the entire gully stirred. Tenant farmers peeked from roadsides and village paths, whispering among themselves.

Meanwhile, the Luo family patriarch—leaning on a staff—emerged with a large group of clan members to welcome him.

The moment father and son met—

Thwack!

The patriarch's staff came down squarely on Luo Xi's head.

"You unfilial bastard!" the old man roared, swinging his staff again and again with startling precision. "What disgraceful crime did you commit to get yourself stripped of office? My Luo family has produced this kind of shame?"

Luo Xi dared not resist. He crouched, shielding his head.

"Father, please stop! I didn't do anything wrong! I only wrote a memorial—truthfully! The emperor became angry, that's all! I swear I committed no evil deeds!"

The patriarch barked, "What did you write?"

"I wrote that a thousand firearm soldiers fired four volleys within ten breaths, driving back Mongol troops—"

The old man exploded. "Nonsense! Absolute nonsense! What kind of firearm fires four volleys in ten breaths? Are you trying to anger your father to death?"

Thwack!

This blow landed hard.

Luo Xi collapsed and went still.

The patriarch froze. Did I hit him too hard? He prodded him anxiously. "Hey! Get up! Are you dead?"

Luo Xi remained motionless.

After a moment, he stirred—slowly, carefully—and stood up.

"Father... I truly wasn't lying. It really was four volleys."

"Say that again," the patriarch warned, "and I'll switch to the iron staff."

Zheng Gouzi finally stepped forward, no longer able to suppress his laughter.

"Elder Luo, Brigade General Luo is telling the truth."

The patriarch snorted. "And who are you, conspiring with him to fool me?"

"You'll know in a few days," Zheng Gouzi replied calmly. "There will be a battle soon."

The old man's expression changed. He looked at the two thousand firearm soldiers behind them, then toward Tianzhu Mountain.

"So many troops..." he murmured. "Then something serious truly is coming."

Luo Xi briefly explained the rebels crossing the Yellow River, bypassing Luoyang, and pressing toward the border of the four provinces.

The patriarch had once served in the army himself. He understood immediately. His brow furrowed deeply.

"Tianzhu Mountain..." he said slowly. "A perfect place for rebels to establish a base."

He turned to Luo Xi. "So that's why you rushed back."

"Yes," Luo Xi replied. "These are Zheng Gouzi and Flat Rabbit, household guards of Shi Jian, the Garrison Commander of Hejin. I... shamelessly begged them to help."

The patriarch immediately bowed deeply to Zheng Gouzi and Flat Rabbit.

"Thank you for your aid. But the rebels are vast—often tens of thousands. For you to risk yourselves for my Luo family is too dangerous. Please, I beg you, return. We cannot burden others."

Flat Rabbit burst into laughter.

"Elder Luo, just hearing you say that," he said, slapping his thigh, "we're definitely helping."

Chapter 763 Progress

Flat Rabbit swaggered forward and declared loudly,

"Old Luo, you can rest easy. They're just a bunch of insignificant bandits. This Lord Rabbit's sword gleams, chilling forty prefectures. If those ruffians know what's good for them, they won't even dare show their faces. But if they do, this Lord Rabbit will cut them down one by one—three days and three nights without blinking—then chop them all into mincemeat to feed the dogs."

It would have been better if he hadn't spoken.

The moment he finished, Old Luo's gaze fixed on him, as though he were examining a lunatic who had wandered in from somewhere unknown.

Zheng Gouzi could only smile helplessly.

"Lord Rabbit is acting up again."

Flat Rabbit possessed a peculiar talent. Whether facing enemies or allies, anyone who encountered him would instinctively underestimate the true strength of Gao Family Village.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had once casually mentioned that Flat Rabbit might someday be appointed Director of the Bureau of Strategic Deception. Zheng Gouzi often wondered what such a bureau would actually do, but after watching Flat Rabbit in action, he felt that the title was disturbingly appropriate.

Luo Xi stepped forward.

"Father, this relief force is extremely strong. They repelled Mongol cavalry within ten breaths. With their assistance, our chances of holding out are very good. Moreover, the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers and General Zhang Yingchang of Henan should already be on their way. Only the Hubei army's arrival remains uncertain. All things considered, we truly have a chance this time."

Old Luo stroked his white beard and pondered for a long moment before letting out a deep sigh.

"Very well. If we fail to stop them here, the bandits will once again enter Shaanxi through Shanyang County. The consequences would be unimaginable. If we can annihilate them at the junction of the four provinces, that would indeed be a great merit."

He turned and gave Zheng Gouzi a solemn bow.

"This old man thanks you in advance."

Flat Rabbit waved his hand casually.

"No need for such formalities."

Zheng Gouzi immediately scoffed.

"Old Luo wasn't bowing to you! Why are you saying that? If anyone should say it, it should be me."

Flat Rabbit blinked.

"Huh? Am I not the captain of this unit?"

Zheng Gouzi shot back,

"Since when did you develop the delusion that you're the captain?"

Flat Rabbit puffed out his chest.

"This Rabbit is the most dazzling hero here. Naturally, the captain must be me."

The surrounding people exchanged glances, utterly speechless.

There was simply no point arguing with him.

Everyone chose to ignore Flat Rabbit completely.

Zheng Gouzi turned his attention to the terrain.

"Old Luo, your manor is located at the foot of the mountain. Visibility is poor. The bandits could arrive at any moment, and defending from low ground is never ideal. Is there a suitable place to establish a garrison on Tianzhu Mountain?"

Old Luo nodded.

"Of course. Tianzhu Mountain has been a site of Buddhist and Daoist activity since the Han Dynasty. There are many temples and monasteries there, and villagers frequently go up to burn incense. The Luo family has long-standing relations with those establishments. With a single word, you can station troops there without issue."

"That's excellent," Zheng Gouzi replied. "High ground is easy to defend and hard to attack, and it gives us a clear view of enemy movements. We'll head up the mountain."

Old Luo had no objections. He immediately wrote a letter and handed it to Luo Xi, instructing him to personally lead the local militia to Tianzhu Mountain and coordinate with the monasteries to select a suitable campsite.

Afterward, Old Luo began mobilizing the local population.

The area surrounding Tianzhu Mountain was dotted with villages, and the Luo family—being the wealthiest and most influential household—had long borne responsibility for organizing militias to resist bandits.

With the Luo family issuing orders, the surrounding villages quickly sprang into action, making preparations to defend against the approaching rebels.

Meanwhile, at Gao Family Village Thirty-Two Middle School.

Despite the name "middle school," within Gao Family Village, this institution represented the highest level of learning available.

At this very moment, a large group of people inside the school were carefully connecting electrical wires.

They had successfully stripped a small section of insulation from one of Dao Xuan Tianzun's divine devices and connected their own wire to it.

Because the principles of electrical circuits had already been included in the physics curriculum, these students—true scientific prodigies—had quickly learned how to make switches on their own.

They first turned the divine generator off, disconnected the power, and installed a switch along the wire they had laid. Afterward, they turned the generator back on.

From that point on, they no longer needed to directly manipulate the divine artifact itself. With their own switch, they could control the flow of electricity through the wire.

This greatly simplified wiring work.

They had not yet mastered the production of insulated wire. Fortunately, Dao Xuan Tianzun had previously supplied rubber to solve airtightness problems for the Chassepot Rifles.

The researchers soon realized that rubber could also function as an electrical insulator. They applied for a batch from the military factory and wrapped it around the exposed wires.

With that, the wires were made safe.

To prevent curious students from accidentally touching them, tall wooden frameworks were erected, and the wires were strung high overhead.

Thus, the first utility poles were born.

Long wires were then routed into the laboratory.

Song Yingxing chuckled as he connected the wire to a small device he had just assembled.

A group of graduate students crowded around. Inside the square glass enclosure stood two carbon rods.

Song Yingxing laughed.

"Don't look at me like that. This isn't my invention. These are the designs provided by Dao Xuan Tianzun. I merely followed the instructions."

"Professor Song, what is this?" one student asked.

Song Yingxing did not answer. He simply pressed the switch.

The circuit completed.

The two carbon rods instantly erupted with blinding light.

Caught completely off guard, everyone cried out and shielded their eyes, retreating several steps.

"What is this? It's too bright!"

Song Yingxing laughed heartily.

"Success! The light bulb is a success! Hahaha! Dao Xuan Tianzun's knowledge is truly astonishing. We only followed the instructions, and it worked!"

"It's far too bright..."

"Almost unbearable to look at..."

Song Yingxing nodded.

"This is only the initial experimental version. The brightness still needs adjustment. By thinning the filament, we can control it. And of course, there's also the matter of lifespan."

He continued explaining in detail, and the graduate students hurriedly pulled out notebooks, writing furiously.

Before long, every participant had filled pages with essential knowledge.

Song Yingxing's expression turned solemn.

"The divine generator provided by Dao Xuan Tianzun produces an enormous amount of electricity. The divine mirror used for news broadcasts alone cannot consume all of it. Your task is to continue researching and find ways to fully utilize this power. We must not allow it to go to waste."

"Yes!" the students replied in unison.

"Let's begin by replacing all the oil lamps in Gao Family Village's commercial district," Song Yingxing said. "Replace them with light bulbs. Work hard."

Chapter 764 The Grass Sledding Project

The two thousand soldiers led by Zheng Gouzi and Flat Rabbit set up camp at the Medicine King Temple on Tianzhu Mountain.

The Daoist priests of the Medicine King Temple had long received generous offerings from the Luo family. As soon as they heard that the request came from the Luo household, they did not hesitate at all and immediately opened both the front and rear courtyards of the temple for the soldiers to pitch their tents.

At first, the Daoist priests were somewhat worried about the poor discipline of government troops. However, after observing them for a short time, they realized that these were not government troops at all, but the private guards of some powerful figure.

Their discipline was extremely strict. They neither harassed the common people nor seized supplies at will.

Only then did the Daoist priests finally relax.

At the same time, curiosity inevitably arose regarding this mysterious "lord."

That lord—the mass-produced third Dao Xuan Tianzun unit—stood at the edge of the cliff in front of the Medicine King Temple, looking down at the deep ravine below.

"The scenery here is truly beautiful," Li Daoxuan said, clearly pleased. "Natural landscapes really can't be faked. Those so-called scenic spots in later generations mostly rely on man-made cultural packaging."

Li Daoxuan had previously been thoroughly disappointed by places such as Dragon Gate Ferry, Yongji Ferry, Fengling Ferry, and Puzhou City. Because of that, he had almost completely lost interest in traveling inside the box.

But Tianzhu Mountain genuinely surprised him.

Judging purely from the scenery, it would be more than worthy of being rated a five-A scenic area in the future.

At that moment, a Daoist priest approached from behind and performed a formal hand salute.

"Boundless Longevity and Fortune. Mr. Li, you have traveled far to assist Shanyang County in resisting bandits. This humble Daoist is deeply grateful. However... our small temple does not have much stored grain. If you station so many people here, I fear we may not be able to provide for them."

Li Daoxuan immediately understood what the Daoist priest was worried about.

He smiled and waved his hand.

"Grain isn't a problem. Our logistics unit will arrive shortly. You only need to lend us some space to store supplies."

The Daoist priest was momentarily stunned.

"Eh?"

Li Daoxuan glanced around and suddenly noticed a large grassy slope ahead. The incline was extremely steep, at least sixty degrees, and the turf was thick and smooth.

He couldn't help exclaiming,

"If this were up to me, I'd turn this place into a grass sledding attraction. Charge a hundred yuan per ride and make a fortune."

"Grass... sledding?" the Daoist priest repeated, completely confused.

"You wouldn't understand even if I explained it," Li Daoxuan said, waving dismissively. "Forget it. I'll just go play by myself. Do you have any cowhide mats or something similar? Lend me one."

"Yes, yes, we do!" the Daoist priest replied hastily.

He quickly went inside and soon returned carrying a large, stiff cowhide mat.

This type of cowhide mat was commonly used in summer. It was cool and comfortable, though if someone slept on it too long, it would leave a very obvious flattened imprint on their face.

Li Daoxuan placed the cowhide mat on the grassy slope and sat down on it.

Only then did the Daoist priest finally realize what he was about to do. His face changed drastically.

"Mr. Li, you absolutely must not! This slope is far too steep and far too long. Sliding down from here is extremely dangerous. You could easily crash into rocks at the bottom of the mountain and be severely injured."

Li Daoxuan did not respond.

He simply pushed backward lightly with his hands.

The cowhide mat immediately slid forward, shooting down the sixty-degree grassy slope.

The Daoist priest was terrified.

"Quick! Someone! Mr. Li is sliding down the mountain! This is too dangerous!"

Hearing the shout, the militia soldiers all rushed over and crowded around the edge of the slope.

They watched as Li Daoxuan, seated on the cowhide mat, hurtled wildly downward.

The slope was indeed extremely steep—so steep that even modern grass sledding attractions would not dare use such an angle.

Li Daoxuan's speed increased rapidly.

The Daoist priest broke out in a cold sweat.

The militia soldiers, however, burst into laughter.

"Oh, Dao Xuan Tianzun, that looks so fun!"

"Only Dao Xuan Tianzun can play like that," another soldier said. "If it were us, we'd die for sure."

Li Daoxuan's laughter echoed through the valley, bouncing between the mountain peaks as he continued accelerating.

At the bottom of the slope stood a massive boulder.

Because his speed was too great, he had no time to slow down.

With a loud crash, Li Daoxuan slammed directly into the stone.

The Daoist priest's heart sank.

It's over. Mr. Li must be dead.

But in the next instant, he realized he was wrong.

Li Daoxuan had smashed a large, clearly defined human-shaped indentation into the boulder. He pushed himself out of the hollow with both hands and laughed.

"So Tom and Jerry really was a documentary. You really can crash into a person-shaped dent."

Thump.

His left arm fell off.

The impact had damaged the joint mechanism.

Li Daoxuan calmly picked up the detached arm with his right hand and tucked it under his armpit.

"Broken again," he muttered. "Looks like I'll need to reattach it."

The Daoist priest stared in complete shock.

"This... this... what kind of divine power is this?!"

"The silicone outer layer is damaged too," Li Daoxuan added. "Fortunately, I brought spare parts."

He wrapped himself in his cloak and slowly climbed back up the slope. Then he entered his large carriage. Several militia soldiers followed him inside, retrieved spare components, reconnected the arm joint, and replaced the damaged silicone outer layer.

Before long, Li Daoxuan stepped out of the carriage once again, looking exactly as he had before.

He smiled at the soldiers.

"See? This is the advantage of standardized production. Parts can be replaced at any time."

The soldiers exchanged strange looks.

"Yes, yes, Dao Xuan Tianzun is correct," they said. "But we only brought three sets of spare parts, and you've already used one. Please try to be more economical when playing in the future."

Li Daoxuan walked over to the Daoist priest, still smiling.

"Fun, isn't it? Tianzhu Mountain really is an excellent scenic area."

The Daoist priest was practically radiating confusion, completely unable to respond.

After a long pause, he finally stammered,

"Mr. Li... are you here to suppress bandits, or to play?"

"We suppress bandits, and we play," Li Daoxuan said seriously. "Both hands must be grasped firmly. And incidentally, I also want to help the local people prosper."

He paused briefly, then continued,

"Let's first examine the living conditions of the common folk around Tianzhu Mountain. Someone, launch a reconnaissance hot air balloon."

"Coming!" Zheng Gouzi replied immediately.

This time, the militia did not need to hastily construct a balloon on the spot. Large numbers of reconnaissance hot air balloons had already been prepared in advance and transported as important military supplies.

Zheng Gouzi quickly launched one.

The Daoist priest stood there blankly, completely unable to understand what was happening.

After the hot air balloon rose into the sky, Li Daoxuan closed his eyes and stood motionless.

Several seconds later, he suddenly opened them, pointed diagonally forward, and said,

"In that direction, about one li from here at the foot of the mountain, there is a poor village of roughly fifty people. Mark it down. Later, send a poverty alleviation team."

"Understood!" Zheng Gouzi replied.

Li Daoxuan then pointed in another direction.

"At the foot of the mountain in that direction, there's a large village with more than four hundred people. There also seems to be a local gentry household there. Go investigate their conduct. If they're good, assist them. If they're not..."

He paused slightly.

"...beat them into submission first, then assist them."

Chapter 765 The 800-Li Express Messenger

Wan Shou Zhai, Wan Shou Mountain, Sichuan.

This was the headquarters of the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers.

The height of summer had arrived, and with it came the season of harvest. Ears of corn were being gathered one after another.

At the main gate of Wan Shou Zhai, the fifty-nine-year-old General Qin Liangyu stood quietly, watching her subordinates carry basket after basket of corn into the fortress for storage.

In recent years, the affairs of the realm had steadily worsened. Disorder spread everywhere, and Qin Liangyu had enjoyed very few peaceful days. Yet today, her face was filled with genuine smiles.

A great harvest.

What could be more joyful than that?

With this yield, the people of Shizhu would have enough grain to last an entire year. More importantly, the long-standing problem of military provisions that had plagued the White Pole Soldiers was finally resolved.

It was truly something worth celebrating.

Qin Liangyu turned her head toward her daughter-in-law, Zhang Fengyi, and smiled.

"Fengyi, this time you've truly rendered great service. You brought back new crops, new cultivation methods, and even celestial fertilizer. You allowed Wan Shou Zhai to reap an unprecedented harvest."

Zhang Fengyi replied modestly, "This is not my merit. It was Squire Li of Gao Family Village who gave these things to your daughter-in-law."

Qin Liangyu paused, her expression turning thoughtful.

"Squire Li... Who exactly is he? With cultivation methods this effective, why have they never been widely promoted? I've never heard of such techniques before."

Zhang Fengyi sighed softly.

"Squire Li's home is in Shaanxi. With the severe drought there, he had no way to promote them on a large scale. At present, he's trying to spread them in Shanxi, but since he's not an imperial official, he encounters great resistance. When he gave me these methods, he said he hoped to use our Ma family's authority in Shizhu to promote them more easily."

Qin Liangyu nodded slowly.

"That makes sense. Without official authority, spreading new techniques is extremely difficult. Even officials face obstruction from local interests."

The reason these methods had spread so rapidly in Shizhu—and produced such results within half a year—was precisely because Zhang Fengyi was her daughter-in-law, and because Qin Liangyu herself served as the Chieftain of Shizhu.

In this region, her word was law.

Qin Liangyu continued, "This Squire Li is truly a good man. Not only did he save your life, but he also bestowed such valuable agricultural knowledge. Later, prepare a generous gift and personally deliver it to him. We must express our gratitude properly."

She paused, then added, "And that celestial fertilizer he gave us—we only tested it on a few plots, but the effect was astonishing. Next year, we won't have any left. You'll need to contact him and ask whether we can purchase more."

As she spoke, her brows gradually knitted together.

"Shaanxi is far from here, and Sichuan's terrain is treacherous. Transport alone is extremely difficult. Haah... If we must haul fertilizer all the way from Shaanxi, that won't be easy. What should we do?"

Just as they were speaking, a sharp voice rang out from the watchtower above the fortress gate.

"A fast horse approaching!"

Qin Liangyu looked up. "Only one rider? A messenger?"

A single rider soon came into view, galloping at full speed. As he neared the gate, he was forced to slow down because a long line of soldiers carrying corn blocked the road.

The White Pole Soldiers had temporarily laid aside their armor to farm, and the men transporting corn were all veterans of battle. Bold and fearless, they were not intimidated at all by the charging horse.

Instead, they laughed loudly. One soldier even stepped forward, spreading his arms wide.

"Wan Shou Zhai of Wan Shou Mountain! Unauthorized entry is forbidden!"

The rider shouted urgently, "Urgent military intelligence! Make way!"

"Urgent military intelligence?" Only then did the soldiers step aside.

The rider spurred his horse forward and rushed straight to the gate.

He had expected to wait for a formal announcement, but to his surprise, General Qin Liangyu herself—along with Ma Xianglin and Zhang Fengyi—were already standing at the gate, looking directly at him.

The rider quickly dismounted, cupped his hands, and spoke with urgency.

"This humble one is Li Yuan, a messenger from Gao Family Village, bearing an eight-hundred-li urgent report!"

"Gao Family Village?"

Ma Xianglin and Zhang Fengyi spoke at the same time, their faces lighting up.

"A friend from Gao Family Village!"

Qin Liangyu let out a soft sound of acknowledgment. She glanced at the corn being carried inside the fortress, then looked back at Li Yuan, finding him unexpectedly pleasing to the eye.

Li Yuan was clearly travel-worn, but his spirit remained high.

He had once fled from under Yansui Regional Commander Chen Qiyu and joined Gao Family Village, serving under Shi Jian. There, he had returned to his old trade as a messenger.

This time, Gao Family Village needed to send a message to Sichuan.

The journey was long, the roads difficult, and the mountain paths infamous—"harder than ascending to heaven." The newer messengers simply weren't up to the task.

Thus, the veteran Li Yuan had been chosen.

Using his expertise in eight-hundred-li express deliveries, he had ridden day and night straight to Wan Shou Zhai.

Before departing, Shi Jian had promised him a special reward: fifteen taels of silver.

Under Chen Qiyu, such generosity would have been unimaginable.

Thinking of that silver, Li Yuan felt invigorated. He spoke rapidly:

"General Qin, the rebels are advancing southwest from Kaifeng. They bypassed Luoyang and are likely to enter the border region of the four provinces. Gao Family Village has already dispatched troops to Shanyang County, and Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng has mobilized his forces to pursue them!"

Qin Liangyu immediately understood.

"White Pole Soldiers, prepare to march to Kuizhou!"

Kuizhou—modern Fengjie—was a vital choke point in eastern Sichuan. Any army attempting to enter the province through regular routes would have to pass through it.

But just as the order left her mouth, Qin Liangyu's expression tightened.

"No. Wait."

Her tone grew grave.

"Rebels are not the same as regular armies. Regular troops must maintain supply lines, so they move city by city. Kuizhou would be unavoidable for them."

She shook her head.

"But rebels do not rely on fixed supply lines. They won't attack Kuizhou head-on. Instead, they'll slip through the mountain routes north of it and enter Sichuan that way."

She immediately revised her command.

"Xianglin. Fengyi. The three of us will personally lead several thousand White Pole Soldiers to the mountain line north of Kuizhou—Langshu Yakou, Baiyan Cao, Xiagou, Shuangtou Baoshan, Feidu Gorge, and Nangong Mountain."

"We will establish outposts and conduct constant patrols. The rebels must be blocked from entering Sichuan."

Mobilization began at once.

The White Pole Soldiers who had just been happily hauling corn immediately dropped their baskets and seized their white pole spears again.

Then, after a brief pause—

They discreetly stuffed two ears of corn into their pockets.

This year's abundant harvest had greatly strengthened morale.

For the first time in many years, the White Pole Soldiers no longer worried about running out of food. They could fight with full stomachs.

Qin Liangyu herself quickly donned her armor.

The set she wore was the very model that later opera troupes would use for the character "Mu Guiying." It was imposing and beautiful at the same time.

Though nearly sixty years old, once armored, she still radiated valor and martial spirit.

She turned to Li Yuan.

"Messenger, your name is Li Yuan, correct? Ride ahead and report back. Our army will follow immediately."

Li Yuan's eyes widened.

"Ah? Yes! Yes, General!"

He laughed loudly as he mounted his horse again.

"As soon as I return, I can collect my fifteen taels of silver special bonus! Hahaha! Gao Family Village's treatment is truly excellent! An eight-hundred-li express—off to collect my silver!"

He cracked the reins and galloped away.

Qin Liangyu stood at the gate, momentarily stunned.

"...What an energetic messenger."

Chapter 766 Stationing at Wuguan Pass

Henan Province.

In the sixth year of the Chongzhen Emperor's reign, Henan had just endured the catastrophic breach of the Yellow River. Before the land could recover even slightly, another calamity followed close behind.

A great drought.

Autumn arrived, yet there was no harvest to speak of. Wheat could not be planted at all. The fields lay bare, cracked and lifeless, without even a trace of green grass. Of every ten households, nine stood empty.

In this desolate land, grain prices soared beyond reason. A single dou of rice sold for five silver qian. A strong laborer could work from dawn until dusk and still fail to earn enough to buy one meal.

People began digging up grass roots. Tree bark was stripped and boiled.

Husbands abandoned wives. Mothers deserted their children. Selling a child barely bought a few days' worth of grain. Some people hanged themselves in the barren woods, deliberately letting their bodies fill ditches. Others collapsed by the roadside and starved where they fell.

Beggar corpses lay together, heads touching, death taking them side by side.

Some families sealed their doors with mud and fled overnight, carrying whatever scraps they could. In certain places, there were even cases of kin devouring kin.

This was Henan.

And into this hellscape—

The rebels returned.

Like a swarm of locusts, the rebel army swept in, swords and knives flashing. At first, they intended to sack villages as usual, stripping them clean.

But the moment they entered the countryside, they were stunned.

There was nothing.

No grain. No livestock. No villagers worth robbing.

Meng Hu rode back to report, his face dark.

"Brother Chuǎng Wang," he said, "there's nothing to take. The people of Henan are poorer than we are. Damn it."

Chuǎng Wang frowned deeply.

"What now?" he asked. "We have over a hundred thousand men. They all need to eat."

From the side, Chuang Jiang spoke up.

"Brother Chuǎng Wang, hear me out. With an army this large, plundering villages is meaningless. How many peasants would we need to rob to feed over a hundred thousand mouths?"

He continued, his tone firm.

"We must seize cities. Only by capturing prefectures and counties can we open the government granaries. As for the common folk—rather than robbing them, we should conscript them."

"Bring them into the army. Expand our numbers. Only then can we keep advancing and take more cities."

Chuǎng Wang listened in silence.

The logic was sound.

Thus, the rebel army changed its methods.

They no longer wasted effort looting villages. Instead, they forcibly recruited the starving population, swelling their ranks as they advanced.

County seats across western Henan fell one after another.

The rebel army surged once more.

This time, their vanguard pointed directly—

At Wuguan Pass.

Tianzhu Mountain.

At the foot of the mountain, the common folk of Shanyang County fell into panic when rumors spread that the rebels might be coming.

But before the rebels arrived, something else reached them first.

The logistics convoy of Gao Family Village.

The moment the convoy entered the county, the situation changed.

Li Daoxuan issued an order without hesitation.

Each household was to receive five measures of grain.

There were no speeches and no ceremonies.

The grain was distributed immediately.

The effect was instantaneous.

The people stopped panicking. They became obedient, cooperative, even proactive.

Farm work was temporarily set aside. Instead, villagers began digging trenches, foxholes, and concealed shelters. Entire villages were transformed into fortified warrens, resembling the tunnel networks described in war legends.

Everything was prepared.

They waited.

Soon, new intelligence arrived.

After ravaging Henan, the rebel army—once reduced to just over a hundred thousand—had expanded again.

Two hundred and fifty thousand.

With their momentum restored, the rebels grew arrogant. Instead of hiding in mountain routes along the borders of the four provinces, they marched openly along the main roads.

Their target was unmistakable.

Wuguan Pass.

"The rebels are almost at Wuguan Pass!"

Luo Xi rushed into the Medicine King Temple, shouting as he entered.

"Brother Zheng, this is bad! Wuguan Pass is the gateway to Shaanxi. If it falls, the rebels will re-enter Shaanxi. What should we do?"

Zheng Gouzi spread his hands, disbelief plain on his face.

"They're that bold? Not even sneaking through the mountains—charging straight at Wuguan Pass?"

Luo Xi nodded grimly.

"They've calculated it. Hong Chengchou is pinned down at Guyuan dealing with the Mongols. Shaanxi's defenses are weak. That's why they dare."

Before Zheng Gouzi could reply, Li Daoxuan stepped down from his carriage, his expression calm.

"Then we go to Wuguan Pass," he said.

He continued evenly, "We stationed ourselves in Shanyang County precisely because of its central position. No matter where the rebels go, we can reinforce quickly."

"Where they go—we follow."

At his command, the militia mobilized at once.

From Tianzhu Mountain to Wuguan Pass was only one hundred li.

Marching at speed, they arrived in just over a day.

Luo Xi narrowed his eyes, staring ahead.

"There it is—Wuguan Pass. I don't see any rebels attacking. It's still in government hands."

Flat Rabbit scanned the walls.

"...But I don't see any government troops either."

Luo Xi froze.

"That's strange. This is the gateway to Shaanxi. There should always be troops stationed here."

Flat Rabbit laughed outright.

"They ran. Obviously."

Luo Xi wiped the sweat from his brow.

Just then, scouts from the Gao Family Village Militia appeared atop the pass walls, waving signals to indicate the route was safe.

The main force advanced immediately.

Inside Wuguan Pass, their suspicions were confirmed.

It was completely empty.

No government soldiers. No civilians.

The residents had fled long ago, escaping into the surrounding mountains when the garrison withdrew.

Luo Xi let out a bitter laugh.

"This defending general is even more cowardly than I am. I might run after losing a battle, but I wouldn't flee before a single strike. Doesn't he fear the Emperor's wrath?"

Zheng Gouzi chuckled.

"Running means dismissal. Losing a battle means execution. Can't blame him."

"With the government troops gone, things are simpler for us."

The militia immediately began surveying the terrain, assigning defensive positions and marking fallback routes, just as they had done in Luoyang.

Everything proceeded methodically.

Luo Xi and his household guards, however, found themselves with nothing to do.

After lingering awkwardly for a while, Luo Xi finally spoke.

"Brother Zheng... could you find something for my men to do?"

He smiled wryly.

"I invited you here to help, yet I've done nothing myself. It feels wrong."

A militia soldier brushed past him.

"Move aside. Don't block the road."

Luo Xi: "..."

After a moment's thought, Luo Xi brightened.

"How about reconnaissance? My men are good at that."

Zheng Gouzi nodded.

"Not a bad idea."

"Post some of your men on the watchtowers. Send others east from the pass toward Henan. If they spot the rebels, have them return immediately."

Luo Xi was delighted.

"Excellent! Finally, I can be useful."

He had one hundred and fifty household guards, all elite troops. The personal guards of Ming officers were never weak.

Some climbed the towers.

Others slipped out of Wuguan Pass, spreading into the countryside.

The scouts set out.

And the storm approached.

Chapter 767 Calling at the Gate

"What?"

"The Wuguan Pass garrison fled?"

Lian Guoshi, newly appointed Governor and still buried in the routine of settling accounts and reviewing documents in Xi'an Prefecture, felt a chill surge straight up his spine the moment he heard the report. The brush in his hand froze mid-stroke.

"Wuguan Pass is only three hundred li from Xi'an," he said sharply. "Mobilize immediately! If we move fast, we might still make it in time."

He raised his voice.

"What forces are currently available in Xi'an?"

His aide answered without delay. "Xi'an has four guard units: Left, Right, Front, and Rear. Five hundred men of the Left Guard are attached to the Prince of Qin's Residence and cannot be moved. The remaining three guards are under your authority and can be mobilized."

Lian Guoshi did not hesitate.

He immediately ordered the Right, Front, and Rear Guard garrisons of Xi'an to assemble. Adding his own household guards and a hastily gathered group of local militia volunteers, he personally led the column toward Wuguan Pass.

But they had not gone far when an unease crept into Lian Guoshi's heart.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

The three guard units looked nothing like soldiers.

They were farmers in armor.

Their stances were loose, their armor sat crooked on their bodies, and their formations dissolved the moment the column slowed. When a few men tried to brandish spears or sabers, their movements were stiff and awkward, as if they had never practiced beyond a ceremonial drill.

Not one of them looked capable of standing firm in battle.

Lian Guoshi's heart sank.

But he had no choice.

Wuguan Pass absolutely could not be lost—

Before he could finish the thought, a shout tore through the air.

"The rebel army has arrived!"

Five of Luo Xi's household guards came sprinting back through the pass at full speed.

"Close the gates! Close the gates now!"

"We're the last scout party—there's no one else outside! Shut the gates immediately!"

The quiet of Wuguan Pass shattered at once.

Gongs thundered from the watchtowers, their sharp metallic echoes rolling through the ravines. Gate guards heaved at the winches, chains clanking as the massive wooden gates began to descend inch by inch.

Militia soldiers who had been resting sprang up and rushed for the walls, each man moving to positions that had already been assigned days earlier.

Even Li Daoxuan—who had been "resting" in his carriage—pushed open the door and jumped down with light steps.

"Oh," he said cheerfully, glancing toward the eastern road, "excellent timing. Is the fight about to start?"

Zheng Gouzi hurried over. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, the rebel troops will arrive any moment."

"Hm." Li Daoxuan waved a hand casually. "You handle your duties. Don't mind me."

He followed his long-held principle: never issue commands without understanding the battlefield. As long as he did not interfere, the Gao Family Village Militia knew exactly what to do.

The deployment was completed swiftly and methodically.

Not long after, movement appeared on the eastern road.

At first it was just shadows.

Then figures.

Then a tide.

The rebel army did not trickle in—it surged forward like a flood, darkening the land as far as the eye could see.

At the front of their formation, two large banners snapped violently in the wind.

One read: Sweeping King.

The other: Stars-A-Plenty.

Li Daoxuan narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Well now," he said with interest, "new faces. We haven't met these two before, have we?"

Flat Rabbit glanced at the banners and chuckled. "Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun—definitely new. We've never fought them."

Li Daoxuan smiled. "Good. Then let's give them a proper introduction."

"Make them afraid."

"Make them cry."

"Make them regret ever setting foot in Shaanxi."

Sweeping King and Stars-A-Plenty were only the vanguard.

The two shared a single guiding philosophy in life:

Always be the fastest.

Fastest to seize spoils.

Fastest to retreat when things went bad.

That way, the gains were theirs—and survival was guaranteed.

So when the Dashing General finalized the strategy to march west through Wuguan Pass and re-enter Shaanxi, the two volunteered without hesitation to lead the advance.

Sweeping King squinted toward the distant pass. "That's Wuguan Pass ahead. A strategic choke point. The imperial garrison should be formidable, don't you think?"

Stars-A-Plenty burst out laughing. "Formidable? I sent scouts long ago. The guards there are useless trash. They probably fled already—hahaha!"

But before his laughter faded, he saw it.

The gates of Wuguan Pass were tightly shut.

The walls were manned.

Figures stood shoulder to shoulder atop the ramparts—no fewer than a thousand defenders at a glance.

Stars-A-Plenty's expression stiffened.

"This is troublesome," he muttered. "The terrain here is terrible—two ravines squeezing the pass. Just looking at it gives me a headache. If they hadn't defended it, that would've been ideal. But if they're holding firm, this won't be easy."

Sweeping King snorted. "What strength do mere garrison troops have? As long as Hong Chengchou doesn't show up, it doesn't matter who's inside. We'll smash this rotten pass with one charge and open the Shangluo Road."

Stars-A-Plenty laughed again. "True. Garrison troops are worthless."

Sweeping King nodded. "Still, let's test them first. Send someone to call at the gate. Maybe a few words will scare them into running."

Calling at the gate was an old tactic.

Against weak defenders, a loud challenge could shatter morale without spilling blood.

Sweeping King immediately selected a sharp-tongued subordinate known as Bold King and sent him forward.

Bold King rode his horse slowly up to the gates, lifted his head, and shouted toward the walls:

"Who commands this pass? Our Great Brother has words for you!"

On the wall, Luo Xi glanced nervously at Zheng Gouzi.

Zheng Gouzi smiled. "General Luo, we're here to support you. Naturally, you're the one defending the pass."

Luo Xi froze. "Me? But I... I lack virtue and ability..."

Li Daoxuan laughed softly. "You're the one. Go on."

With his hidden patron speaking, Luo Xi had no way out.

He gritted his teeth, stepped forward, and shouted from the battlements:

"I am the commander of this pass. Speak."

Bold King sneered. "And who are you?"

"Brigadier General—cough—former Brigadier General, Luo Xi!"

The word former made the title sting.

Bold King laughed openly. "So you're a disgraced officer? Lost your post suppressing bandits, did you?"

Luo Xi bristled. "That is none of your concern! Say what you came to say!"

Bold King's gaze flicked across the walls. "So these are your household guards and militia? Hahaha! You think these shrimp soldiers and crab generals can stop us?"

His tone hardened suddenly.

"Do you know who we are? We serve Sweeping King and Stars-A-Plenty, vanguard generals under the Great Chuang Wang! Our lord commands two hundred and fifty thousand troops!"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand!"

"Your tiny Wuguan Pass could be flattened with a flick of his hand!"

Luo Xi's face went pale.

He had known the rebels were numerous—but not this numerous. His voice wavered.

"You... you're lying..."

Behind him, Li Daoxuan chuckled quietly.

"General Luo," he said mildly, "two hundred and fifty thousand is a large number. But only a few thousand can attack this pass at once. What is there to fear?"

Luo Xi blinked.

Then his eyes lit up.

"That's right!"

He leaned forward and shouted back, confidence surging.

"What good are numbers? Only a few thousand can fight here at a time. Why should I fear you?"

Bold King looked genuinely surprised.

"Oh? Some backbone after all. But are your militias as brave as you?"

He suddenly raised his voice, letting it echo along the walls.

"Listen up! Are you really willing to die for these landlords and gentry? Are you fed? Are you clothed?"

"Come join the Dashing General! Leave the darkness and embrace the light! Glory, wealth, full bellies—it's not too late!"

The words rolled across the ramparts.

The challenge had been cast.

And the real test of Wuguan Pass was about to begin.

Chapter 768 Why Are You Wavering?

At Bold King's deafening shout, Luo Xi instantly flew into a rage.

"You wretched scoundrel!" he roared. "How dare you sow discord among my troops? Guards! Loose arrows! Shoot him dead!"

His personal retainers reacted at once, drawing their heavy bows and setting arrows to the string.

Before they could fire, a relaxed chuckle sounded behind them.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot," Li Daoxuan said lazily. "Let him shout. Isn't it more fun to watch a clown perform?"

Luo Xi froze mid-command.

"Huh?" he said anxiously. "But if he keeps shouting like this, I'm afraid the men might—"

"It's fine," Li Daoxuan replied calmly. "Just enjoy the show."

With no one stopping him, Bold King continued his impassioned tirade.

"Brothers!" he shouted toward the walls. "Think carefully! How have those landlords and wealthy gentry treated you?"

"You toil in the fields, and half your harvest is taken as rent! They feast on meat and wine while you gnaw on bark and grass roots!"

"They even snatch your daughters away to serve as maidservants! Can you endure such humiliation?"

"Our Chuǎng Wang has come to save you! Join us, kill those landlords and rich scum, wipe them out completely, and take this world for ourselves!"

"The Chuǎng Wang commands two hundred and fifty thousand troops! You cannot stop us!"

"Instead of throwing your lives away for landlords and gentry—like a mantis trying to block a chariot—why not join us while you still can?"

Bold King finished his speech with a smug expression.

He waited.

He expected to see hesitation. Fear. Confusion. Maybe even men throwing down their weapons or scrambling to flee.

But what he saw made his confidence waver.

One militia soldier on the wall wasn't furious.

He wasn't tempted.

He looked... amused.

His expression was a strange mix of interest and entertainment, as if he were watching a street performance.

This was wrong.

After such a speech, ordinary people should not be making such faces.

Bold King felt a flicker of unease.

Just then, a quick-witted militiaman spoke up loudly:

"Landlords and wealthy gentry? Who exactly are you talking about?"

"Do you mean our Master Li?"

Bold King had no idea who "Master Li" was. But judging by the tone, he assumed this Master Li must be a major landlord, and that these men were his tenants.

So he rolled with it.

"Yes!" Bold King declared confidently. "People like your Master Li! None of them are good! They do nothing but oppress the poor! Think carefully—what have such people ever done for you?"

The militiamen fell silent.

They began to think.

They remembered what Dao Xuan Tianzun had done for them.

Rice—distributed freely, in great quantities.

White flour—handed out without stinginess.

Hot Pot Festivals—entire villages eating together.

Crispy rice crackers—special treats no one had tasted before.

The miraculous "Happy Fat Water."

Opera troupes invited to perform for everyone.

Cotton issued for padded winter clothes.

Houses allocated so no one slept exposed to wind and snow.

The memories piled up.

Too many.

Too sweet.

One man suddenly broke into song.

"Sweet—so sweet—your smile is sweet—

Like blossoms in the spring breeze..."

It was a tune that often played during Gao Family Village News broadcasts, said to be sung by a goddess named Deng. Everyone loved it.

As soon as he began, others joined in.

"Blooming in the spring breeze—ah—

As if in a dream..."

Two thousand men singing together on the city walls.

The scene was absurd.

The atmosphere turned bizarrely eerie.

Bold King's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"!!!"

Not only Bold King—even Luo Xi was stunned.

"What's happening?" he muttered. "Why are they singing?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly. "Because they're happy."

"How can unhappy people feel like singing?"

Luo Xi had no words.

Bold King listened for a moment longer, and finally realized—

They weren't wavering.

They were mocking him.

His face flushed red with rage.

"I'm trying to save you!" he screamed. "And you dare mock me?"

"Do you really enjoy being lackeys to landlords and wealthy gentry?"

"Only by looting them clean is there a future!"

A militiaman who had attended Gao Family Village School for only a few days raised his hand and spoke seriously:

"So... everyone stops farming and just loots, right?"

"And after all the rich are looted clean—who do we loot then?"

"When there's no one left to loot, what will we eat?"

Bold King froze.

"Eh?"

The walls exploded with laughter.

"Hahahahaha!"

With that level of thinking, he wanted to incite them?

Within the Gao Family Village Militia, even the lowest foot soldier had attended many rounds of political education classes. They all understood simple, fundamental truths.

Meanwhile, Bold King—an illiterate bandit—understood none of it.

Someone who understood nothing trying to sway those who understood at least something—

It was a complete farce.

Defeated, Bold King turned his horse and slunk back.

He approached Sweeping King and said weakly, "Boss... those people are incredibly stubborn. I couldn't get them to open the gates."

"And... they asked me a strange question. But the more I think about it, the more it kind of makes sense."

Sweeping King frowned. "What question?"

Bold King hesitated. "If we keep looting the rich... what happens after all the rich are looted clean? What will we eat then?"

Sweeping King exploded.

"I sent you to shake their morale!" he roared. "How did you end up wavering instead?"

"Are you an idiot?!"

Bold King whimpered, "But that question really is—"

"Nonsense!" Sweeping King kicked him aside. "Get lost!"

Then he raised his voice and bellowed:

"Attack the pass!"

Sweeping King and Stars-A-Plenty each commanded their divisions forward.

The terrain before Wuguan Pass was extremely narrow, squeezed between two mountains. Though they had tens of thousands of men, they could not deploy properly.

Only two large square formations could be arranged at the front, advancing slowly in dense ranks.

Against the Gao Family Village Militia, the difficulty of defending such terrain required no explanation.

This time, even Luo Xi felt no fear at all.

In northern Shaanxi, he had personally witnessed how the militia shattered Mongol cavalry.

If even Mongol horsemen couldn't break through—

How could these sluggish infantry succeed?

Luo Xi stood atop the wall, hands on his hips, laughing loudly.

"You bandits! Today you'll learn what true strength is!"

As if in response, the rhythmic bang, bang, bang of musket fire rang out.

The rebel soldiers at the front collapsed instantly.

The narrow terrain forced them to bunch together. Even careless shots could not miss.

Hundreds fell in a blink.

Their morale shattered immediately.

The front ranks panicked and began to retreat. Those behind them, unable to see what was happening, only heard gunfire—then saw men rushing backward.

The formation collapsed like rotten wood.

The rebel army recoiled like a retreating tide.

Sweeping King and Stars-A-Plenty were stunned.

They had never imagined that tens of thousands of men would be driven back by a few thousand militia—at the very first clash.

Where was the logic in this?!

"Don't run!"

"Turn back and attack!"

"Damn it!"

They shouted themselves hoarse, but nothing worked.

Tens of thousands of rebel soldiers fled down Shangluo Road in chaos.

And Wuguan Pass remained unbroken.

Chapter 769 This Man, Also Demoted

The newly appointed Governor of Shaanxi, Lian Guoshi, was riding hard.

He led the Xi'an Right Guard, Front Guard, and Rear Guard, along with a hastily assembled group of local militia volunteers. The column stretched long across the road, armor clanking, breath coming heavy.

Lian Guoshi's heart pounded.

Wuguan Pass could not be lost.

If the rebels broke through Wuguan Pass, Shaanxi would once again be opened wide to bandit incursions. Xi'an itself would be threatened. As a newly appointed governor, if this happened under his watch, his official career would be finished before it even began.

As the army reached the northwestern outskirts of Wuxi County, scouts galloped back at full speed.

"Report! The rebels have already reached Wuguan Pass and are attacking!"

Lian Guoshi froze.

"Attacking the pass?" he asked in disbelief. "Wasn't the Wuguan garrison reported to have fled? If they arrived first, why would they attack? They should have simply occupied the pass and used it to block us."

The scout quickly replied, "There is a garrison inside Wuguan Pass! They are not the original garrison troops. They appear to be household guards and militia from an unknown source. They fly no banners, so I could not identify them clearly."

Lian Guoshi frowned deeply.

"Household guards and militia... from nowhere?"

He couldn't make sense of it.

But one thing was clear.

Anyone fighting the rebels was an ally.

"Press forward!" Lian Guoshi ordered. "Move as fast as you can!"

The three Guards and the militia volunteers broke into a run. Soldiers panted heavily, sweat pouring down their backs, legs trembling with exhaustion. Discipline was poor, formations loose, but no one dared slow down.

When they finally drew near Wuguan Pass, a thunderous roar rolled toward them.

The rebels had already begun their assault.

Because the pass itself blocked the view, Lian Guoshi could not see the battlefield, but he could hear it clearly—

Furious shouting.

Charging cries.

War drums pounding like thunder.

The sheer volume drained the color from his face.

How many rebels are there?

Fifty thousand? Sixty thousand?

Then—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sharp crack of arquebuses erupted.

Not once, but in dense succession, as if thousands of shots had been fired in the blink of an eye.

Immediately, the rebels' earth-shaking roars turned into screams.

Panicked cries.

Terrified shrieks.

Chaotic wailing.

Then came another sound—

The unmistakable clang of retreat gongs.

Lian Guoshi's eyes widened.

The rebels... were retreating?

So fast?

Although he was a civil official, Lian Guoshi was not ignorant of warfare. Battles were supposed to be drawn-out affairs—sieges, probing attacks, stalemates lasting from morning until dusk, with both sides disengaging only at night.

But this fight—

From start to finish, it seemed to have lasted only a few breaths.

It was over almost as soon as it began.

Lian Guoshi was completely baffled.

"Move up," he said. "I must see this with my own eyes."

He urged his men forward. Soon, they reached the base of Wuguan Pass.

A subordinate stepped ahead, cupped his hands, and shouted loudly toward the walls:

"Which garrison holds Wuguan Pass? We are the anti-bandit force personally led by His Excellency Lian Guoshi, Governor of Shaanxi! Those atop the walls, state your name at once!"

A head suddenly popped up above the battlements.

"This humble general—cough—is Luo Xi," the man said. "Former commander, Luo Xi. Ah! So it is Your Excellency the Governor. Quickly, open the gate and invite His Excellency inside!"

The gates creaked open.

Luo Xi personally came down to greet him.

Lian Guoshi glanced at him and asked curiously, "Former?"

Luo Xi looked embarrassed. "Yes... this humble general has already been dismissed from office."

Lian Guoshi paused.

He remembered now.

This Luo Xi had indeed been dismissed along with the former Shaanxi Governor, Wang Shunxing. Their crime had been the same: spreading outrageous claims and misleading the Emperor.

What had Luo Xi said back then?

Ah—he had claimed that a thousand arquebusiers fired four volleys within ten breaths and repelled Mongol cavalry.

Because of that, he had lost his post.

Lian Guoshi felt a stir of sympathy and sighed.

"So it was General Luo who defended Wuguan Pass," he said slowly. "Although you have been dismissed, you still serve the court loyally. I am very pleased."

"Just now, though I did not see it myself, I heard the battle. It seemed..."

Luo Xi gave a wry smile.

"Just now, the rebel leaders—Stars-A-Plenty and Sweeping King—led fifty thousand men to attack Wuguan Pass."

"This humble general led my household guards... cough..."

He had originally planned to mention the borrowed guards from Shi Jian, but thought better of it. Shi Jian was still within the system and would not want unnecessary attention.

So Luo Xi continued smoothly.

"My household guards used their arquebuses. Two volleys in five breaths. The rebels collapsed and fled."

Lian Guoshi's first reaction was instinctive skepticism.

Two volleys in five breaths?

No wonder he was dismissed...

But then—

He stopped.

Wait.

That battle just now... it really did sound like that.

The first burst of gunfire, then only a brief pause—just a few breaths—followed by another burst, and then the rebels' retreat.

And now, looking at Luo Xi's face—

This man did not seem to be lying.

A strange, absurd feeling crept into Lian Guoshi's chest.

Wang Shunxing had been dismissed for reporting on great iron vehicles.

Yet Lian Guoshi himself had personally seen those iron vehicles. Wang Shunxing had not lied.

And Luo Xi had been dismissed for reporting rapid volleys.

Yet Lian Guoshi had just heard it with his own ears.

So their dismissals...

He didn't finish the thought.

Instead, he walked toward the eastern wall and looked out.

The battlefield lay open before him.

The corpses of rebel soldiers were scattered across the ground. The battle had ended only moments ago, and the field had not yet been cleared.

Across the open terrain, nearly a thousand bodies lay sprawled.

Some were motionless.

Others groaned faintly, writhing or crawling.

This was not something that could be fabricated.

Lian Guoshi stood there, speechless.

Just then, the eastern gate opened again.

Flat Rabbit led a group of militia soldiers out to clear the battlefield.

As he walked, he lectured the new recruits behind him loudly:

"Listen carefully! When clearing the battlefield, the most dangerous thing is bandits pretending to be dead. If you let your guard down, one of them might suddenly jump up and stab you—so whatever you do, don't—"

Before he could finish—

A blood-soaked "corpse" in front of him suddenly sprang up.

"I'll fight you to the death!"

The man swung his blade wildly.

Flat Rabbit swayed aside in one smooth motion, drew his ancestral treasured sword, and roared:

"Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord Sword!"

Thud.

The blade plunged straight into the man's chest.

Flat Rabbit pulled the sword free, struck a dramatic finishing pose, wiped the blood from the blade on his clothes, and slid it back into its sheath.

The new recruits stared in awe.

"Wow! Rabbit Lord is amazing!"

"What was that move? So powerful!"

"My admiration for Rabbit Lord is like a surging river, endless and unbroken!"

Flat Rabbit laughed proudly.

"Hahahaha! See that? That's what experience looks like! You rookies should watch closely and learn!"

Nearby, Zheng Gouzi shook his head with a smile.

This fellow can only fool the newcomers, he thought. Every veteran in Gao Family Village knows that his so-called 'ultimate move' is just a randomly named slash.

A blind cat catching a dead mouse.

Wuguan Pass stood firm.

And yet another man, wrongly dismissed, had once again proven his worth.

Chapter 770 Afraid of What?

Lian Guoshi, Luo Xi, Zheng Gouzi, and Flat Rabbit sat together around the table.

Mass-produced Model Three also entered the conference room, but unlike the others, he deliberately chose a seat in the corner. He neither approached the main table nor joined the discussion, keeping his presence deliberately understated.

Lian Guoshi spoke first.

"General Luo," he said, his tone formal, "I thank you for holding Wuguan Pass. The rebel army has already withdrawn. Based on the latest reports, they are retreating toward Shangnan County."

He paused briefly before continuing.

"Shangnan County still falls under Shaanxi's jurisdiction. As governor, it is my responsibility to pursue them."

The moment those words settled, an awkward silence spread through the room.

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly.

He had brought his forces to Wuguan Pass for one clear purpose—to block the rebels from entering Shaanxi. Yet reality had not unfolded as he had hoped. By the time news of the rebel movement reached him, Shangnan County had already fallen. He had arrived just in time to secure Wuguan Pass itself, nothing more.

From a strategic standpoint, this could hardly be called a success.

Li Daoxuan let out a quiet sigh.

Only now did he truly understand why the ancients had gone to such lengths to construct the Great Wall. Against an enemy that moved like flowing water—appearing, vanishing, detouring, converging—defense without a continuous barrier was an exhausting and thankless task. Without sealing every gap, there would always be another breach.

Lian Guoshi continued without hesitation.

"I do not intend to delay. The battlefield here has already been settled. I plan to depart for Shangnan County immediately. However, my available forces are few, and the remaining garrison troops are unreliable."

He turned his gaze directly toward Luo Xi.

"Therefore, I must request General Luo's assistance. I ask that you bring your personal retainers and militia volunteers to accompany us."

Luo Xi instinctively glanced at Li Daoxuan.

By now, he understood very clearly that although Zheng Gouzi and the others bore ranks and titles, all real decisions flowed through Li Daoxuan. If Li Daoxuan disapproved, this request would go nowhere.

Li Daoxuan gave a slight nod.

Only then did Luo Xi turn back to Lian Guoshi.

"This subordinate—cough—I mean, I have no objections," he said quickly.

With the matter settled, no one lingered.

A small detachment of local volunteers was left behind to hold Wuguan Pass. The main force immediately assembled and marched out along the Shangluo Road, advancing southeast—

Toward Shangnan County.

By the time they arrived, Shangnan County town had already become a ruin.

Like so many county seats trampled by the rebel tide, its city walls lay broken. Streets were littered with debris and corpses. The common people had suffered grievous losses—those who survived were either dragged away by the rebels or fled into the surrounding mountains.

Sweeping King and Full Sky Star, having been repulsed at Wuguan Pass, retreated here in disgrace. No sooner had they arrived than Chuǎng Wang's main army caught up from behind.

Two hundred and fifty thousand rebel troops converged once again.

The county town itself could not possibly contain such numbers. Camps sprawled outward in every direction, tents stretching as far as the eye could see, covering the plains like a living sea.

Sweeping King and Full Sky Star entered the main command tent, both wearing expressions heavy with defeat.

"Brother Chuǎng Wang," Sweeping King reported, bowing slightly, "we have suffered a setback. Wuguan Pass blocked our advance."

Chuǎng Wang looked startled.

"A mere Wuguan Pass," he said slowly, "stopped you?"

Sweeping King hesitated before replying.

"The defenders used some kind of unfamiliar firearm. Their rate of fire was... abnormal. We couldn't push through."

Before he could say more, the Dashing General—who had been standing behind Chuǎng Wang—stepped forward sharply.

"Explain clearly," he ordered.

Full Sky Star immediately recounted the Battle of Wuguan Pass.

In truth, the engagement itself had been brief, beginning suddenly and ending just as quickly. There was little concrete detail to give. Left with no choice, Full Sky Star focused on exaggerating the enemy's firearms—how fast they fired, how dense the volleys were, how impossible it was to advance under such pressure.

The Dashing General's expression darkened as he listened.

"Those strange firearm troops again..." he muttered.

He turned toward Chuǎng Wang and clasped his hands.

"Brother Chuǎng Wang, please listen to me."

Chuǎng Wang grunted.

"Speak."

The Dashing General began calmly.

"These firearm soldiers with unusually rapid firing and tight formations are not new to us. We have encountered them repeatedly—northwestern Shanxi's Pingyang Prefecture, the Dragon Gate Bridge, the Hejin river crossing, Wenshui County, Luoyang City..."

"One battle after another."

Chuǎng Wang frowned.

"Now that you mention it... you're right."

The Dashing General unfolded a map and pointed to each location where the firearm troops had appeared. Then, with his finger, he drew an arc connecting them—stretching from northwestern Shanxi all the way down to Wuguan Pass.

The arc formed a rough circle.

"Look closely," he said.

Several rebel leaders leaned in, eyes widening as they followed the line.

The Dashing General placed his finger squarely at the center of the circle.

Xi'an.

"These firearm soldiers," he explained, "operate with this city as their core. Their range is limited. They do not stray far."

"This may be due to supply constraints," he continued, "or perhaps their manpower is insufficient to expand further. Whatever the reason, the pattern is clear."

Chuǎng Wang murmured, "I see..."

The Dashing General pressed on.

"If we wish to avoid further clashes with these troops, then we must put distance between ourselves and this region. My recommendation is simple."

"Abandon the advance into Shaanxi. Turn south instead."

Sweeping King sneered.

"And make ourselves look like cowards?"

The Dashing General shot him a cold glance.

"If you want to act brave, go ahead," he said bluntly. "I have no interest in dying for appearances."

Sweeping King muttered under his breath.

"I don't either."

Chuǎng Wang fell silent.

His greatest flaw had always been his inability to decide. Faced with a choice like this—advance or withdraw—he hesitated, trapped between pride and fear.

At that moment, a sharp, mocking voice cut in from the side.

"Dashing General," it sneered, "aren't you exaggerating the enemy?"

The speaker stepped forward.

"You praise their strength while undermining our own morale. Shaanxi is where this rebellion began. It's your homeland. Now that you command two hundred and fifty thousand men, you're afraid to go home?"

"That's spineless."

"Haven't you heard the saying—to return home rich and famous is like parading in fine clothes at night?"

Everyone turned.

The man was Yi Dou Gu.

A newly risen bandit leader, only recently absorbed into the main rebel force in Henan.

Henan had been devastated by flood and drought for years, becoming a living hell. Starvation drove countless refugees into rebellion. Yi Dou Gu, along with his sworn brother Wa Guanzi, rose amid that chaos, gathering tens of thousands of followers.

When the Shaanxi and Shanxi rebels entered Henan, the merger was inevitable.

Though newcomers, Yi Dou Gu's local roots gave him an advantage. He knew Henan's terrain and people intimately. Refugees followed him willingly, swelling his ranks to forty or fifty thousand.

Because of this, he held little respect for veteran figures like the Dashing General.

More importantly—

Yi Dou Gu had never fought Gao Family Village's firearm troops.

Ignorance bred fearlessness.

"You may fear these so-called firearm soldiers," Yi Dou Gu declared loudly, "but I, Yi Dou Gu, do not."

"Leave them to me. I'll deal with them myself."

The Dashing General frowned.

"Don't be reckless."

Yi Dou Gu scoffed.

"We'll see who dies first."

Before the tension could escalate further, a scout burst into the tent, breathless.

"Reporting!" he shouted. "Governor Lian Guoshi of Shaanxi is leading those strange firearm troops straight toward Shangnan County! What are our orders?"

The Dashing General answered instantly.

"Brother Chuǎng Wang, we must withdraw south into Yunxi County. Once we do, the Shaanxi forces will be unable to pursue."

Yi Dou Gu laughed harshly.

"Afraid of what?"

"I'm staying right here. I'm not moving an inch."

"We'll slaughter every one of those gutless Shaanxi soldiers—"

"Then we march straight to Xi'an."