

Great Ming 771

Chapter 771 This Is Mechanical Art

Lian Guoshi nominally led the main force as it pressed forward.

Scouts rode back one after another with reports. Shangnan County lay just ahead.

"The rebel scouts have already discovered us," one scout reported. "A portion of their forces has retreated south, likely toward Yunxi County. However, tens of thousands remain inside Shangnan County, apparently preparing to engage us."

Upon hearing this, Lian Guoshi couldn't help but let out a startled sound.

Li Daoxuan, however, showed no reaction at all.

Everything the scouts described, he had already observed clearly from the reconnaissance hot air balloon. The rebel army had indeed split cleanly into two large contingents—one retreating south, the other remaining behind to hold Shangnan County.

The enemy force was enormous, spreading across the plains like a dark tide.

With only two thousand men from Gao Family Village, it was impossible to annihilate them. Even driving them off would already count as a success. To truly wipe them out would require the White Pole Soldiers from Sichuan, General Zhang Yingchang's Henan troops, and the Yunyang Pacification Commissioner to converge from multiple directions, forming a great encirclement.

For now, the objective was simple—

Reclaim Shangnan County.

The army advanced steadily.

Before long, another scout arrived at a gallop.

"The rebels holding Shangnan County are led by the Henan bandit chiefs Yi Dou Gu and Wa Guanzi. Their numbers are estimated at... fifty thousand."

This figure genuinely stunned Lian Guoshi.

His own forces consisted of the Xi'an Right, Front, and Rear Three Guards—each with only five hundred men. Even after adding local militia and volunteer civilians, the total barely reached three thousand.

Including Luo Xi's two thousand household guards and militia, their entire force amounted to only about five thousand.

No matter how it was calculated, five thousand against fifty thousand was an absurd disparity.

The unease was not limited to Lian Guoshi alone. The garrison soldiers of the Three Guards and the local militia also showed obvious hesitation as they marched.

At last, a commander from the Xi'an Right Guard stepped forward and bowed.

"Governor," he said respectfully, "our forces are insufficient. We should not force an assault on Shangnan County. It would be better to monitor the rebels and wait for other armies to arrive before engaging."

Lian Guoshi hesitated.

"Uh..."

At this moment, Flat Rabbit stepped out from the side.

"It's useless," he said bluntly. "When other government forces arrive, they'll only stand around in their own provinces and look toward Shaanxi. They won't cross the border to suppress bandits."

Lian Guoshi froze.

"Ah!"

He knew it was true.

Once rebels entered Shaanxi, dealing with them became the Shaanxi Governor's responsibility alone. Expecting other provinces to send troops was nothing more than wishful thinking.

Still, Lian Guoshi felt deeply uneasy.

He simply didn't believe this battle could be won.

Flat Rabbit waved his hand dismissively.

"You just stay back and watch," he said. "This battle—we'll fight it. Heh heh. Wherever this Rabbit Lord's sword points—"

"Hey!" Lian Guoshi interrupted sharply. Hearing this dramatic nonsense, he immediately judged this man unreliable. "Wait. Who exactly are you? What are you saying? Isn't anyone going to restrain him? Whose subordinate is this? Whose?"

Luo Xi broke out in a cold sweat and stepped forward awkwardly.

"This person... is with my contingent."

Lian Guoshi stared at him.

"Where did you find such a character? Couldn't you have—"

Before he could finish, Flat Rabbit had already strode forward toward Shangnan County. Behind him, two thousand riflemen advanced in silence, their formation tight and disciplined.

Lian Guoshi pointed after them, stunned.

"What's going on? What are these people doing?"

Still sweating, Luo Xi spoke quickly.

"That! I—this subordinate—must also... go and assist them."

Lian Guoshi looked at him incredulously.

"General Luo, I've never known you to be so fearless."

Luo Xi's face darkened.

"Is my reputation really that bad?" he said bitterly. "You've misunderstood. My family has produced generals for generations—we're not cowards!"

He clenched his teeth.

"It's just that in past battles, my subordinates always ran first, and I had no way to stop them."

Then his expression changed.

"But this time," he said firmly, "my subordinates are exceptionally reliable. This subordinate dares to fight."

Lian Guoshi stared.

"!!!"

Luo Xi hurried forward.

"Brother Zheng! Brother Rabbit! Wait for me! I still have one hundred and fifty household guards—they can be useful!"

By this point, Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi had already begun surveying Shangnan County.

Like all county towns previously taken by the rebels, its city walls had been torn down. Only heaps of broken bricks and rubble remained. Where walls once stood, crude stacks of stones had been piled up in their place.

Zheng Gouzi observed calmly.

"The lack of city walls helps us greatly."

Flat Rabbit chuckled.

"Heh, but they're hiding among the ruins. That makes it harder for our riflemen to fight effectively. We'll still need to draw them out."

Zheng Gouzi frowned.

"They're defending the town. Why would they come out?"

"Uh—"

Flat Rabbit paused, then slapped his thigh.

"You're right! They don't need to come out. Oh! I remember—last time, when you attacked Wangjia Fork fortress, didn't you blast them out with artillery?"

Zheng Gouzi shook his head.

"The cannons aren't here this time."

Flat Rabbit thought for a moment.

"Then we'll just use hand grenades to force our way in."

Zheng Gouzi said seriously, "Hand grenades don't have much range. Our men would be exposed to arrows while throwing them. There will be casualties."

"Casualties should be avoided."

A calm voice spoke from behind them.

"I'll handle it."

Tianzun Unit Three stepped forward.

"This is a good opportunity to test whether the Type Three unit can be deployed normally."

Seeing that Li Daoxuan intended to act personally, Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi were immediately delighted. They stepped aside respectfully, unconsciously forming positions to either side of him.

Just like that, Li Daoxuan found himself walking at the very front.

Luo Xi followed closely behind. Although he had no idea what was about to happen, he knew one thing very clearly—

Li Daoxuan was the highest authority present.

So he followed without hesitation.

The four of them advanced together, like a legendary quartet, radiating an indescribable sense of dominance.

Behind them marched over two thousand subordinates, their presence only amplifying the weight of the scene.

By now, Lian Guoshi and his entourage could no longer see Li Daoxuan himself. From where they stood, all they could see was the advancing wall of riflemen, completely obscuring whatever was happening at the very front.

Li Daoxuan stopped when he was several hundred meters from Shangnan County.

Then—

He placed his right hand over his left wrist.

Applied force.

Pulled.

In the next instant, his left hand came off.

Luo Xi, standing nearby, let out a terrified gasp.

But there was no blood.

No torn flesh.

Where the wrist should have been, there was only a dark, hollow opening.

Luo Xi's mind went completely blank.

"???"

Li Daoxuan casually tossed the detached hand to a nearby soldier.

"Hold this for me."

The soldier accepted it respectfully and stepped back, his expression utterly calm.

It was as if Luo Xi alone was living in a different world—one where this scene was horrifying—while everyone else found it entirely normal.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly at Luo Xi.

"I lost my left hand due to an injury when I was young," he said casually. "This is a prosthetic I later attached. Perfectly reasonable, wouldn't you say?"

Luo Xi stammered.

"A... a prosthetic? But I saw you just a few days ago—your hand moved perfectly! That was fake?"

Li Daoxuan replied evenly.

"This is mechanical art."

"An invention of our ancient ancestor Mozi."

"Understand?"

Chapter 772 Not Fun At All

Luo Xi: "???"

Mozi invented this too?

I don't understand it at all.

I must be uncultured. Ignorant. Illiterate in Mozi's ultimate mechanical arts.

Before he could sink any deeper into self-contempt, Li Daoxuan calmly grabbed his left arm with his right hand—

—and yanked.

Whoosh.

The "skin" of the entire arm peeled away like a sleeve.

Luo Xi: "AAAAHHH—!"

The shock nearly paralyzed him on the spot. His scalp tingled, his knees went weak, his soul very nearly left his body.

But then he looked again.

Beneath the torn outer layer, there was no flesh.

No bone.

What stared back at him was a dark, ominous iron cannon barrel.

Luo Xi: "...Huh?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled lightly, as if explaining something trivial.

"After my left arm fell off, I installed a cannon," he said. "Then I attached a hand to the front of it. Makes daily life easier."

Cold sweat instantly soaked Luo Xi's robes.

"But—even with Mozi's mechanical arts," he blurted out, "that hand shouldn't be able to move! The arm is hollow! There's no mechanism inside at all!"

Li Daoxuan lifted his chin.

"Cannonball, come."

At once, a soldier stepped forward, holding a small cannonball with both hands, as respectfully as if presenting an offering to the Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

Li Daoxuan's arm-cannon wasn't as thick as a proper breech-loading cannon—only about the width of a forearm. To keep it from bursting, the barrel walls were exceptionally thick, leaving a narrow inner bore.

Naturally, it couldn't fire standard Red Barbarian cannonballs. These were custom-made, smaller rounds prepared specifically for this device.

He poured in the gunpowder, loaded the cannonball, and—still smiling—walked forward toward the city.

Luo Xi stood there, completely stupefied.

He wasn't the only one.

Inside the city, Yi Dou Gu and Wa Guanzi were equally dumbfounded.

They had already seen the government troops arrive and were discussing tactics. Since they held the defensive position, they hadn't rushed to send their main force out. Instead, they waited inside the city, curious to see what tricks the government army would attempt.

Then—

They saw Li Daoxuan, walking alone toward the front.

From afar, his left arm looked useless—just a dark, crude iron pipe where a hand should be.

They couldn't understand this strange, underworld-style design.

And then—

Li Daoxuan stopped several hundred paces from the city, raised his left arm, leveled it straight at the shattered wall.

With his right hand, he produced a fire starter.

Tsss.

Sparks flew. The fuse caught.

Yi Dou Gu: "What?!"

Wa Guanzi: "What in the hell is that?!"

BOOM!

A thunderous roar ripped across the battlefield.

A violent explosion.

Savage recoil.

Li Daoxuan himself was blasted backward, skidding across the ground.

At the same instant, a small, dark sphere screamed through the air toward the county town.

Thud.

It smashed into what used to be the city wall—now nothing more than broken rubble.

Inside the city, fifty thousand rebel soldiers were packed together shoulder to shoulder. Missing was impossible.

The cannonball struck one man square in the forehead.

Squelch.

His skull burst apart.

Red and white matter sprayed across the ground.

Yi Dou Gu: "Holy shit!"

Wa Guanzi: "Holy shit!"

The rebels: "HOLY SHIT!"

Luo Xi: "HOLY SHIT!"

After shouting, Luo Xi suddenly froze.

The Gao Family Village Militia...

Looked utterly calm.

Not a trace of surprise.

Cold sweat poured down his spine.

"Damn it," he cursed inwardly. "Why am I reacting the same way as the rebels? I'm clearly standing on the wrong side!"

He snapped back to his senses and shouted,

"Quick! Go check on Squire Li! He just blasted himself backward—he must be seriously injured!"

Before the sentence even finished—

Li Daoxuan stood up.

Alive.

Unhurt.

Only slightly... blackened.

Gunpowder smoke rolled around him. His clothes and face were smeared with soot.

Li Daoxuan spat to the side.

"Pah. Not fun at all."

Zheng Gouzi frowned deeply.

"Tianzun, there's clearly a flaw in this thing's design."

Flat Rabbit nodded with a serious expression.

"Indeed. We should have the Gao Family Village technicians improve it immediately."

Li Daoxuan sighed.

"It can't be improved. With current technology, there's no way to neutralize recoil like this."

He shook his head in disappointment.

"Ugh. Not fun. I don't want to play with it myself anymore."

He reached up, grabbed the cannon barrel attached to his left arm—

Clink.

Detached it cleanly.

Then tossed it onto the ground.

A squad of Gao Family Village militia immediately rushed forward, stacking stones to mount the barrel, cleaning the breech, and loading ammunition with smooth, practiced movements.

They'd clearly trained for this.

Zheng Gouzi blinked.

"Oh? We even have artillerymen?"

The group burst into laughter.

"Our artillery battalion was practically rusting away! When Tianzun told us to follow him this time, how could we not come?"

Everyone: "..."

Then Li Daoxuan casually extended his right arm.

"Here. Take this one too."

The artillerymen hurried forward, first bowing deeply and apologizing for the offense, then—without hesitation—detached Li Daoxuan's right arm and mounted it beside the first cannon.

Two small cannons now sat side by side.

Perfectly aligned.

Luo Xi: "AAAAHHH! So your right hand was fake too?! Then how were you making such nimble gestures earlier?!"

Li Daoxuan waved dismissively.

"That's not important. Don't worry about it."

But how could anyone not worry about something like that?

Luo Xi wasn't alone.

Inside the city, Yi Dou Gu and Wa Guanzi were practically losing their minds.

"Both arms are cannons?!"

"Is this man insane?!"

"How could something that heavy be attached to his body all this time?!"

Before they could finish venting—

BOOM!

BOOM!

Two more cannon shots thundered.

Two iron spheres flew over the battlefield.

Thud!

One rebel was struck squarely in the torso and collapsed instantly, dead before he hit the ground.

Another was "luckier," only hit in the calf.

Crack.

Bone shattered. The impact sent blood spraying from all seven orifices as he collapsed screaming.

The rebels howled in rage—but the enemy was far beyond bow range. Only cannons could reach that distance.

Yi Dou Gu slammed his fist.

"This is preposterous!"

Wa Guanzi spat.

"Why are we even defending this place? They only have two thousand men! This city doesn't even have proper walls anymore—defend it or not, what's the difference?! Charge!"

Yi Dou Gu gritted his teeth.

"...You're right. Charge!"

At their command, the Henan rebels surged out of the city, roaring like a tidal wave.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"These Henan rebels are still green," he said calmly.

"They've only just joined the uprising. Their combat strength is about the same as early Chongzhen-era troops."

He raised his hand.

"Disorganized rabble."

Then—

"Crush them."

The militia burst into laughter.

Swish, swish, swish.

Flintlock rifles rose in perfect unison.

"The fools are charging!"

"Prepare volley fire!"

"Then free fire!"

"Fire!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The battlefield exploded into rhythmic thunder.

Chapter 773 No Need for Honors

The crack of flintlocks shattered the rebel lines in an instant.

These Henan rebels had joined the main rebel army less than a year ago. Green as spring grass, their combat ability was pitiful, their morale even worse. If not for veterans like the Rebel King and the Dashing General holding things together, they would still be scattering at the mere sight of imperial banners.

Back in the early Chongzhen years, a few hundred imperial soldiers had dared to chase tens of thousands of rebels across the plains.

That same truth applied here.

Yi Dou Gu and Wa Guanzi barely heard a few sharp bang, bang, bang ahead before the rebel formation completely collapsed.

"Run—!"

"They're firing—!"

"We can't hold—!"

Panic exploded through the ranks.

The front line crashed into the rear. The rear shoved the sides. Fear spread like falling tiles. In the blink of an eye, every rebel soldier went from charging to fleeing.

Yi Dou Gu hadn't even finished cursing "Damn it!" when the rout slammed into him, forcing him to retreat as well—otherwise, he'd be trampled by his own men.

Wa Guanzi relied on his nimble footwork, sprinting like a rabbit while shouting curses over his shoulder.

"Damn it all! So flintlocks really are this terrifying?!"

Yi Dou Gu kept pace beside him, panting hard.

"Bloody hell... I never imagined they'd be this effective. No wonder the Dashing General heard flintlock troops were coming and immediately bolted south. And here we were—idiots—staying behind to be targets."

The two men fled south as if flying, dragging a massive tide of Henan rebels along with them.

Li Daoxuan switched his co-sensing to the reconnaissance hot-air balloon.

From above, he saw a dense black tide surging southward—routed troops scattering like ants after their nest had been smashed.

Not every one of them was a hardened bandit.

Many were ordinary Henan commoners—farmers driven to desperation by floods and droughts, forced into rebellion just to survive.

Their will to fight was low. During the charge, many had hidden at the back. They hadn't taken much flintlock fire. Now, fleeing, they couldn't run very fast either—unlike the "main rebel forces," they hadn't been eating well. They simply didn't have the stamina.

Li Daoxuan switched his co-sensing back to the ground and gave a calm order:

"Pursue them. Capture all slow-running rebels alive. Do not let them rejoin the main rebel forces."

Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi immediately understood.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun wanted more labor reform prisoners.

Excellent.

Gao Family Village never had too many labor reformees—only not enough.

"Chase them!" Zheng Gouzi roared with laughter.

"Time to round up some able-bodied men!"

Flat Rabbit frowned.

"Hey, Gouzi. The way you say that makes us sound like villains."

Zheng Gouzi blinked.

"Then how should I say it?"

Flat Rabbit scratched his head, struggling.

"Capture... uh... damn it, I'm not good with words."

He waved his hand decisively.

"Brothers, move out! Let's free them from their sea of suffering!"

Two thousand Gao Family Village militia surged forward in pursuit.

Seeing this, Luo Xi had no choice but to follow, leading his one hundred and fifty personal guards as well, shouting encouragement as they ran.

Their pursuit sent the Henan rebels into a fresh wave of panic.

Those lagging behind screamed in terror. They had just witnessed, with their own eyes, how these strange flintlock soldiers could drop rebel troops like wheat with a single volley.

Terrifying.

And now those terrifying people were chasing them.

What choice did they have?

An old woman, exhausted, stumbled and fell.

Her son immediately turned back to help her. But fleeing with an elder slowed them down even more. As the pursuers drew closer, the son raised a woodcutting knife behind his mother and roared:

"You sons of bitches! I'll fight you to the death!"

In a flash, Flat Rabbit leapt in front of him.

The son slashed wildly, but his movements were clumsy, his strength sapped by hunger. Flat Rabbit kicked his wrist cleanly.

Clang!

The knife flew from his hand.

Believing death was certain, the son turned and hugged his old mother tightly. Both buried their heads, trembling, waiting for the end.

Then—

"Hands on your heads. Squat by the roadside. Don't move."

Flat Rabbit's voice was calm.

"We won't kill you."

"...Huh?"

Mother and son looked up in disbelief.

Imperial soldiers earned merit by cutting off rebel ears.

He wasn't going to kill them?

He didn't want military honors?

At that moment, the two thousand militia bellowed in unison:

"Rebels ahead! You're running too slow! You're already within flintlock range! We command you to immediately put your hands on your heads, squat by the roadside, and surrender! Otherwise, we'll shoot you in the back!"

The slower rebels were scared out of their wits.

They glanced back—and sure enough, the imperial soldiers were close. At this distance, if the flintlocks fired, everyone would be shot down from behind.

Exhausted and terrified, they obeyed.

Hands on heads.

Squat.

In moments, nearly ten thousand people were crouching by the roadside.

Only a handful of stubborn rebels kept running.

Zheng Gouzi raised his rifle, aimed at a large tree just ahead of one fleeing man—

Bang!

A bullet punched a neat hole through the trunk. Wood chips sprayed.

The man shuddered violently, then dropped, hands on head, squatting without another step.

Soon, every slow-moving rebel had been rounded up.

Yi Dou Gu, Wa Guanzi, and the faster rebels, however, had already fled far south.

Zheng Gouzi stared into the distance and let out a long sigh.

"Too many... far too many. We're only two thousand strong. We can't capture them all, even as prisoners."

Flat Rabbit nodded.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun said the rebel problem isn't a military one—it's a social one. You can't cure it by fighting alone."

He smiled faintly.

"We'll take it slow."

The pursuit ended.

Behind them, Li Daoxuan calmly reassembled his two arms.

After firing several shots, a few components had shaken loose and needed replacement. Once repaired, he reattached everything and reapplied the silicone outer layer.

In the blink of an eye, handsome, refined Squire Li was back.

He stepped forward, surveying the nearly ten thousand Henan rebels squatting across the fields.

Zheng Gouzi lowered his voice.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun... are all these people being sent to Huanglong Mountain Prison?"

"Yes," Li Daoxuan replied.

"That's the plan."

As they spoke, Lian Guoshi hurried over, looking utterly bewildered—and secretly delighted.

He had stayed far behind earlier, too afraid to advance. Seeing Yi Dou Gu and Wa Guanzi routed so quickly had left his mind spinning.

Now that the fighting was over, he rushed forward to heap praise:

"Oh, esteemed generals! Truly formidable! So many rebels, crushed in an instant! They fled like dogs, and you even captured such a vast number alive! A great achievement! A tremendous achievement! I will certainly write to the imperial court and request commendations for you all!"

At those words, Luo Xi nearly jumped out of his skin.

"No—no—please don't petition for honors!" he shouted in panic.

"You'll get us all dismissed!"

Chapter 774 How to Arrange Them?

Lian Guoshi heard Luo Xi's panicked shout and suddenly realized what felt wrong.

"This battle today..." he said slowly, brows knitting together, "even watching from the rear, I couldn't fully understand what happened. If I were to submit a memorial to His Majesty, he would surely think it unbelievable."

He paused, then gave a bitter laugh.

"Wouldn't it just be dismissed as nonsense? Accused of deceiving the Emperor?"

For once, Lian Guoshi found himself at a loss for words.

He quickly changed the subject.

"Leaving that aside—gentlemen, you've captured an enormous number of Henan rebels. What do you intend to do with them?"

"Killing them all would violate heavenly principles. That is absolutely unacceptable."

"But managing so many people... we simply don't have the capacity."

He hesitated.

"Should we send them back to Henan? To Governor Fan Shangzheng? I doubt... I truly doubt Fan Shangzheng could absorb so many surrendered rebels."

Zheng Gouzi turned his head.

"These surrendered rebels—we plan to put them into labor reform."

"...Huh?"

Lian Guoshi froze. "Labor... reform?"

Zheng Gouzi nodded matter-of-factly.

"Building roads and bridges takes manpower."

Lian Guoshi blinked, then slowly nodded.

"Labor reform... that's not a bad idea. But if they're working, they need to eat. Feeding ten thousand mouths is no small matter."

Zheng Gouzi waved it off casually.

"Your Excellency, no need to worry about such a trivial issue. We'll handle it."

Then he reached out and patted Luo Xi heavily on the shoulder.

"Commander Luo here is the richest man in Shanyang County. Most of the fertile land at the foot of Tianzhu Mountain belongs to his family. His assets are... considerable. Feeding this many people shouldn't be a problem for him."

Lian Guoshi turned to look at Luo Xi.

Luo Xi's heart screamed internally:

I could barely afford to feed ten thousand ghosts—where am I supposed to find grain for ten thousand living people?!

But Zheng Gouzi's hand on his shoulder tightened slightly, his gaze carrying a clear, wordless message.

Luo Xi finally understood.

This was a choice.

Not between right and wrong—

but between sides.

After everything he had seen today, Luo Xi instinctively knew which side he needed to stand on.

He immediately laughed, smooth and knowing.

"Your Excellency, leave this matter to me," Luo Xi said confidently.

"Near my residence, on the western slope of Tianzhu Mountain, my family owns a small mine. In recent years, all the miners have fled. There's no one left to work it—it's been abandoned for ages."

His smile grew broader.

"I'll take these vagrant rebels back with me. I'll make sure they're fed just enough not to starve... and then have them dig relentlessly."

Lian Guoshi felt a chill crawl up his spine.

Turning ten thousand surrendered rebels into family draft animals...

How ruthless. Truly ruthless.

Military men were terrifying.

Lian Guoshi knew he would never be able to do such a thing himself. He felt the urge to scold Luo Xi—

—but then reality caught up with him.

He couldn't take responsibility for these people either.

Since Luo Xi was willing to take them off his hands, Lian Guoshi had no grounds to interfere.

He sighed inwardly and let the matter pass.

Just then, Flat Rabbit poked his head out from the side.

"Your Excellency," he asked, "the vagrant rebels all fled south. That direction—that's Yunxi, isn't it?"

Lian Guoshi nodded.

"Yes. That's Yunxi. Beyond that point, it's no longer under my jurisdiction. I can only pursue them this far."

Flat Rabbit pressed on.

"Then who governs that region? Please write a letter immediately and have him dispatch troops. If we converge from both sides, we might trap the vagrant rebels along the border."

Lian Guoshi nodded again.

"That would be Jiang Yunyi, Administrator of Yunyang. I'll send a messenger at once."

At this very moment—

Jiang Yunyi, Administrator of Yunyang, was writing a memorial.

The content was painfully short:

Helpless. Merely petitioning for death.

Ten characters.

Too exhausted to even bother with the formal courtesies between ruler and subject, Jiang Yunyi set down his brush and pushed open the window.

What greeted him were shouts echoing throughout Yunxi City.

"Don't let Jiang Yunyi escape!"

"Seize Jiang Yunyi and kill him!"

"Don't let the corrupt official get away!"

Rebel banners filled the streets.

Vagrant rebels clashed violently with garrison soldiers. The city walls had already fallen—how could the streets be held?

Street fighting collapsed completely.

Yunxi City was on the verge of falling.

Jiang Yunyi let out a long, hollow sigh.

"So even petitioning for death is unnecessary now," he murmured.

"The Emperor won't even get the chance to kill me."

He drew a dagger, lifting it toward his throat—

"Master!"

A group of household guards burst in, snatching the blade away.

"Please don't take your own life! Fleeing is the only option!"

The household guards were far stronger than the garrison troops. Fighting fiercely, they carved a bloody path through the streets, escorting Jiang Yunyi toward the city gates.

Behind them, Yunxi City erupted in flames.

Thick black smoke rolled skyward.

Jiang Yunyi turned back for one last look at the city he governed and wept.

In the sixth year of Chongzhen, the vagrant rebels split into two forces.

One force advanced south, successively taking Yunxi, Shangjin, Fang County, and Baokang—

moving through abandoned and undefended land like a storm.

The second force—eight battalions led by Full Sky Star, Sweeping King, Rampaging Wolf, Yi Dou Gu, Wa Guanzi, and others—attempted to re-enter Shaanxi.

Hong Chengchou issued orders for the Heyang garrison to intercept them.

But before reinforcements arrived, this force was intercepted by Shaanxi Governor Lian Guoshi and former Commander Luo Xi, suffering a heavy defeat.

They turned south instead, successively taking Xunyang, Ziyang, Pingli, and Baihe, pushing toward Sichuan.

Upon entering Sichuan, they were intercepted by the White Pole Soldiers.

In the mountains of Sichuan, no force could rival the White Pole Soldiers.

The vagrant rebels were beaten badly—but their momentum was fierce, and the White Pole forces were few. The two sides became locked in a grueling stalemate.

The rebel advance was halted—

but not destroyed.

Meanwhile—

The ten thousand surrendered rebels remained a pressing problem.

They had to be sent to prison.

But Huanglong Mountain Prison was far away.

Marching to Xi'an, boarding trains, transferring them—this alone would take days. Transporting everyone would require more than ten trips.

Ten thousand prisoners couldn't be left unguarded.

The Gao Family Village Militia would have to escort them the entire time.

The delay would be enormous.

Li Daoxuan frowned.

He couldn't afford that delay.

If the militia withdrew now and took more than ten days to return, the vagrant rebels might very well double back—charging straight toward Wuguan Pass, then the outskirts of Xi'an.

Unacceptable.

Li Daoxuan had seen the records.

In the seventh year of Chongzhen, Chuang Wang would attack Chengcheng County.

Without intervention, Shaanxi would once again be ravaged like wildfire, and next year countless families would be destroyed.

He had to block the rebels here.

No retreat.

Not even one step.

The militia had to hold firm near Shangzhou.

So—

How should these ten thousand people be handled?

Should Lian Guoshi take them?

Li Daoxuan was still thinking when he heard Luo Xi speaking excitedly nearby.

"Brother Zheng," Luo Xi said, grinning, "do you remember what I said last time when I was bluffing the Governor?"

Zheng Gouzi frowned.

"What did you say?"

"Mining!" Luo Xi beamed.

"My family owns a mine—right at the foot of Tianzhu Mountain. Assign some of these able-bodied surrendered rebels to me, and I'll put them to work digging."

Li Daoxuan's eyes narrowed slightly.

He had just heard something... interesting.

Chapter 775 The Wicked Flat Rabbit

Luo Xi's casual words lit a spark in Li Daoxuan's mind.

Tianzhu Mountain.

It wasn't far from here at all.

Better yet, the Luo family held extensive lands there.

After several days of interaction, Li Daoxuan had already formed a fairly clear impression of Luo Xi. The man was sharp, perceptive—and, more importantly, eager to bind himself to their cause. Since that was the case, borrowing the Luo family's territory for a trial expansion seemed like a perfectly reasonable move.

Li Daoxuan stepped forward and joined Luo Xi and Zheng Gouzi.

At this moment, Zheng Gouzi was wearing a troubled expression.

"Brother Luo, this won't do. We can't let you take these people off to mine. They all need to be escorted back to the Labor Reform Camp on Huanglong Mountain."

Luo Xi froze for a split second.

Labor Reform Camp?

He had absolutely no idea what that actually was. But the words alone sounded... ominous. In his imagination, it instantly transformed into some terrifying hellhole where prisoners were whipped day and night until they dropped dead.

Naturally, he didn't dare ask too many questions. Lowering his voice, he said cautiously,

"There are more than ten thousand captives here. Since you have so many anyway, couldn't you spare a few for me? I don't need much—just a hundred would be enough. I can't afford to feed more. Our family mine has been abandoned for years."

"Absolutely not," Zheng Gouzi said firmly.

Just then—

"Actually," Li Daoxuan cut in calmly, "it's not entirely impossible."

The moment he spoke, Zheng Gouzi sucked in a breath and immediately shut his mouth, retreating without another word.

Luo Xi's eyes lit up. He instantly switched expressions, smiling broadly as he turned toward Li Daoxuan—the true decision-maker.

"Patron Li, is that really possible? You're willing to spare some people for me?"

"Of course," Li Daoxuan said with a laugh. "In fact, let's send all ten thousand-plus of them to Tianzhu Mountain."

"...Huh?"

Luo Xi nearly jumped on the spot.

"All of them?! I—I can't feed that many! A hundred is already my limit!"

Li Daoxuan waved his hand dismissively.

"You won't be feeding them. We will."

Luo Xi blinked.

"Then... what exactly are you planning to do?"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"We'll establish a Labor Reform Camp right there on Tianzhu Mountain."

Luo Xi stood rooted to the spot, utterly dumbfounded.

"...What?"

Li Daoxuan's smile deepened, carrying a strange, almost mischievous edge.

"Didn't you say that every three to five years, bandits rise up around Tianzhu Mountain?"

He paused, then said lightly,

"I've decided to walk the bandits' path—so that bandits have nowhere left to walk."

"We'll plant ourselves on Tianzhu Mountain first."

Luo Xi stared at him as though he were looking at a madman.

"Flat Rabbit!" Li Daoxuan called out loudly.

With a swish, Flat Rabbit appeared out of thin air.

"This Rabbit is here!"

Li Daoxuan smiled at him.

"I've decided to establish a new Labor Reform Camp on Tianzhu Mountain, modeled after the successful experience of Huanglong Mountain. This large-scale camp will be entirely under your charge."

Flat Rabbit's fur nearly stood on end.

"W-What?!" he wailed.

"You want me to handle administration again?! Dao Xuan Tianzun, please—please revoke this order! Let this Rabbit charge into battle, slaughter enemies, dispense justice, or hand out porridge to the people! Anything but making me a wicked prison warden!"

Li Daoxuan laughed.

"If Zhong Gaoliang heard you calling prison wardens 'wicked,' do you think he'd mobilize a hundred thousand labor reform prisoners, storm your home, drag you back to Huanglong Mountain, and hold a struggle session?"

Flat Rabbit shuddered violently.

"...I wouldn't dare provoke Zhong Gaoliang."

Li Daoxuan's expression suddenly turned solemn.

"These ten thousand surrendered Henan rebels are, at their core, just impoverished common folk. They're no different from the other labor reform prisoners we've taken in."

He continued slowly,

"Their lives have been nothing but suffering—drought, then floods, then drought again—until they were forced into bandit armies just to survive. Tell me: are people like this not exactly those a true hero should be saving?"

Flat Rabbit froze.

Then his eyes lit up.

"Huh? Oh! Yes! That's right!"

"This Rabbit performs heroic deeds! Saving the common people is exactly what I should be doing!"

"Then go," Li Daoxuan said simply.

"Hahaha!" Flat Rabbit laughed loudly.

"The Rabbit departs!"

The Gao Family Village Militia soon split into two groups. One half remained behind to guard the damaged Shangnan County town. The other half, led by Flat Rabbit, escorted the more than ten thousand surrendered rebels toward Tianzhu Mountain.

Luo Xi, still unable to fully grasp what they were truly planning, nevertheless followed them back to his ancestral lands—uneasy, curious, and more than a little nervous.

The distance from Shangnan County to Tianzhu Mountain was only a little over a hundred li.

They had barely set out when a harsh reality struck them squarely in the face.

Food.

The militia had brought a logistics unit along, but even so, the supplies were only enough to feed two thousand people for one month. This food couldn't all be given to the surrendered rebels—at least ten days' worth had to be reserved for the soldiers themselves.

That left only twenty days' worth of rations to distribute among the ten thousand captives.

They couldn't hand out too much at once, either. The supplies had to last until the next delivery arrived.

Flat Rabbit knew perfectly well that Dao Xuan Tianzun had surely already used some divine method—perhaps spiritual projection or long-distance command—to return to Gao Family Village and arrange more provisions.

But until those arrived, they had no choice but to tighten their belts.

As a result, each surrendered rebel received only a single bowl of thin, watery gruel—so thin that chopsticks wouldn't even stand upright in it.

Cradling their bowls, the rebels exchanged bitter looks.

Captured by government troops... this really is bad news.

This food is even worse than what Yi Dou Gu and Wa Guanzi used to give us.

To eat like this and still be forced into hard labor... the days ahead will be unbearable.

The young rebel who had been captured while protecting his mother quietly pushed his bowl toward her.

"Mother, drink my bowl too."

His elderly mother shook her head desperately and pushed her own bowl back.

"No, my son—you drink mine."

Among the captives, the two enacted a heart-wrenching scene of filial devotion.

Watching from nearby, the other surrendered rebels thought silently:

No... we can't just submit like this. We must find a chance to escape.

Just as these thoughts were taking shape, Flat Rabbit's booming voice rang out:

"Rest assured, everyone! This humble Rabbit has spent over twenty years performing heroic deeds—robbing the rich to help the poor and never harming good people! These hardships are only temporary! Once my logistics arrive, I guarantee you'll be eating fine food and drinking strong liquor!"

The surrendered rebels rolled their eyes in unison.

Not a single person believed him.

It wasn't their fault. Flat Rabbit naturally gave off an air of unreliability. Anyone meeting him for the first time would immediately feel that this fellow was full of hot air.

After pitifully finishing their watery gruel, the captives struggled to their feet and continued the march.

The journey stretched over more than a hundred li, much of it along rugged mountain paths. For Henan natives unused to such terrain, it was pure torment. Yet with a thousand militia soldiers—every one of them armed with flintlock rifles—guarding them closely, no one dared resist.

Day after day, hungry and exhausted, people collapsed along the road.

In their hearts, every surrendered rebel cursed Flat Rabbit—their "wicked government general"—wishing they could beat him to death with their bare hands.

That evening...

At last, they arrived at the foot of Tianzhu Mountain.

Ahead lay the Luo family estate, surrounded by broad stretches of fertile land. On the western slope, a small, abandoned mine shaft gaped silently.

The surrendered rebels felt their hearts sink.

So this is where we'll be worked to death?

Eating less than a rabbit, working harder than an ox...

Just then, Flat Rabbit's laughter rang out joyfully.

"Look! Everyone, look! Our logistics team has arrived!"

"Hahaha! Finally—the logistics team is here!"

The grain transport unit dispatched from Gao Family Village had raced by train to Xi'an, then transferred to horse-drawn carts for the final stretch.

They arrived at the foot of Tianzhu Mountain—at the exact same time as the surrendered rebels.

Chapter 776 What Do Jin Merchants Want With Us?

Flat Rabbit's earlier shouts reached the detained rebels' ears—but instead of inspiring hope, they only sounded ridiculous.

What does the arrival of the logistics team have to do with us?

They're just hauling supplies for the officials and officers.

We'll still be fed thin gruel—just enough to keep us alive, never enough to feel full.

As far as the captives were concerned, nothing would change.

The long convoy of carts slowly rolled up to Flat Rabbit.

The captain of the logistics team dismounted, pulled a document from his sleeve, and handed it over respectfully.

"Lord Rabbit, please inspect the goods and sign for them."

"Oh, inspect?" Flat Rabbit waved his hand impatiently.

"What's there to inspect? We're all brothers here. I trust them—"

Before he could finish, the logistics captain rolled his eyes.

"Lord Rabbit, even trust has its limits. If you sign first and later find two carts of grain missing, you'll be the one compensating for them."

Flat Rabbit froze.

Sweat instantly poured down his face.

Other leaders in Gao Family Village might afford to lose two carts of grain without blinking—but Flat Rabbit was genuinely poor. Painfully so. He was famous for being incorruptible, and also famous for barely owning a roof over his head.

Making him compensate for two carts of grain would be worse than chopping him into spicy rabbit head.

"...Fine."

With a long sigh, Flat Rabbit bent over and personally lifted the tarpaulin on each cart, inspecting them one by one. He checked sack after sack, muttering under his breath.

When it came time to compare the goods to the manifest, his head began to ache.

After all—he wasn't very literate.

Luckily, ever since joining the Gao Family Village Militia, he had been forcibly sent to classes. Thanks to those lessons, he now possessed the bare minimum literacy and arithmetic needed to survive official paperwork.

Squinting hard, he finally finished checking everything.

He picked up a brush, carefully drew a crooked rabbit head on the form, then slapped his palm down beside it.

Done.

The logistics captain stared.

"...Lord Rabbit, don't you even know how to write your own name?"

Flat Rabbit snorted.

"Do you even know my name? If I wrote it properly, who would recognize it? But once this rabbit head is drawn—who in the world wouldn't know it was Lord Rabbit who signed?"

The logistics captain fell silent.

Annoyingly enough... the logic was flawless.

With a helpless sigh, the captain cupped his hands.

"Very well. We'll take our leave. Next time we come, we'll bring Blue Hats skilled in cement production, agriculture, and mining. Please prepare proper accommodations so the technicians won't have to sleep in tents."

"I know, I know!" Flat Rabbit waved him off.

"Stop nagging. Go back and hurry the next shipment!"

The captain didn't know whether to laugh or cry. After saluting, he mounted his horse and departed.

Flat Rabbit turned back toward the mountain of supplies piled behind him.

Grain sacks. Tools. Equipment.

His spirits soared.

Throwing his head back, he burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha! You Henan labor reform prisoners—your suffering ends today!"

He spread his arms grandly.

"From now on, Lord Rabbit has you covered! As long as you study well, work hard, and properly undergo labor reform, I guarantee you'll live like proper human beings!"

The detained rebels didn't even bother reacting.

They had heard this kind of boasting far too many times over the past few days. Their faces were blank, their expressions numb.

Flat Rabbit didn't mind at all.

He strode to a large cart and yanked off the tarpaulin with a flourish.

Inside—neatly stacked sacks of flour.

"Grain has arrived!" he announced loudly.

"Everyone gets one jin! Eat your fill first—we'll talk about the rest later!"

The detained rebels stiffened.

"...A whole jin?"

They stared at him in disbelief.

This was the same Flat Rabbit who had been handing out watery gruel not long ago. Suddenly becoming this generous felt... unreal.

But he wasn't bluffing.

Ten thousand jin of grain were distributed without hesitation—enough for every detained rebel to eat until full.

Shock rippled through the crowd.

Only then did the captives begin to feel that this fellow named Flat Rabbit... might not actually be so bad.

"So we didn't fall into the hands of 'evil government troops,'" they whispered to one another,

"but into something... surprisingly normal."

That night, countless earthen pots and makeshift stoves were set up at the foot of Tianzhu Mountain. The smell of cooked flour drifted through the air.

The detained rebels ate until they were full.

And for people like them, nothing was more reassuring than a full stomach.

With warmth returning to their bodies, the cold no longer felt so unbearable. They slept in clusters at the mountain's base.

Early the next morning, Flat Rabbit once again distributed ample grain for breakfast.

Then he clapped his hands and announced cheerfully,

"Alright! First task—build your own prison cells and lock yourselves inside them!"

"...?"

"Let's head up the mountain. We'll find a sheltered valley and build properly."

The detained rebels didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

But after being fed properly, they decided to obey.

Listening to Yi Dou Gu or listening to Flat Rabbit—what difference did it make?

Then—

They suddenly realized something unsettling.

This "government general" was called Flat Rabbit.

That name sounded suspiciously like a bandit's alias.

A terrifying realization struck them all at once.

Could it be... we weren't captured by government troops at all?

Could this be another bandit gang preying on its own kind?

No wonder he wanted to go up Tianzhu Mountain.

This was textbook mountain bandit behavior.

...But in that case, there was even less to fear.

The detained rebels climbed Tianzhu Mountain, found a broad, sheltered valley, and began felling trees and cutting wood—constructing their own prison cells using techniques identical to those of a bandit stronghold.

A few days later, Gao Family Village's second transport team arrived.

With them came another massive shipment of supplies—as well as numerous Blue Hats responsible for guiding the prisoners in constructing cement factories and establishing Gao Family Village–style industries.

At the same time, fresh militia recruits arrived to take over camp management.

With replacements in place, the veteran soldiers were finally able to withdraw and return to the front lines.

And with their strength restored, the frontline forces resumed their advance—

Yunxi County.

After routing Governor Jiang Yunyi of Yunyang, the bandits occupied the city.

Wealthy households were looted clean.

The official treasury was emptied.

City walls were torn down. Houses were burned.

Inside the commander's tent, Chuang Wang, the Dashing General, Lao Huihui, and the West Camp's Eight Great Kings convened an urgent meeting.

News of Yi Dou Gu's defeat in Shangnan County had already reached them.

That mysterious firearms unit had become a name that made bandits turn pale.

Chuang Wang spoke grimly,

"That firearms unit is now stationed in Shangnan County. They clearly intend to block our path into Shaanxi."

He continued,

"Shaanxi is sealed. Sichuan is blocked by the White Pole Soldiers. Zhang Yingchang of Henan is advancing from the north, and Eunuch Chen Dagan and Zuo Liangyu are chasing us from the east."

He looked around the tent.

"Tell me—where do we go now?"

No one answered.

With enemies behind and killers ahead, the situation was dire.

Just then, a scout rushed in and knelt.

"Reporting! A representative sent by a Jin merchant requests an audience outside."

"A Jin merchant?" Chuang Wang frowned.

"What would Jin merchants want with us?"

Chapter 777 An Unexpected Visitor

The Jin merchant's retainer was escorted into the tent at once.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, his bearing steady and fearless—clearly someone who had walked through danger many times before. Facing a room packed with notorious bandit chiefs, he showed not the slightest trace of fear. He clasped his fists calmly and bowed.

"Greetings, esteemed heroes," he said evenly. "I am a household retainer of Zhai Tang, a Jin merchant. You may not recognize my master's name, but anyone who trades in Shanxi or along the northern border has, in one way or another, heard of him."

"Zhai Tang?"

The Dashing General frowned slightly, then nodded. "I know the name. A major merchant in Xuanfu and Datong. His operations are... substantial."

The retainer smiled faintly.

"Since General Chuang is already familiar with my master, that spares me a long introduction."

The Dashing General's gaze sharpened.

"Why have you come? And what does Zhai Tang want from us?"

The retainer did not evade the question.

"To speak plainly, my master has encountered a small obstacle. His business is no longer running as smoothly as before."

The Dashing General raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? And a man like Zhai Tang can encounter difficulties?"

The retainer sighed.

"My master has long supplied grain and military equipment to the border armies of Xuanfu and Datong. He has contributed greatly to the Great Ming's frontier defense. Yet just days ago, the Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da was misled by a treacherous individual."

He paused, then continued slowly.

"This person accused my master's trade of being illegal and harmful to the state. Supreme Commander Zhang Zongheng sent troops to arrest him, forcibly severing the Zhai family's trade routes throughout Xuan-Da."

Chuǎng Wang slammed the table.

"Outrageous! That official has gone too far!"

The Dashing General merely smiled, saying nothing.

Inwardly, however, he sneered.

Treacherous official? Or perhaps someone finally stepped on the merchants' tails.

Chuǎng Wang asked bluntly,

"So Zhai Tang has now become an enemy of Zhang Zongheng?"

The retainer nodded.

"Indeed. The Great Ming court has turned against the Zhai family. My master is now in hiding, unable to move freely. All because of that one man."

Chuǎng Wang seized the key point.

"Who is this so-called treacherous individual?"

The retainer answered calmly,

"An expert in flintlock firearms."

The temperature inside the tent dropped instantly.

Every bandit chief's expression darkened.

The retainer went on,

"My master believes firmly in one principle: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The Jin merchants are willing to join hands with you, esteemed kings, to deal with this person."

The Dashing General leaned forward slightly.

"And how, exactly, does Zhai Tang intend to help us?"

The retainer's lips curved faintly.

"My master understands little about warfare, but he understands trade. Any cooperation, naturally, begins with business."

Understanding dawned immediately.

The Dashing General spoke first.

"Zhai Tang intends to sell us the goods he originally supplied to the border armies."

The retainer chuckled.

"Exactly."

He spread his hands.

"You gentlemen have plundered counties and cities alike, gathering mountains of gold, silver, and jewels. But such things cannot be eaten, nor can they be turned into strength on the battlefield."

His gaze swept the room.

"In truth, you have no way to spend this wealth."

That was an undeniable fact.

The roving bandits had seized unimaginable riches—but those riches were dead weight. No one dared openly trade with bandits.

Each leader present was wealthy beyond measure—and yet all of it was useless.

"My master can change that," the retainer said smoothly.

"Grain, salt, cloth. Three-Eyed Arquebuses. Gunpowder. Lead bullets. Repeating crossbows. Armor. Shields."

He smiled.

"Everything we once supplied to the border armies—we can now supply to you. If the Jin merchants can sustain the frontier, sustaining you will be no problem at all."

The bandit chiefs exchanged glances.

Then, almost simultaneously—

"Good!"

"Excellent!"

"We'll take this deal!"

The retainer nodded.

"Since we are now friends, my master can also offer a small additional favor."

The tent fell silent.

"There is a secret mountain route nearby," he said slowly.

"One that will allow you to slip past the government armies' encirclement."

The bandit chiefs' eyes lit up.

"Where is it?"

"Show us!"

— —

Shangnan County.

Li Daoxuan, Zheng Gouzi, Luo Xi, and Lian Guoshi sat around a table, a massive military map spread before them.

Lian Guoshi's finger rested on Yunyang Prefecture City.

"Jiang Yunyi, the Pacification Commissioner of Yunyang, is currently under siege. He has withdrawn into the prefectural city and refuses to sortie. With cannons mounted on the walls, the rebels dare not assault recklessly."

His finger slid south.

"The Dashing General's main force remains in Yunxi County. Meanwhile, Rampaging Wolf, Yi Dou Gu, Sweeping King, and the others have already entered Sichuan and are locked in combat with the White Pole Soldiers."

His finger moved again—northward.

"We are here."

Then slightly northeast.

"And Zhang Yingchang is here."

Lian Guoshi sighed.

"No force can cross provincial borders into Yunyang's jurisdiction without authorization. Everyone is locked in place, forced to watch helplessly."

He tapped another spot.

"Only Zuo Liangyu can intervene. He is marching rapidly to reinforce Yunyang Prefecture."

Zheng Gouzi frowned.

"Why can only Zuo Liangyu cross borders so freely?"

Lian Guoshi replied,

"Because he has a palace eunuch serving as army supervisor."

"A palace eunuch?" Zheng Gouzi blinked.

Luo Xi whispered an explanation,

"A supervisor sent directly from the capital... a eunuch."

Realization struck.

Chen Dajin—trusted confidant of the Chongzhen Emperor—was overseeing Zuo Liangyu's army. His presence granted Zuo Liangyu absolute authority, allowing him to ignore all provincial boundaries.

Lian Guoshi concluded confidently,

"We are forming a great snare. The roving bandits are trapped. Once Zuo Liangyu arrives, it will be catching turtles in a jar. We will wipe them out completely."

Luo Xi immediately praised,

"Governor, truly profound insight!"

Li Daoxuan remained silent.

Is it really that simple?

A sense of unease gnawed at him.

History had taught him one thing clearly—these bandits never died so neatly.

Just then, a messenger burst in, pale and frantic.

"Governor! Disaster—absolute disaster!"

Lian Guoshi shot to his feet.

"What happened?"

The messenger gasped,

"Chen Dajin and Zuo Liangyu pursued the bandits to Yunxi County—only to find the city empty. They rescued several women and assumed the bandits had fled toward Yunyang Prefecture."

He swallowed hard.

"When they arrived, Vice Commissioner Xu Jinglin saw the women among the relief forces and suspected the army was bandits in disguise. He ordered the city cannons to open fire."

The room went dead silent.

"Chen Dajin and Zuo Liangyu were bombarded without warning," the messenger continued.

"Massive casualties. Men and horses alike."

He lowered his head.

"A palace eunuch does not endure such humiliation. Chen Dajin has already memorialized the court, demanding the arrest and punishment of Xu Jinglin... and Jiang Yunyi."

No one spoke.

Li Daoxuan's unease solidified into certainty.

The trap has been sprung.

Chapter 778 Lu Xiangheng Arrives

Within the Imperial Capital, inside the solemn and quiet Imperial Study.

Emperor Zhu Youjian sat once again behind his desk, buried in a mountain of memorials. In the eyes of many, he seemed to do nothing else—day after day, year after year—except read documents and issue decrees. Yet it was precisely this unrelenting diligence that had carved such deep exhaustion into his body.

His shoulders were perpetually hunched. Wrinkles furrowed his face like dry riverbeds, and anxiety lingered in his eyes, never quite fading. All of it bore silent witness to how desperately he struggled to hold together this vast, crumbling empire.

He picked up another memorial.

It was submitted by Lian Guoshi, the newly appointed Governor of Shaanxi.

Zhu Youjian's expression tightened as he read.

Bandits were raging through Shangzhou.

The Prefect had been killed.

The commander of Wuguan Pass had fled in panic.

Only at the very end did the situation turn.

Former Brigadier-General Luo Xi, leading his personal guards along with locally recruited militia, had managed to seize Wuguan Pass and block the bandits from entering Shaanxi.

"Hm?"

A faint sound of surprise escaped Zhu Youjian's throat. He leaned closer and reread the memorial carefully.

Lian Guoshi's report was written with unusual precision. He detailed how Luo Xi, commanding barely two thousand militia, had stood firm at Wuguan Pass. The men fought with crudely made Three-Eyed Arquebuses, hunting bows hastily strung together, and whatever weapons they could scrape up.

When the bandits charged the pass, logs and massive stones were hurled down from above. Militia soldiers stabbed downward with bamboo spears, fighting at arm's length. Casualties were severe on both sides, but Wuguan Pass itself was naturally treacherous terrain—easy to defend, hard to assault.

In the end, despite suffering heavy losses, the defenders held.

A rare surge of joy rose in Zhu Youjian's chest.

He lightly flicked the memorial with his fingers and said slowly, "Lian Guoshi truly lives up to his family's reputation. Eight generations of service, loyal to the throne and devoted to the nation. His memorials are always solid—no exaggeration, no nonsense."

Cao Huachun nodded quickly. "Indeed, Your Majesty. Among all provincial officials, Lian Guoshi's reports are the most reliable. He is a man who truly gets things done."

Zhu Youjian tapped the desk. "This Luo Xi—why is he called a former Brigadier-General?"

Cao Huachun smiled awkwardly. "Your Majesty... you stripped him of his rank previously. He was punished for falsifying military achievements."

Zhu Youjian paused, then remembered. "Ah. That fellow who padded his battle reports."

He snorted softly. "Still, this time he seems to have performed real service. According to Lian Guoshi, without Luo Xi, Wuguan Pass would already have fallen."

Cao Huachun carefully tested the waters. "Then Your Majesty intends...?"

Zhu Youjian thought for a moment, then spoke decisively. "Since he has redeemed himself through merit, he can still be used. Restore part of his status. Appoint him Commander of Shangzhou."

Thus, Luo Xi was reinstated—though only partially.

Zhu Youjian moved on to the next memorial.

This one bore the name Chen Dajin.

The emperor straightened slightly. Chen Dajin was someone he trusted deeply—an eunuch who had grown up alongside him since childhood, loyal and dependable.

Zhu Youjian opened the memorial at once.

As he read, his expression darkened rapidly.

Chen Dajin reported that while supervising Zuo Liangyu's army in pursuit of the bandits, they had chased them to Yunyang. Beneath the city walls, Vice-Commissioner Xu Jinglin—an officer under the Prefect-Governor Jiang Yunyi—had suddenly opened fire with heavy cannons.

Men and horses were torn apart.

Chen Dajin himself had narrowly avoided being killed by a cannonball, barely escaping with his life—and the chance to ever see His Majesty again. The memorial pleaded for justice.

Because of the shelling, Zuo Liangyu's army suffered significant losses and erupted into a fierce conflict with the Yunyang authorities. The army was now completely unable to continue pursuing the bandits.

Meanwhile, the bandits seized the opportunity. They slipped through hidden mountain paths, rushed into Neixiang, passed through Dengzhou and Xishui, and fled south into Xiangyang of Huguang...

Once again evading imperial suppression.

Zhu Youjian erupted.

"Outrageous!" he roared. "How dare Jiang Yunyi allow his subordinates to bombard my envoy! How dare he sabotage the entire strategy to suppress the bandits!"

Cao Huachun immediately lowered his head, not daring to make a sound.

Zhu Youjian slammed the table. "Strip Jiang Yunyi and Xu Jinglin of their posts! Throw them both into prison! I will deal with these scoundrels personally!"

Cao Huachun hesitated, then asked cautiously, "Then... who will govern Yunyang?"

Zhu Youjian fell silent.

After a moment, a name surfaced in his mind.

This man had achieved great merit suppressing bandits in Hebei—a rare and capable talent.

He nodded to himself. "He would be suitable."

Then Zhu Youjian spoke loudly, "Lu Xiangheng. Appoint Lu Xiangheng as the new Prefect-Governor of Yunyang!"

"Congratulations, General Luo!"

"Our congratulations, General Luo!"

Inside the county yamen of Shangnan County, Luo Xi sat beaming as Zheng Gouzi and the others offered their congratulations.

The official order had just arrived.

Luo Xi, having redeemed himself through meritorious service, was reinstated and appointed Commander of Shangzhou.

Though the position was only fifth rank—far below his former third-rank Brigadier-General post—it was still an official appointment. As long as he had a foothold, he could accumulate merit and climb again.

At last, he could face his elderly father without shame.

At last, he could meet his ancestors in the afterlife without lowering his head.

Luo Xi laughed heartily. "Brother Zheng, Mr. Li—this time, it was entirely thanks to you two! I, Luo Xi, hardly did anything. You fought the bandits, yet handed all the credit to me. Such kindness—I will never forget it! From this day forward, if you need anything, just say the word. I'll go through fire and water for you. If I hesitate even once, I'm not a man!"

Zheng Gouzi laughed. "Then we'll have to rely on General Luo to help revive Shangnan County and the surrounding villages. They've all been devastated by bandits."

Luo Xi's eyes lit up immediately.

He had personally seen Gao Family Village's methods—how ten thousand surrendered bandits were fed with grain and then obediently built their own prison on Tianzhu Mountain, locking themselves inside.

Reviving Shangnan and its countryside...

He understood instantly.

"Mr. Li is going to spend another enormous sum of silver and grain to help the common people, isn't he?" Luo Xi exclaimed. "Ah, Mr. Li—you are truly the most benevolent person I have ever met!"

Li Daoxuan merely smiled, saying nothing.

Zheng Gouzi muttered softly, "He's a deity, not a man."

"What was that?" Luo Xi asked. "Brother Zheng, I didn't quite catch it."

Zheng Gouzi raised his voice at once. "Nothing! I didn't say anything!"

Luo Xi rubbed his hands together, excitement tempered by hesitation. "I truly want to help with this... but I'm only a military official. Everything Mr. Li plans falls under civil administration. If I interfere without authorization, won't the court dismiss me again?"

Zheng Gouzi burst out laughing. "If you get dismissed, then you get dismissed! Worst case, you earn another merit and get reinstated again!"

Luo Xi's face instantly stiffened. "How can you say that so casually?!"

Just then, a guard hurried in. "General Luo, the newly appointed Prefect-Governor of Yunyang has taken office. He is about to arrive in Shangnan County for an inspection."

"Oh?" Luo Xi raised an eyebrow. "Someone actually dares to take office in a place this chaotic? Quite bold."

The guard lowered his voice. "His name is Lu Xiangheng. They say he was extremely fierce suppressing bandits in Hebei. He commands three thousand personal guards, calling themselves the Tianxiong Army. Their combat power is said to be exceptional."

"Three thousand personal guards?" Luo Xi gasped. "That's impressive! This man must be incredibly wealthy!"

At the mention of the name Lu Xiangheng, Li Daoxuan's eyes brightened.

"Oh?" he said softly. "A valuable asset is arriving?"

He chuckled and stepped forward. "If I remember correctly, Lu Xiangheng's Tianxiong Army was formed in the second year of Chongzhen, when the Manchus invaded the passes. He raised them to defend the capital."

He looked at Luo Xi calmly. "General Luo, there's no need to fear him. With us backing you, you also command over two thousand personal guards. Compared to his three thousand... it's not that far apart, is it?"

Chapter 779 Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations

Hearing Li Daoxuan's words, Luo Xi's spirits instantly soared.

"That's right!" he exclaimed. "With Mr. Li and Brother Zheng backing me, I effectively command more than two thousand men—and they're all elite flintlock soldiers! Hahahaha! Even if Lu Xiangheng is fierce, he might not be stronger than me!"

Luo Xi was exactly the sort of man who would grow bolder with the slightest encouragement.

After laughing heartily, he quickly composed himself and hurried out to receive the guest.

After all, his current position as Commander of the Shangzhou Garrison placed him directly under the authority of the Yunyang Prefect-Governor. Lu Xiangheng was now his immediate superior. No matter what, the proper etiquette had to be observed.

Li Daoxuan, who was deeply interested in Lu Xiangheng, pulled Zheng Gouzi along as well. The two deliberately positioned themselves on either side of Luo Xi, disguising themselves as his subordinates, and followed him out to greet the arriving official.

The group soon reached the entrance of the county town.

Shangnan County's city walls had long since been torn down by the rebels. What remained of the gate was little more than a symbolic opening, barely marking the boundary of the town.

Outside the gate, an army had already formed ranks.

This was Lu Xiangheng's famed Tianxiong Army.

Their armor gleamed coldly under the light, their uniforms were clean and orderly, their formations precise, and their morale visibly high. At a glance, it was clear that this was a truly elite force.

At the front stood a tall, sturdy man, seemingly in his early thirties. Though clad in battle armor, he carried an unmistakable scholarly air—calm, restrained, and profound.

Luo Xi immediately stepped forward and bowed deeply.

"Your subordinate, Luo Xi, greets Supreme Commander Lu."

Lu Xiangheng did not reply at once.

Instead, his gaze swept past Luo Xi and fell upon the soldiers behind him.

First, he examined Luo Xi's personal guard—one hundred and fifty men, all well-fed, well-armored, and properly equipped. Their appearance was respectable, though in spirit and discipline they still fell short of the Tianxiong Army.

Then, his eyes shifted further back—

And stopped.

Two thousand men.

Uniformly equipped.

Every single one holding a long flintlock rifle.

Just those two thousand firearms, not to mention the ammunition to sustain them, represented an astonishing expenditure of silver.

Lu Xiangheng was inwardly shaken.

"This Luo Xi truly is wealthy," he thought. "Even wealthier than my own clan. I can barely sustain three thousand Tianxiong soldiers—there's no way I could afford two thousand flintlock troops."

Previously, he had heard reports that this Luo Xi had crushed Xue Hongqi, Yizuo Cheng, Yizi Wang, and Wang Chenggong in northern Shaanxi, then repelled Saodi Wang and Mantian Xing at Wuguan Pass, and finally defeated Yi Dou Gu and Wa Guanzi in Shangnan County.

Frankly speaking, such achievements sounded exaggerated.

After all, whether civil or military officials, everyone in the Great Ming had a habit of inflating their accomplishments.

But now—

Seeing these two thousand flintlock soldiers with his own eyes, Lu Xiangheng believed it.

He cupped his hands toward Luo Xi.

"This official has heard that General Luo successively crushed the rebels at Wuguan Pass and Shangnan County, driving them out of Shangnan and earning great merit. Seeing you today, General, you are indeed a man of ability."

Luo Xi waved his hands hastily.

"Not at all, not at all! These are merely trivial accomplishments. Compared to Supreme Commander Lu's feats suppressing bandits in Hebei, my little bit of merit is nothing worth mentioning."

Lu Xiangheng nodded.

"In any case, with General Luo stationed in Shangzhou, this official can finally rest easy. It seems I won't need to worry much about Shangzhou's affairs anymore."

Luo Xi laughed.

"Hehe... please be at ease. Leave everything to your humble subordinate."

Lu Xiangheng continued,

"This official did not come to Shangzhou merely to inspect the situation. I have also drafted several proposals that I wish to discuss with the local officials. However... as for the officials of Shangnan County—alas..."

Luo Xi quickly explained,

"The County Magistrate, Assistant Magistrate, and Registrar all died in service to the nation. At present, this county town is temporarily under my command. I can only hand it over once a new magistrate arrives."

"Very well," Lu Xiangheng said calmly. "Then for now, you shall exercise civil authority through military means."

He then took out a large sheet of paper.

"This official has prepared the Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations. They are to be implemented throughout all prefectures and counties. For the time being, I shall place these Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations under your charge."

The paper listed:

Ten Proposals:

Encourage population growth; establish core military forces; develop reconnaissance and defense systems; plan fortifications; organize local self-defense; accelerate communications; stockpile provisions; plan mutual assistance; empower village militias; regulate weaponry.

Eight Regulations:

Grant tax deferrals to preserve livelihoods; repair and construct homes to ensure stable settlement; utilize natural resources to relieve poverty; punish malicious accusations to eliminate public harm; prohibit oppressive conscription to safeguard the people; promote land reclamation to enrich civilians; assist traveling merchants to facilitate trade; strictly regulate postal services to reduce burdens.

Luo Xi took the paper and scanned it.

Then—

"Ah!"

Inside, his heart skipped a beat.

He recognized barely half the characters. The rest looked like celestial script.

Embarrassment crept across his face.

At that moment, inspiration struck.

He turned around and handed the paper directly to Li Daoxuan.

"Mr. Li, you're a man of learning. What exactly is written here?"

In truth, Li Daoxuan was also struggling.

"Damn it," he cursed inwardly. "All traditional characters—and not a single punctuation mark."

His temples throbbed as he painstakingly parsed the text, finally grasping its meaning after considerable effort.

He looked up and smiled faintly.

"Supreme Commander Lu, your Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations align perfectly with my own thinking."

Lu Xiangheng's gaze shifted sharply to Li Daoxuan.

"And this gentleman is...?"

Li Daoxuan answered calmly,

"I am from Xi'an. My surname is Li. I'm merely a country gentleman."

"A country gentleman?" Lu Xiangheng's eyes widened slightly.

Luo Xi hurriedly added,

"His 'ordinary' is simply modesty. Mr. Li is a man of great influence. This militia under my command was entirely funded by him. He currently serves as our military advisor."

Only then did Lu Xiangheng fully understand.

Those two thousand elite soldiers—

They were all raised by this man.

This Mr. Li was no ordinary figure.

Lu Xiangheng cupped his hands toward Li Daoxuan.

"Mr. Li, do you have any additions or revisions to my Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head.

"None at all. In fact, we were already preparing to implement these measures. It's only that General Luo is a military officer, while these proposals mainly concern civil administration. He feared overstepping his authority and being dismissed by the court. Now that Supreme Commander Lu has formally entrusted these regulations to him, we can proceed openly and legitimately."

Lu Xiangheng was no fool.

With a brief moment of thought, he understood everything.

Luo Xi couldn't even read half the text—there was no way he could personally carry out these policies. In the end, all these matters would naturally fall into the hands of this Mr. Li.

From now on, this man would be his true support in managing Shangzhou's civil affairs.

Lu Xiangheng said,

"My primary mission in Yunyang is bandit suppression. I may not have the leisure to oversee administration personally. For now, I shall entrust these Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations to Mr. Li. If you encounter any difficulties, report to this official at once—I will support you fully."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Excellent."

Lu Xiangheng continued,

"Then this official will take his leave. I've just received news that a group of rebels has returned from Sichuan and is now entrenched at Huanglongtan. I must proceed immediately to suppress them."

Li Daoxuan cupped his hands.

"I wish the General a swift victory."

He was not worried in the least.

Lu Xiangheng was an absolute nemesis of rebels—invincible against them, though destined to fall later to the Manchus.

They watched as Lu Xiangheng led the Tianxiong Army swiftly toward the southwest.

Li Daoxuan flicked the paper listing the Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations in his hand, then let out a quiet sigh.

"If these Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations could have been implemented across the entire realm," he thought, "would the Great Ming ever have fallen?"

"What a pity... Lu Xiangheng died at only thirty-nine, slain by the Qing army. Had such a man become Grand Secretary, how could the Great Ming have perished?"

Chapter 780 They're Practicing It Very Well

Lu Xiangheng was in the midst of another bandit-suppression campaign.

At Huanglongtan, the Tianxiong Army unleashed its full might. They caught the rebel forces who had just fled back from Sichuan to Yunyang and struck them so brutally that the rebels could barely recognize their own mothers afterward.

The battle ended swiftly.

Lu Xiangheng did not give the rebels a single moment to catch their breath. He immediately ordered a pursuit, chasing them relentlessly until they were terrified out of their wits and scattered in all directions, scrambling back toward Sichuan like startled mice.

At that point, further pursuit was no longer feasible. Lu Xiangheng recalled his troops and began the return march.

Several days later, as the army once again passed through Shangnan County, Lu Xiangheng found himself slowing his horse in surprise.

In just a few short days, Shangnan County had changed beyond recognition.

The city walls—previously demolished by the rebels—were being rebuilt. Large numbers of laborers were working together, hauling bricks and tamping earth. A brand-new wooden city gate had already

been erected. The timber was so fresh that it hadn't even been painted yet, still showing its pale natural grain.

Lu Xiangheng frowned.

"Wait a moment," he thought.

"Rebuilding city walls... mobilizing so many commoners..."

His heart skipped a beat.

"Doesn't this violate the regulation *'Forbid Impressment and Corvée to Stabilize the People's Livelihoods' from my Eight Regulations?"

His expression darkened slightly.

Shangnan County had just suffered a devastating rebel invasion. Countless common folk had been killed or injured. To immediately conscript the survivors for forced labor—how could that be acceptable?

Unacceptable. Absolutely unacceptable!

"That Steward Li... is he completely muddle-headed?" Lu Xiangheng thought grimly.

He urged his horse forward and hurried into the city.

But the moment he reached the city gate, something felt off.

The laborers repairing the walls were... laughing.

They chatted as they worked, joking with one another, their movements brisk and energetic. Their faces were full of life.

This did not look like a group of people being dragged into forced labor by officials.

Lu Xiangheng stopped abruptly. He reached out, grabbed one of the workers by the arm, and asked in a deep voice,

"What exactly are you doing?"

The man nearly jumped out of his skin. Seeing a high-ranking official in armor, he immediately dropped to his knees.

"Sir! I haven't done anything wrong!"

Lu Xiangheng waved his hand.

"Don't be afraid. I'm just asking—if you're doing corvée labor, why are you smiling so happily?"

"Corvée labor?" The man looked confused. He shook his head vigorously. "Sir, I'm not doing corvée labor. I'm a hired short-term worker."

A massive question mark seemed to rise above Lu Xiangheng's head, blotting out the sky above Shangnan County.

"Hired?" he repeated slowly. "You mean... someone is paying you to rebuild the city walls?"

"Not money, sir!" the man said eagerly. "It's grain—three catties of flour per day!"

As he spoke, his grin stretched ear to ear.

"Three catties! I work alone, and my family of five can eat their fill every day!"

Lu Xiangheng nearly fell off his horse.

"What?!"

In a year plagued by drought, paying three catties of flour per day was nothing short of astonishing.

Since the workers were being paid voluntarily, this clearly did not violate the regulation prohibiting forced labor. Lu Xiangheng's anger evaporated instantly, replaced by a warm surge of satisfaction.

He asked, "Who hired you?"

"A young steward," the man replied, scratching his head. "His name is..."

Lu Xiangheng prompted, "Steward Li?"

The man's eyes lit up.

"Yes! That's him—Steward Li!"

Lu Xiangheng sighed inwardly.

"So that's how it is. He's throwing grain around like water."

He quickly calculated in his head. Hundreds of laborers, three catties each per day—this meant over a thousand catties of grain consumed daily.

"To spend such a sum just to rebuild city walls for defense..." Lu Xiangheng thought.

"This man truly has the heart of the people."

His tension fully dissipated.

He entered the city at a relaxed pace.

Inside Shangnan County, it wasn't just the city walls being repaired.

Large sections of the town that had been burned by the rebels were now bustling with activity. Laborers carried debris on their shoulders, cleared charred ruins, and raised new houses in their place.

Lu Xiangheng nodded repeatedly.

"This is exactly 'Diligently Repair and Rebuild to Settle the People's Dwellings' from the Eight Regulations," he thought approvingly.

"Excellent. Truly excellent."

Luo Xi and Steward Li were doing everything before he even needed to say a word.

At the North Gate, he saw yet another group of laborers repairing the official road.

This road connected Shangnan County directly to Wuguan Pass. Neglected for years, it had long been uneven and nearly impassable. Now, however, it was being carefully leveled and reinforced.

Lu Xiangheng's eyes gleamed.

"They're even implementing 'Utilize Mountains and Marshes to Aid the Impoverished'..."

Joy surged through him.

He had originally worried that his Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations would be ignored by local officials, reduced to empty slogans.

Yet here in Shangnan County, they were being executed with frightening efficiency.

He was so pleased he nearly felt light enough to float.

"Every prefect and county under heaven should come here and learn," he thought fervently.

"I'll make them all visit Shangnan County and see what proper governance looks like."

With high spirits, Lu Xiangheng headed toward the county yamen, intending to personally commend Luo Xi and Steward Li.

But halfway there, a messenger came sprinting toward him.

"Urgent report!" the messenger gasped. "A rebel force is advancing toward Wulin Pass!"

Lu Xiangheng let out a quiet sigh.

"So much for a friendly chat," he thought.

"Bandit suppression always comes first."

Without hesitation, he turned around, assembled the Tianxiong Army, and rode straight for Wulin Pass.

Several days later, they arrived to find ten thousand rebels looting and burning inside the pass.

Lu Xiangheng did not hesitate.

"Attack!"

The Tianxiong Army surged forward like a steel tide. At the very first clash, the rebels collapsed in panic, fleeing in all directions. Several hundred were beheaded on the spot, and over three thousand were captured alive.

As usual, they couldn't simply slaughter everyone.

That would offend the balance of Heaven.

The captives had to be brought back and resettled.

This, however, left Lu Xiangheng with a headache.

He had no money. No surplus grain. Supporting three thousand captives was like holding a burning iron rod—painful and impossible to discard.

With no better option, he escorted them back.

Several days later, they once again passed through Shangnan County.

This time, Lu Xiangheng saw something astonishing outside the city.

A massive structure was under construction.

Groups of people wearing Blue Hats stood directing the work, while large numbers of laborers followed their instructions with surprising discipline.

Lu Xiangheng approached, puzzled.

"What are you building here?"

The Blue Hat saw him—but instead of panicking or kneeling, he smiled calmly and replied,

"We are constructing Shangtie No. 1 Factory."

Lu Xiangheng blinked.

"What... is Shangtie No. 1 Factory?"

The Blue Hat chuckled.

"It stands for Shangnan Iron and Steel No. 1 Factory."

Lu Xiangheng felt his brain pause for a moment.

"Smelting... iron and steel?"

"Yes," the Blue Hat replied cheerfully.

"To the west lies Tianzhu Mountain in Shanyang County, and to the east is the Lushi mountain range—both rich in iron ore. Shangnan County lies right between them. So we're building a smelting plant here. All the ore from both regions will be transported here for centralized refining."

Lu Xiangheng stood silently, staring at the construction site.

His heart trembled slightly.

"...They're practicing it this well?"