

Great Ming 791

Chapter 791 What Can I Do?

As the film ended, the lights in the Xi'an Grand Theater slowly brightened.

No one in the VIP section stood up immediately.

A heavy, suffocating silence lingered, as if the battlefield from the screen had not truly faded, but instead followed them into reality, clinging to their sleeves and collars.

At last, Lian Guoshi rose to his feet.

He let out a long, weary sigh and smoothed the folds of his official robes, as though that simple motion could also smooth the turmoil in his heart.

"Alas..." he said slowly. "The border situation is grim. Truly grim."

His voice carried the weight of countless memorials, grain reports, and sleepless nights.

Wu Shen followed suit, standing and cupping his hands.

"Governor," he asked, "as civil officials, how can we possibly assist the soldiers on the frontier?"

Lian Guoshi paused.

The question struck painfully close to home.

"What else can be done?" he replied at length. "We manage administration diligently, stabilize the rear, and provide weapons and provisions to the frontier armies. That is the greatest contribution we civil officials can make."

As soon as he mentioned administration, a familiar ache throbbed behind his temples.

Shaanxi had not seen rain since last August.

Northern Shaanxi, in particular, was riddled with bandits. Listing their names alone could fill over a hundred characters on a memorial. If not for Regional Commander Shi Jian and his troops suppressing them with blood and steel, the province would already have collapsed into chaos.

At present, the entire province of Shaanxi was relying on the northwestern region surrounding Xi'an.

Chengcheng County.

Heyang County.

Baishui County.

These areas were said to be under the blessing of Dao Xuan Tianzun. Rain fell intermittently there, celestial fertilizer was applied, and grain harvests were abundant enough to sustain not only themselves, but much of the surrounding regions.

If not for that miracle—

Shaanxi would have already starved.

In recent days, Dao Xuan Tianzun had even manifested repeatedly over Xi'an, bringing several long-awaited downpours. The farmland surrounding the city had begun to show signs of recovery.

And yet—

Lian Guoshi still could not produce much surplus grain for imperial taxation.

All of it had to be diverted to feed regions where the drought still raged. As for supplying the frontier army...

That burden could only be borne by the wealthy lands of Jiangnan.

Nearby, Zhu Cunji sat pale-faced, his fingers clenched so tightly that his knuckles were white.

He leaned closer to Shi Kefa and lowered his voice.

"Master Shi," he whispered, "you are of the Jinyiwei. Your intelligence network far exceeds ours. Tell me honestly—does this film exaggerate matters? Are there falsehoods?"

Shi Kefa answered without hesitation.

"Yes."

Zhu Cunji immediately exhaled in relief.

"Good... good. So it is exaggerated."

Shi Kefa added calmly, "The protagonist's personal martial prowess was exaggerated."

Zhu Cunji froze.

"Everything else," Shi Kefa continued, "is true."

Zhu Cunji sucked in a sharp breath.

"You mean... the Manchu being so powerful—that's true as well?"

Shi Kefa nodded.

"It's true."

Zhu Cunji pressed urgently, "Aren't they just savages? Do they truly possess so many cannons? Bombarding cities like that—is that also true?"

Shi Kefa's expression darkened.

"It's true. The Manchu acquired cannon-casting techniques years ago. Their firearms are no weaker than Great Ming's. Yet people still call them savages. It's laughable."

Zhu Cunji's face drained of color.

"Ahhh—what should we do?" he cried. "If they're that strong... what if they march all the way here?"

"They won't reach Xi'an for now," Shi Kefa replied.

Only then did Zhu Cunji manage a shaky smile.

"That's good... that's good..."

He wiped his brow, heart still pounding.

"What a film," he muttered. "Truly terrifying... truly..."

Shi Kefa, however, felt no relief.

What haunted him was not fear for Xi'an—but the memory of Dalinghe's civilians, reduced to rations, gnawed by desperate soldiers.

"The common people suffer unbearably," he murmured.

He stood stiffly in place.

"I should do something," he thought. "But... what can I do?"

And then it struck him with painful clarity.

At this moment—

He could do nothing.

For the first time, Shi Kefa realized that he was far more powerless than he had ever imagined.

Inside the Xi'an Grand Theater, backstage.

Chen Qianhu clasped his hands respectfully before the Puppet Heavenly Lord avatar.

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said, "the Xi'an Grand Theater's opening was a resounding success. The box office receipts are extraordinarily high."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"You know," he said, "I have no interest in the box office."

Chen Qianhu immediately shifted course.

"The Battle of Dalinghe has deeply shaken the nobles and officials of Xi'an. For the first time, they truly understand how brutal frontier warfare is—and how formidable the Manchu are."

He hesitated, then added,

"After the screening, Zhu Cunji donated five thousand taels of silver to support His Majesty, the Chongzhen Emperor."

"Five thousand?" Li Daoxuan laughed. "That fellow spends hundreds of taels on snacks, yet only donates five thousand?"

Chen Qianhu replied, "He has been excessively extravagant. The princely estate's treasury is already running a deficit."

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"However," Chen Qianhu continued, "he has recently taken a keen interest in the West Yan Railway. He goes to the construction site daily, urging faster progress. He claims that once it turns a profit, he'll use the money to 'kill off the Manchu.'"

Li Daoxuan laughed even harder.

"Hahahaha! That fellow is surprisingly entertaining."

He paused, then said thoughtfully,

"I originally planned to confiscate all his property once the new state is established. But now... I've changed my mind."

Chen Qianhu listened attentively.

"If he truly builds railways and develops industry for the benefit of the people," Li Daoxuan continued, "then I will not confiscate the wealth he earns from those ventures. I'll let him keep it."

"I'll only confiscate the Prince of Qin's residence," he added casually, "turn it into a museum—and take back his fief."

Chen Qianhu laughed.

"Then Dao Xuan Tianzun is truly benevolent. In past dynastic changes, the remnants of the former imperial family were rarely spared."

"Killing, killing, killing," Li Daoxuan said lightly. "That's not a good habit. Don't always think about extermination."

Just then—

The curtain suddenly flew open.

A small child darted in, clutching a bamboo water gun. With a triumphant shout, he aimed at Chen Qianhu.

"Pew!"

Li Daoxuan instantly stepped back, avoiding the spray with ease.

Chen Qianhu was not so lucky.

Water splashed squarely onto his chest.

The child burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! I got him!"

Chen Qianhu let out a dramatic cry, clutching his chest.

"You... you—"

With a heavy thud, he collapsed to the ground, motionless.

The child screamed with delight and ran off.

"I've eliminated a menace for the country! I've eliminated a menace for the country!"

Only then did Chen Qianhu sit up, calmly wringing water from his clothes.

Li Daoxuan laughed.

"Not angry at all? You even played along."

Chen Qianhu grinned.

"Once you get used to it, it feels rather nice. Making children happy is wonderful. An actor's duty is to bring joy, after all."

"Hold on," Li Daoxuan said. "You're a thousand-household commander. A general. Since when did acting become your profession?"

Chen Qianhu scratched his head.

"Well... I'll retire someday. Once peace reigns, I plan to become a full-time actor. Acting is far more enjoyable than fighting wars."

Li Daoxuan laughed heartily.

"Excellent ambition. I have high hopes for you."

Chen Qianhu's eyes shone.

"With Dao Xuan Tianzun's support, I fear nothing! I'll fight with all my strength to bring peace as soon as possible—so I can act without regret."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Next time, how about playing Nurhaci?"

Chen Qianhu turned pale.

"Ahhh—Heavenly Lord, please spare me! I want to play a good person!"

Chapter 792 Chen Qiyu's Promotion

While A Minor Soldier from the Daling River Border Army was stirring waves of discussion within the Great Ming...

In the modern world, an entirely different storm was brewing.

On a popular short-form drama platform, a new series had quietly begun its promotional rollout.

Its name was no longer A Minor Soldier from the Daling River Border Army.

That title had been decisively discarded by Queen of a Thousand Faces M and replaced with something far more explosive:

"The Daling River God of War."

After all, modern netizens didn't care for subtlety.

They liked boldness.

They liked arrogance.

They liked titles that slapped them across the face.

This was advertised as an "epic historical hardcore martial arts drama," edited into short episodes of just over one minute each—perfectly tailored for endless scrolling.

Compared to the previous production, Mu Guiying, this new work was on an entirely different level.

Back then, they had relied on bargain-bin effects and creative camera tricks.

This time?

The martial arts choreography was crisp, brutal, and precise.

The special effects were heavy, grounded, and cinematic.

From cheap spectacle, it had leapt straight into top-tier, lavish production quality.

Buoyed by past success, Queen of a Thousand Faces M was no longer cautious.

She had confidence.

And confidence meant money.

A lot of money.

She poured promotional funds into the project without hesitation, blanketing the platform with clips, highlights, and dramatic hooks.

As a result, the promotional shorts for The Daling River God of War spread like wildfire.

After work.

After dinner.

While slumped on sofas.

Users picked up their phones, casually scrolling—only to see The Daling River God of War again and again, until it created the illusion that the entire internet was watching it.

In this era, if a production was genuinely good and backed by money, creating a "phenomenal hit" was frighteningly easy.

Comments flooded in.

"Holy crap, this show is insane!"

"What the hell? This scale is huge!"

"I've never seen movie-level production on a short drama app before!"

"How many extras did they hire for this?"

"Which film studio built this city? It looks too real!"

Then—

"Oh... wait. It's asking me to subscribe."

"One dollar per episode?"

"Who are they looking down on? I can afford a dollar!"

A dollar per episode was practically nothing.

Individually cheap.

But collectively?

Terrifying.

Subscribers poured in by the tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands. Revenue surged so fast it was dizzying.

In one single day, box office revenue broke ten million dollars.

Eight days later—

It crossed one hundred million dollars.

Of course, box office numbers were not the same as net profit.

As the series exploded in popularity, Queen of a Thousand Faces M reinvested aggressively into promotion. Behind that hundred-million figure lay tens of millions in advertising costs, fueling the fire.

In the end, net profit settled at twenty million dollars.

The split was clear.

Li Daoxuan took eighty percent.

Queen of a Thousand Faces M took twenty percent.

Li Daoxuan's final share:

Sixteen million dollars.

Yan'an Prefecture.

Dust billowed along the road.

Shi Jian led his troops forward, escorting five thousand surrendered rebels, their faces exhausted, their steps dragging.

They had arrived in Yan'an Prefecture after days of marching.

Just days earlier, Shi Jian had fought another brutal battle in northern Shaanxi, personally eliminating bandit leaders Jia Zongguan, Bi Shangtian, Si Tianwang, and Du Weilang.

Five thousand rebels had surrendered.

They were sent back to Huanglong Mountain under guard.

Shi Jian himself took the opportunity to rest in Yan'an Prefecture, allowing his soldiers—especially the militia—to recuperate and resupply.

The moment his troops entered the city, logistics teams from Huanglong Mountain began flowing in continuously through the Huangqiu Terrace Tunnel, delivering grain, weapons, ammunition, and equipment without pause.

Alongside them came two thousand raw recruits.

These recruits were to follow Shi Jian into further bandit suppression campaigns—fighting while learning, bleeding while growing, being forged into veterans.

Shi Jian looked at the young faces before him and couldn't help but shake his head.

"How long have you been in the militia?" he asked.

"Five months!"

"Just over four months!"

"Half a year!"

Shi Jian laughed softly.

"How's your training?"

"Reporting, General Shi! I'm ranked first in marksmanship!"

"My obstacle course time is the fastest!"

"My grenade throwing score is fourth-highest on record!"

Shi Jian nodded, smiling.

"Very good. Very good."

Then his expression turned serious.

"But that's not what I asked."

He looked at them sharply.

"How well have you learned the Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention?"

The recruits straightened instantly, voices loud and unified.

"We are the people's soldiers, their children!"

"We take not a single needle or thread from the masses!"

"Good," Shi Jian said firmly. "For the Gao Family Village Militia, combat strength matters—but character matters more."

"The Heavenly Lord once taught me," he continued, "that a powerful army can be a sword that kills—"

"—but also a sword that saves!"

The close guards roared in unison, voices echoing.

"We will be the sword that saves!"

"Good!"

Applause rang out from nearby.

Shi Jian turned his head.

Governor Chen Qiyu was approaching, his face radiant with health and barely contained delight.

"Well met, Governor," Shi Jian greeted.

Chen Qiyu laughed.

"Thanks to your good fortune, General Shi, I'm no longer merely a governor."

"Oh?" Shi Jian raised an eyebrow.

Chen Qiyu laughed again, unable to hide his pride.

"General Shi's military achievements are outstanding. Northern Yan'an has been systematically cleared of bandits—bandits who were, mind you, under my jurisdiction."

"And General Shi never monopolizes merit," he continued. "You always share credit generously. Because of this, my reputation at court has risen sharply."

Shi Jian nodded in understanding.

"So Minister Chen has been promoted."

"Indeed," Chen Qiyu said solemnly.

He explained at length:

"Zuo Liangyu was recently bombarded and hesitated outside Yunyang City, allowing bandits to regroup. Large forces moved south into Jingxiang and advanced into Huguang."

"The court concluded that fragmented authority among regional commanders was ineffective. A single grand minister was needed."

"Hong Chengchou was recommended, but he is tied up overseeing the Three Borders."

"So..." Chen Qiyu straightened proudly, "I was promoted to Vice Minister of War, concurrently Censor-in-Chief of the Right, and Grand Coordinator of Military Affairs for Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, Huguang, and Sichuan."

His joy was impossible to conceal.

"Thanks to General Shi," he said warmly, "this humble official has leapt from provincial governor to Grand Coordinator of Five Provinces!"

"Congratulations!" Shi Jian said sincerely.

Chen Qiyu waved his hand.

"These merits were yours, General Shi. I will also memorialize the emperor to request another promotion for you."

Shi Jian smiled and shook his head.

"No need. Rising too quickly leads to instability. Better to remain in my current post for now."

Chen Qiyu sighed in admiration.

"Knowing when to advance and when to retreat—truly admirable."

"I will soon depart for Junzhou in Hubei," he added. "I will oversee the suppression of Huguang's bandits. Northern Shaanxi will rely on you."

"I'll handle it," Shi Jian replied.

Chen Qiyu lowered his voice.

"When I leave, corrupt officials may obstruct you. I've written a personal letter stating that all bandit suppression matters in northern Shaanxi fall under your sole authority."

"If anyone dares interfere," he smiled thinly, "let them come argue with me."

"That helps immensely," Shi Jian said sincerely.

Chen Qiyu grasped his forearm.

"Fight without restraint. I trust you."

With that, he departed for Hubei, spirits soaring.

The moment he was gone—

A tiny cotton-thread figure on Shi Jian's chest spoke calmly.

"With this move," Tianzhun said, "his official hat will not last long."

Chapter 793 Preparing to Make a Move on the Wushen Tribe

Shi Jian was startled by the sudden voice coming from his chest.

"Good heavens—!" He instinctively looked down. "Tianzhun? When did you arrive?"

The small Cotton-Thread Dao Xuan Tianzhun sat leisurely against his armor, legs dangling, chuckling softly.

"I've been here for quite a while."

Shi Jian's heart skipped a beat.

As expected of the Dao Xuan Tianzhun ... appearing and disappearing without a trace. No one ever knows when He's watching.

A chill ran down his spine.

Good thing I haven't done anything wrong.

He hurriedly clasped his fists in respect.

"Dao Xuan Tianzhun ... are you saying Chen Qiyu will lose his post this time?"

"Indeed," the Cotton-Thread Heavenly Lord replied flatly.

"He lacks true ability. His achievements came largely from relying on the Gao Family Village militia. Now that he's been elevated to Grand Coordinator of Five Provinces and sent to the frontline of bandit suppression, his position far exceeds his talent."

The Heavenly Lord's thread-like mouth curved slightly.

"Without our militia backing him, what rebels can he suppress? He'll be toyed with by the bandits, make a catastrophic mistake—and Zhu Youjian will strip him of his office."

Shi Jian hesitated.

"Then... should we help him?"

The Cotton-Thread Heavenly Lord shook his head.

"His fate is his own. You need not concern yourself with it."

"Your task now," the Heavenly Lord continued calmly, "is to make proper use of the authority he left you—and to develop Northern Shaanxi."

Shi Jian's eyes lit up.

"Understood!"

Northern Shaanxi was far from peaceful.

Among all its regions, Yulin was the most chaotic.

After rebel remnants returned from Shanxi to Shaanxi, they began wreaking havoc throughout Yulin with renewed ferocity. Worse still, the Mongolian Wushen Tribe, whose pastures lay dangerously close to Yulin, frequently rode in to stir trouble—burning, looting, probing defenses.

Whenever government troops entered Yulin to suppress rebels, they found themselves caught in a miserable tug-of-war, forced to fight bandits on one side and Mongolian cavalry on the other.

Of course, the Wushen Tribe had already suffered a devastating blow.

During their last clash with the Gao Family Village firearm troops, they had endured four rounds of concentrated fire within ten breaths. Their able-bodied young men were slaughtered in horrifying numbers.

That single encounter shattered the tribe's confidence.

For a time, they didn't dare approach Yulin again.

The Cotton-Dao Xuan Tianzhun spoke again.

"I've transferred Zao Ying here. We're preparing to make a move on the Wushen Tribe."

Shi Jian sucked in a sharp breath, his expression turning grave.

"Tianzhun... do you mean we're going to wipe out the Wushen Tribe?"

"No."

The Cotton-Dao Xuan Tianzhun stitched mouth twisted into a distinctly crooked grin.

"Simply killing them would be meaningless."

"The Mongolian cavalry," he said lightly, "are excellent soldiers. Such assets should be used, not discarded."

Shi Jian blinked.

"...Used?"

"The Mongolians have long allied with the Manchus, serving as their vanguard," Dao Xuan Tianzhun said. "Rather than allowing the Manchus to wield them against us, why shouldn't we wield them against the Manchus instead?"

At that moment, realization slowly dawned on Shi Jian.

Dao Xuan Tianzhun continued, his tone patient but firm.

"I've told you many times—don't rely solely on killing. The world is vast. Governing it requires people."

"The grasslands are immense," he added. "Central Plains people cannot govern them effectively. We lack the population, the familiarity, the lifestyle."

"We need Mongolians—people who can truly manage the grasslands."

Shi Jian lowered his head.

"Understood."

With the Dao Xuan Tianzhun guiding philosophy laid bare, any lingering hesitation in Shi Jian's heart vanished completely.

After resupplying, it wasn't long before Zao Ying's Cavalry Battalion arrived.

Over the years, Gao Family Village had acquired warhorses through countless channels—trade, barter, capture. Unbeknownst to many, the Cavalry Battalion had quietly expanded to a full thousand riders.

For several years, they had traveled alongside Tie Niaofei on trade routes, escorting goods to border garrisons. They frequently passed through Xuanfu and Datong, sharpening their skills in real conditions.

Shi Jian hadn't interacted with them much before.

He genuinely hadn't realized how formidable they had become.

Seeing Zao Ying, he immediately clasped his hands.

"Instructor Zao! It's truly been a long time."

Zao Ying smiled faintly.

"Shi Jian. You're doing quite well yourself—already a Brigadier General."

Shi Jian laughed.

"That title's just for outsiders. Everyone knows that here in Gao Family Village, I'm a nobody."

As he spoke, he pointed sideways.

"But he—" Shi Jian said, nodding at the man riding beside Zao Ying, "—he's the real big shot. Your man."

Zao Ying's smile brightened instantly.

"Well said," she replied cheerfully. "Those words—your man—you used them perfectly."

Zheng Daniu, who was gnawing ferociously on a roasted lamb leg, turned his head.

"Huh?" He stared blankly. "Zao Ying has a man? Who? Where? Why haven't you introduced him to us? That's cold-blooded!"

Shi Jian shot him a look.

"You."

Zheng Daniu froze.

"Me?"

"If not you, then who?" Shi Jian snapped.

Zheng Daniu burst out laughing.

"What nonsense! We're not married. How can I be her man?"

Shi Jian pressed mercilessly, "But you've slept together, haven't you?"

Zheng Daniu nodded without hesitation.

"Of course! On the Xuanfu–Datong border it was freezing. We bunked together plenty of times."

Zao Ying was simultaneously delighted and embarrassed. Tough as she was, hearing the word slept still made her ears redden.

Shi Jian spread his hands.

"There you have it. If you've slept with her, you're responsible. Either marry her, or you're a scumbag."

Zheng Daniu nearly choked.

"There's such a rule?! Then I'd have to marry half the village! Gao Chuwu, Flat Rabbit, and so many brothers—I'd have to marry them all!"

"Thud!"

Zao Ying fell straight off her horse.

It was a hard fall.

Her equipment scattered, and a short firearm strapped to her back tumbled across the ground, stopping at Shi Jian's feet.

Shi Jian bent down, surprised.

"Oh?" He picked it up. "Huh? This firearm is much shorter than ours."

Zao Ying scrambled to her feet.

"Yes. It's a cavalry carbine."

She explained carefully.

"Dao Xuan Tianzhun provided the design. It was jointly developed by Song Yingxing, Li Da, Gao Yiyi, Xu Dafu, and others."

Shi Jian's eyes widened.

"A cavalry carbine?"

"Infantry firearms are too long," Zao Ying said. "They interfere with mounted combat. These have shorter barrels—easier to handle on horseback."

"Of course," she added, "shorter barrels mean reduced range and accuracy."

Shi Jian instantly grasped the logic.

For cavalry charging headlong into battle, long-range precision mattered far less than flexibility and speed.

Zheng Daniu grinned proudly.

"The brothers trained like mad to master these on horseback."

Shi Jian nodded.

"With weapons like this, the Cavalry Battalion will dominate the grasslands."

Then he paused.

"Wait—Daniu, weren't you part of the Armored Grenadier Battalion? Why are you here?"

Zheng Daniu sighed.

"That unit was disbanded ages ago. Firearms kept getting longer range. Our grenade throwing became pointless."

"All of us got reassigned."

His expression dimmed slightly.

"Haven't seen Gao Chuwu in ages either... wonder what he's been up to."

"Waaaah—!"

A baby's cry suddenly rang out.

A midwife rushed from a nearby room, cradling a newborn.

"Congratulations, Master! Congratulations! Your wife has given birth to a son—a big, healthy boy!"

Gao Chuwu rushed forward, grinning ear to ear. He clumsily took the child into his arms.

"Hahahahaha! I'm a father! I'll name him Gao Chu Liu!"

"STOP—!"

Xing Honglang's furious roar exploded from inside the room.

"Give the child a proper, respectable name!"

Chapter 794 Young Master Bai's Car No. 2

Gao Family Village.

Early in the morning, the diligent villagers of Gao Family Village were already up and about.

Farmers headed out to their fields, workers entered their factories, and even the Village Chief sat by his own doorstep, weaving bamboo strips into delicate little birds and grasshoppers. These trinkets would later be sold at the market for a single copper coin each, perfect for amusing children.

It was a peaceful, harmonious morning—no different from any other.

However, an unusually discordant scene was unfolding at the entrance of Gao Family Village's Thirty-Two Middle School.

Song Yingxing, Wang Zheng, along with a large group of graduate students, senior technical engineers, and blacksmiths, were all gathered around a massive iron vehicle.

It was a car.

A car built by Young Master Bai.

The vehicle's main body was almost entirely constructed from steel, solid and heavy, with only its four wheels wrapped in the black rubber bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzhun. At the front sat a prominent boiler, unmistakable at a glance, with a long chimney protruding upward like a small smokestack.

Standing proudly beside it, Young Master Bai announced with excitement and confidence:

"Automobile, Unit Two—officially begins its test run today!"

Yet, the surrounding crowd showed little enthusiasm.

After all, everyone still remembered Young Master Bai's first attempt at building a car—and remembered it far too clearly.

When the first unit had been completed, the steam engine's power had been far too weak to move a heavy chassis. As a result, the body had been made from wood. Worse still, Young Master Bai had forgotten to install brakes altogether. The vehicle had gone out of control twice, crashing straight into the fields, and the fragile wooden frame had shattered on the spot both times.

Every subsequent test had ended in failure.

Because of this, most people in Gao Family Village had developed serious doubts about the feasibility of something called an "automobile."

So when Young Master Bai rolled out his second unit today, it was only natural that no one greeted it with cheers or applause.

"Little Bai," Song Yingxing couldn't help but ask, "did you remember to install brakes this time?"

Young Master Bai laughed loudly.

"Hahaha! I learned my lesson. The very first thing I designed this time was the braking system."

The crowd immediately shot back,

"Don't sound so proud about something that basic! Being able to brake is the bare minimum for a vehicle. What kind of car can't even stop properly?"

"All right," Young Master Bai said confidently, waving his hand. "Now let me show you the power of Automobile Unit Two."

He lifted his right foot and gently eased off the brake.

At once, the power that had been held back was released.

The heavy iron vehicle trembled slightly... then slowly began to move forward.

The crowd stared.

"...Wow," someone muttered. "It actually moves."

"With all that weight, and it's still moving."

Song Yingxing and Wang Zheng exchanged glances, both seeing excitement flicker in the other's eyes.

"Little Bai's modified steam engine is truly powerful," Song Yingxing said. "Despite its compact size, it can push an all-iron vehicle like this."

Wang Zheng nodded.

"Gao Family Village's transportation capabilities are about to enter an entirely new era."

Young Master Bai held the steering wheel with his left hand while opening a small lid beside his seat with his right. Inside was a box filled with perfectly round, neat, and oddly adorable coal briquettes.

He casually picked one up and tossed it into the boiler.

Then, with a smooth turn of the steering wheel, the car passed through the three-way intersection in front of the school gate and headed north.

The infrastructure inside Gao Family Village was already extremely well developed. Cement roads extended in every direction, and road signs stood clearly at every intersection.

Soon, the car reached a large crossroads.

The sign indicated:

Left—west to Chengcheng County.

Right—east to Heyang County.

Straight ahead—north to Huanglong Mountain.

Young Master Bai laughed heartily and turned the wheel, steering the car straight onto the highway leading toward Huanglong Mountain.

A large group of graduate students immediately chased after him, eager to watch the spectacle. But to their astonishment, Automobile Unit Two steadily accelerated, its speed quickly surpassing thirty kilometers per hour.

Relying on nothing but their own legs, the onlookers were left far behind.

Wang Zheng reacted quickly.

"Quick! Get a public solar car! We can catch up with one of those!"

Everyone immediately understood and rushed toward the main fortress gate, where the Gao Family Village Main Vehicle Hub was located. Several idle public solar vehicles were parked there.

Seeing that important figures from the academy needed transport, the station administrator didn't dare refuse. He promptly approved the deployment of Route 86—the bus that had just returned for inspection, had been freshly repaired, and was ready to resume service.

The driver was the same one who had once transported the messenger Li Yuan through Huanglong Mountain.

The vehicle was the same.

And his driving style was just as wild.

"Everyone, hold on tight!" the driver shouted.

The familiar, adrenaline-pumping roar of the engine filled the air as he spun the steering wheel and shot off toward Huanglong Mountain. The bus was packed full of scientists and graduate students, all of them wide-eyed and staring straight ahead.

Route 86 lived up to its reputation.

Before long, it caught up with Young Master Bai's automobile.

They watched as Automobile Unit Two rolled steadily along the highway, occasionally letting out a loud whoosh as thick plumes of smoke burst from its chimney.

Every so often, Young Master Bai would grab another coal briquette and toss it into the boiler.

However, sitting so close to the boiler made the heat unavoidable. Sweat soon formed on his face. After throwing in a briquette, he casually wiped his face with his hand.

As a result, his usually refined, jade-like appearance became smudged with soot, making him look even more like a laborer than the actual laborers.

The Route 86 bus pulled alongside the automobile and slowed down until the two vehicles were driving side by side.

Song Yingxing leaned out the window and shouted,

"Hey, Little Bai! Where are you planning to drive this thing?"

Young Master Bai grinned.

"Back to Bai Family Fortress, of course!"

Song Yingxing was inwardly startled.

"Forty li? Can your car really handle that distance?"

Young Master Bai replied confidently,

"I've already calculated the coal weight and mileage. Forty li there and back won't be a problem. Besides, I can replenish coal at Bai Family Fortress. If we set up coal supply stations in every city in the future, this car could go anywhere."

Song Yingxing was deeply impressed.

"Your invention is truly remarkable."

Wang Zheng added from the side,

"Even Dao Xuan Tianzhun himself would surely be pleased with this creation."

Young Master Bai laughed loudly.

"From now on, wherever our cement roads reach, these vehicles can go as well. Transporting materials will no longer be a bottleneck."

Song Yingxing nodded, then spoke thoughtfully,

"But the real issue lies in the cost of this vehicle, doesn't it?"

Young Master Bai paused.

For a moment, he was completely speechless.

Chapter 795 The Local Militia Is Gone

Xixia County...

Chen Dajin and Zuo Liangyu had both been in a terrible mood lately.

After being brutally shelled by their own side's artillery in Yunyang Prefecture, the two of them had been genuinely furious for quite some time.

One was a palace eunuch, the other a tyrannical warlord—when had either of them ever suffered such humiliation?

They holed up in Yunyang Prefecture, suspended all military action, and spent their days arguing endlessly. In the end, they managed to pin all the blame onto Yunyang Pacification Commissioner Jiang Yunyi, throwing him straight into prison. They then welcomed the newly appointed Yunyang Pacification Commissioner, Lu Xiangheng, with great fanfare.

Only after venting their anger did the two finally feel satisfied enough to resume the campaign to pursue and suppress the rebels.

After a long and grueling chase, Zuo Liangyu's army finally caught up with the rebel forces on Erlong Mountain, northeast of Xixia County.

From afar, they could see the large Chuǎng banner fluttering proudly on the mountainside.

A huge number of rebels were entrenched along the slopes of Erlong Mountain, occupying the high ground and guarding the rugged terrain. Their posture was clear at a glance:

We're not running. If you want us, come and fight.

Seeing this, Zuo Liangyu couldn't help but laugh loudly.

"A bunch of wretched bandits!" he sneered. "They don't even dare flee at the sight of this general, and instead choose to hole up on a mountainside? Are they tired of living?"

Chen Dajin also laughed.

"Perfect. We can wipe them out in one net."

Zuo Liangyu didn't bother with further words.

"Attack the mountain!"

However, the moment his troops began the assault, he immediately sensed that something was wrong.

The rebels on the mountainside suddenly moved in unison. With a synchronized motion, they pulled out hundreds of matchlock muskets and Three-Eyed Arquebuses.

Zuo Liangyu: "???"

The next instant, gunfire erupted across the mountainside like strings of exploding firecrackers. Dense volleys of lead shot poured down toward Zuo Liangyu's army.

Zuo Liangyu's face turned green.

"What the hell?! Where did these rebels get firearms?"

Chen Dajin was equally startled.

"It's not strange for them to have firearms—they loot everywhere, so getting a few isn't surprising. But where did they get this much gunpowder and lead shot?"

The two men stood safely in the rear, directing the formation, merely shocked by what they saw.

But the government troops assaulting the mountain weren't just shocked—they were being cut down.

The bravest soldiers at the front collapsed in 大片 swathes in the blink of an eye.

Then, as if on cue, the rebels switched weapons again. They pulled out large numbers of repeating crossbows—clearly well-crafted, far superior to the crude hunting bows and light bows they had used in the past.

Repeating crossbows were also much easier to use than standard bows. Even without strong arms or refined archery skills, the rebels could operate them with ease.

Arrows poured down in a relentless storm, indiscriminately blanketing the slopes below.

The government troops, already scattered by the musket volleys, were immediately shredded by the rain of crossbow bolts. Their formation collapsed almost instantly. In less than a moment, the front line could no longer hold, and the troops began to retreat.

Then panic erupted.

With a collective roar, the entire army broke and fled down the mountain.

No matter how furiously Zuo Liangyu stomped his feet or cursed, it was useless. His soldiers retreated in one chaotic mass.

The rebels on the mountain burst into laughter.

"Zuo Liangyu, you bastard!" they shouted. "You chased us from Shanxi to Henan, then from Henan into Yunyang. What's wrong—can't keep up anymore? We don't fear you at all now!"

Zuo Liangyu was livid.

"How is this possible?" he roared. "How can these bandits possess such fine weapons? These are arms supplied exclusively to border armies! How could they possibly have them?!"

Chen Dajin said firmly,

"They must have looted them. They definitely looted them."

Zuo Liangyu clenched his fists.

"Someone sabotaged me! This is sabotage—without a doubt! Damn it all!"

What he didn't know was that at this very moment, a few dozen li north of the battlefield, Zhai Tang was sitting comfortably in a small grove, happily counting money.

These very weapons—originally meant to be sold to the Manchus—had instead been sold by him to the rebels at double the price.

And the rebels had been exceptionally generous buyers.

They didn't even bother to haggle.

After all, their money had nowhere else to go.

Gold, silver, and jewels were meaningless to rebels. What they wanted were powerful weapons and full bellies. As for Zhai Tang's prices, they couldn't care less.

Zhai Tang laughed to himself.

"Whose money isn't worth earning? As long as there's money to be made, anything goes. Hahahaha!"

—

Meanwhile, Chen Qiyu—the newly appointed Supreme Commander of Five Provinces—had just arrived at the front lines, brimming with ambition and ready to launch sweeping reforms.

The moment he took office, Chen Qiyu began deploying troops with great urgency.

He ordered Shaanxi Governor Lian Guoshi to garrison Shangnan County, blocking the rebels' route toward the northwest.

He ordered Yunyang Pacification Commissioner Lu Xiangheng to garrison Fang County and Zhushan, cutting off their western escape.

He ordered Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng to station troops in Lushi County, preventing a northeastern breakout.

And he ordered Huguang Governor Tang Hui to garrison Nanzhang, sealing the southeastern route.

As for Chen Qiyu himself...

After careful consideration, he decided to attach himself to the strongest fighter among them all.

Thus, he chose Lu Xiangheng and eagerly hurried to join Lu Xiangheng's army.

—

Upon receiving the Supreme Commander's order, Lian Guoshi prepared to head to Shangnan County once more.

He first mustered 1,500 soldiers from the three garrisons. Then, as usual, he attempted to summon the local militia.

But this time, something went very wrong.

When the summons went out, hardly anyone responded.

Even after shouting himself hoarse through a tin megaphone, only one or two hundred people showed up.

Alarmed, Lian Guoshi summoned his subordinates and questioned them closely. Only then did he learn the truth.

All the idle, young, able-bodied laborers had been recruited by the Prince of Qin's Residence—to build roads.

This put Lian Guoshi in an extremely awkward position.

He quickly asked,

"Where is the Heir Apparent right now?"

A subordinate replied,

"The Heir Apparent is to the north, inspecting his railway project."

Lian Guoshi couldn't simply send a messenger. The difference in their ranks made that impossible.

He could only go himself.

Mounting a swift horse, Lian Guoshi rode out of Xi'an City, galloping furiously northward along the long railway line.

After crossing the Wei River Bridge and riding several more miles past its northern end, he finally found the Heir Apparent, Zhu Cunji.

This area was already close to Sanyuan County.

Strictly speaking, Zhu Cunji being this far from Xi'an City violated ancestral regulations. However, the distance wasn't especially far, nor particularly close. It was unlikely anyone would bother reporting him.

Even Shi Kefa, as a member of the Jinyiwei, wouldn't trouble himself to report such a trivial matter to the emperor.

Lian Guoshi rode up and shouted loudly,

"Heir Apparent!"

"Huh? Minister Lian!" Zhu Cunji's face immediately lit up with a broad smile. He pointed proudly at his chest, where an image of Dao Xuan Tianzun was embroidered in golden thread.

"Don't you think my embroidery looks magnificent?"

Lian Guoshi was momentarily stunned.

"Huh? Heir Apparent... have you also joined the Dao Xuan Tianzun Daoist Sect?"

Zhu Cunji replied without hesitation,

"Of course I have! Why wouldn't I? Dao Xuan Tianzun has personally manifested divine miracles—bestowed such a colossal bridge upon us, and even granted us such a wondrous Divine Mirror. With a deity this powerful, who else would I believe in if not him?"

Lian Guoshi sighed inwardly. He knew there was no point arguing about faith.

Cutting straight to the issue, he said quickly,

"The Supreme Commander of Five Provinces, Chen Qiyu, has ordered this official to lead troops to garrison Shangnan County, preventing rebel forces from entering Shaanxi. However, I cannot recruit local militia. I've heard that all the able-bodied young men in Xi'an Prefecture have been hired by the Heir Apparent to build roads..."

Chapter 796 The Flying Rat Emerges

Zhu Cunji rolled his eyes.

"What does your failure to recruit local militia have to do with me, this heir-apparent?"

Lian Guoshi could only give a wry smile.

"Without local militia, this humble official's troops are insufficient."

Zhu Cunji continued rolling his eyes.

"Where's He Renlong? Isn't he the Commander-in-Chief of Shaanxi?"

Lian Guoshi replied,

"He is currently in Henan."

Zhu Cunji snorted.

"Oh, so He Renlong runs around everywhere, leaves you without troops, and now you come to seize my road-building workforce? Absolutely not! No, no—this heir-apparent will never agree to that."

Lian Guoshi was left speechless.

Zhu Cunji suddenly remembered something.

"Isn't there a Major Luo Xi who's quite reliable? He should be in Shangnan County, right? Why don't you just go rely on Luo Xi and be done with it?"

Lian Guoshi forced another bitter smile.

"Major Luo Xi has already been promoted by His Majesty to Garrison Commander of Shangnan County. Shangnan County is now under Lu Xiangheng's jurisdiction. This humble official can no longer command him."

Zhu Cunji shook his head like a rattle drum.

"I don't care. No matter what you say, I, this heir-apparent, will not give up these local militia. They're workers hired with my own hard-earned silver. Losing even one would affect my road-building project."

Lian Guoshi felt a wave of helplessness wash over him...

What was he supposed to do?

Just then, his trusted subordinate suddenly rushed over and shouted excitedly,

"Governor! Good news—excellent news!"

Lian Guoshi said,

"Speak."

The subordinate replied,

"Wu Shen and Shi Kefa have somehow gathered a large group of trained recruits. They're waiting outside Xi'an's city gates for you to inspect them."

Lian Guoshi exclaimed,

"Oh? Trained recruits found by Wu Shen and Shi Kefa? Where did they find them?"

The subordinate smiled mysteriously.

"You'll know once you see them."

Left with no choice, Lian Guoshi mounted his horse again and rode back along the railway track toward Xi'an.

Outside the city, he saw two thousand trained recruits already lined up in neat formations, standing in disciplined silence, waiting for his inspection.

The man leading them was sturdy and sharp-eyed, clearly not someone to trifle with.

Seeing Wu Shen and Shi Kefa present as well, Lian Guoshi hurriedly asked,

"Gentlemen, these trained recruits... where did they come from?"

Wu Shen laughed.

"Ha! These men were once rebels. They followed Wang Jiayin. During the battle at Hequ County, they were captured by us and later escorted back to Shaanxi by Sir Shi."

Shi Kefa continued,

"This humble official sent them to Huanglong Mountain and settled them in the valley. They farmed and labored there for several years. Now, every one of them is a law-abiding, upright citizen."

As they spoke, both men wore faintly proud expressions.

Back then, Wu Shen had provided the funds, and Shi Kefa personally escorted thirty thousand people on a grueling journey spanning thousands of li, traversing countless dangerous paths.

In the end, those tens of thousands of former rebels settled down peacefully and never rebelled again.

Although much of it was thanks to Gao Family Village's support, Wu Shen and Shi Kefa's contributions were undeniable.

Looking at these "successfully reformed" men now, both naturally felt pride welling in their hearts.

Wu Shen sighed deeply.

"Back then, people called me Wu Ten-Thousand, and even now they still remember those hundred thousand taels of silver. Today, those silver coins have finally borne fruit. I, Wu Shen, have not failed the empire."

Lian Guoshi asked cautiously,

"So... these trained recruits... are willing to come out and help?"

At that moment, the leader of the two thousand men stepped forward and spoke loudly,

"My name is Flying Rat of Hengshan. I was once a major general under Wang Jiayin. Today, having turned over a new leaf, I lead two thousand local militia to reinforce the Governor. We swear to block the rebels from entering Shaanxi and protect our hard-won happy lives!"

Lian Guoshi was stunned.

Why does this man speak so fluently? And so... formally?

'Hard-won happy lives'—this phrasing sounds strangely familiar...

Suddenly, realization struck him.

He had heard it on Gaojia News.

Every evening after dinner, the Divine Mirror in Xi'an's central market square broadcast Gaojia News on schedule, and the anchors often used phrases like:

"Our hard-won happy lives,"

"Fields of hope heavy with golden grain,"

"A beautiful future lies ahead."

Lian Guoshi could practically recite a few lines himself.

Unable to resist, he asked,

"Do you often watch Gaojia News?"

Flying Rat answered without hesitation,

"Every single day."

Lian Guoshi nearly reached out to shake his hand, delighted to find a kindred spirit.

"Ah—no, no, I almost got sidetracked," he quickly refocused.

"It is excellent that you are willing to join the local militia and serve the imperial court. I will immediately arrange for weapons to be distributed."

"No need," Flying Rat replied calmly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has already arranged weapons for us."

Lian Guoshi blinked.

"Huh?"

Following Flying Rat's gesture, he looked toward the nearby train station.

A massive train was unloading cargo. Crate after crate of firearms and basket after basket of military rations were being carried down and stacked neatly along the platform.

A logistics captain from Gao Family Village, holding a manifest, hurried over and thrust it into Flying Rat's hands.

"Flying Rat! Weapons and supplies for two thousand men. Please sign here."

Flying Rat took the pen, scribbled a crooked "ya," pressed his fingerprint, and handed it back. The logistics captain immediately vanished.

Lian Guoshi sucked in a sharp breath.

Something about this felt deeply strange... but he couldn't pinpoint what.

Still—troops were troops. Better than none.

Thus, Lian Guoshi set out for Shangnan County with 1,500 imperial soldiers and 2,000 local militia.

Once on the road, the difference became painfully obvious.

His own 1,500 imperial soldiers wore tattered uniforms, carried battered weapons, ate sparse rations, and trudged along with shattered morale.

Behind them, the 2,000 local militia marched in clean uniforms, their weapons pristine, rations plentiful, spirits soaring.

It was absurd.

Who were the real regular troops here?

Lian Guoshi almost wanted to draft a memorial, compiling all the strange sights he'd witnessed in Xi'an and submit it to the Emperor.

But recalling the Emperor's temperament, he sighed again.

"Forget it... better not invite trouble upon myself."

The journey from Xi'an to Shangnan County spanned roughly four hundred li.

Lian Guoshi drove his troops relentlessly, pushing them day and night.

The first half went smoothly enough, but as they neared Wuguan Pass, something began to feel off.

The roads around Wuguan Pass had become inexplicably smooth and wide.

Perfectly paved cement roads—who could have built such things?

Astonished, he followed the road all the way to the foot of Wuguan Pass.

There, he discovered a massive complex labeled:

"Wuguan Cement Factory No. 1."

Countless laborers were carrying sacks of cement out of the factory, transporting them southeast.

Completely bewildered, Lian Guoshi followed the flow of people—and soon saw a massive construction site ahead, where endless streams of laborers were frantically building roads...

Chapter 797 I'm Just a Hanger-On

Lian Guoshi suddenly recalled that during his previous visit, former Assistant General Luo Xi had personally led his household guards to decisively crush the rebel forces here, capturing more than ten thousand surrendered bandits in one stroke.

At the time, Luo Xi had openly declared that these captives would be put to hard labor—building roads, bridges, and fortifications.

Now, seeing the scene before him, it was obvious that those people were indeed being used to construct roads around Wuguan Pass.

"Well, well," Lian Guoshi thought to himself.

"A truly benevolent policy."

However, the cement factory nearby looked strangely familiar.

There was a similar one in Xi'an.

Both had been built by Li Daoxuan.

Now that Li Daoxuan's cement factories had extended all the way to Wuguan Pass, the sheer scale of his operations was undeniable.

Such powerful merchants were truly formidable.

Lian Guoshi continued onward. As he neared the outskirts of Shangnan County, he suddenly saw a massive factory complex rising ahead of him, bristling with chimneys and roaring furnaces.

He had seen something like this before.

At the Zunhua Iron Smelting Plant in Shuntian Prefecture.

These were blast furnaces—nothing but blast furnaces.

Outside the factory gates, countless carts rolled back and forth, transporting iron ore into the compound.

And what came out of the factory?

Blades.

Spears.

Polearms.

And... firearms.

Lian Guoshi's heart jolted.

"Shangnan County is already producing weapons like this?" he wondered in alarm.

Once he entered the city, his shock only deepened.

In an astonishingly short period of time, Shangnan County had been rebuilt with remarkable order. The city walls were already more than halfway repaired. The streets were clean and orderly. The common folk he encountered wore relaxed smiles, their lives clearly far removed from hardship.

This was a world apart from the devastated city he remembered—the Shangnan County left in ruins after Yi Dou Gu and Wa Guanzi had rampaged through it.

"Your Excellency, Governor—you've returned!"

Luo Xi appeared ahead on the street, leading a group of subordinates forward to greet him.

Lian Guoshi clasped his hands.

"General Luo," he said sincerely, "you've managed Shangnan County with exemplary order. Your governance surpasses that of many civil officials."

Luo Xi laughed.

"This humble general doesn't dare take the credit. It's all thanks to Li Daoxuan's tremendous assistance. And Lord Lu Xiangheng's strong support as well—he handed over all the roaming bandits captured in Yunyang for me to put to hard labor. Naturally, progress here has been swift."

Lian Guoshi couldn't help exclaiming,

"With General Luo guarding Shangnan County, this official truly feels a great burden lifted from his shoulders."

Meanwhile, Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng was feeling anything but relieved.

Several days earlier, he had received direct orders from Chen Qiyu, the Supreme Commander of the Five Provinces: Lushi County must be held, preventing roaming bandits from fleeing northeast.

Fan Shangzheng immediately rushed to Lushi County with Henan's Commander-in-Chief, Zhang Yingchang, to personally take command.

Lushi County was rugged and treacherous, its county seat wedged tightly between two mountains. The terrain was exceedingly complex.

No sooner had they arrived than they were ambushed.

The roaming bandits possessed large numbers of firearms and repeating crossbows, obtained from some unknown source. Using the mountains and dense forests as cover, they unleashed a withering barrage.

Zhang Yingchang's troops were instantly thrown into chaos, scattering in panic, ducking for cover with heads lowered.

Fan Shangzheng didn't even manage to enter the county seat before being forced into retreat.

There was no hope.

The Henan garrison troops were utterly useless.

Yet the Supreme Commander's orders weighed heavily on him—Lushi County had to be taken.

What was he supposed to do?

Fan Shangzheng was nearly driven mad with anxiety, so distressed he almost considered resigning on the spot.

"What do we do? What do we do?" Zhang Yingchang cried, grabbing Fan Shangzheng and shaking him desperately.

"Your Excellency, Governor, we're finished! We simply can't take Lushi County! If the roaming bandits break out from Lushi when the four government armies converge, both of us will be guilty of a grave crime—a grave crime!"

Fan Shangzheng, equally frantic, snapped,

"Stop shaking me! Let this official think—let me think carefully."

Zhang Yingchang suddenly said,

"Your Excellency, when you defended Luoyang, didn't you have a powerful firearms unit? Use them! If not now, then when? Are you planning to wait until we're dismissed before deploying them?"

Fan Shangzheng's eyes lit up.

"Ah! That's right—Bai Yuan! I can still seek help from Master Bai Yuan!"

At this very moment, Bai Yuan's militia was undergoing frantic expansion.

After the last roaming bandit assault on Luoyang, Zhu Changxun, the Prince of Fu, had been terrified out of his wits. To save his own life, he had voluntarily contributed funds to expand the militia.

At the same time, he deliberately avoided any real authority—he had no desire to be accused of plotting rebellion.

Thus, the militia—nominally funded by the Prince of Fu, but in reality backed by Gao Family Village—launched an aggressive recruitment drive.

Recruiting soldiers in Henan was far easier than in the territory of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The people here lived in extreme misery.

Floods followed by droughts.

Hunger and cold without end.

They cared nothing for the saying, "Good iron is not used for nails, and good men do not become soldiers."

Give them a full meal, and they would do anything.

Moreover, "joining the militia" wasn't regarded as formally entering the military register.

Militiamen were still commoners.

That last hesitation vanished entirely.

The moment Bai Yuan's recruitment notices went up, refugees swarmed in. Within minutes, the threshold of the recruitment office was nearly trampled flat.

Bai Yuan effortlessly recruited ten thousand men from Henan.

However, these new recruits could not be deployed immediately.

Men without ideological training, once armed, might easily turn their weapons against the weak—becoming no different from the abusive government troops.

Thus, the ten thousand recruits were first sent to Yellow Turban Fortress at Xiaolangdi.

There, they drilled formations daily, studied the Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention, and trained with wooden dummy firearms.

One day, as Bai Yuan watched a squad practice bayonet drills with their wooden rifles, a messenger hurried over.

"Master Bai," the man said, "I am a household guard of Governor Fan. I bring an urgent request."

"Oh?" Bai Yuan replied.

"Governor Fan and I are old acquaintances. Speak freely."

The guard quickly explained the situation—how the roaming bandits in Lushi County were armed with firearms and repeating crossbows, and how the government troops had suffered repeated defeats.

Bai Yuan frowned slightly.

"Hmm? Roaming bandits with firearms and repeating crossbows? Could they even afford such things?"

As doubt formed in his mind, a familiar voice resonated from the gold coin medallion on his chest.

"Something is wrong."

"Ah—Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived?"

Bai Yuan straightened at once.

"This humble one feels the same. Firearms require vast quantities of ammunition, and repeating crossbows consume arrows at an alarming rate. Roaming bandits are constantly on the move and possess no manufacturing capacity. There's no way they could sustain such weapons."

Dao Xuan Tianzun commanded calmly,

"Agree to the request. Go reinforce them. Find out who is secretly supplying the roaming bandits."

"This humble one obeys."

Xiaolangdi barracks immediately burst into activity.

Bai Yuan mobilized four thousand men—two thousand veterans and two thousand new recruits—and marched southwest toward Lushi County.

After reaching the Luo River, they followed it downstream for several days.

Soon, they arrived at Liucun Village, where another army was camped.

It was the battered Henan garrison—Fan Shangzheng and Zhang Yingchang's defeated troops.

The garrison soldiers looked utterly miserable, their combat strength barely better than Xiaolangdi's new recruits.

Seeing Bai Yuan's forces arrive, they cheered in relief, instantly assuming the posture of—

"We're just hanger-ons."

Chapter 798 I See You

Bai Yuan first asked Fan Shangzheng and Zhang Yingchang to give a detailed account of the situation ahead.

Fan Shangzheng began explaining, his tone carrying a trace of grievance.

He and Zhang Yingchang had advanced along the Luo River. Lushi County was extremely mountainous, with roads so treacherous that movement was severely restricted. Only a single official road ran alongside the Luo River and led directly toward the county town.

To ensure stable supply lines, the imperial army could not move freely through the wilderness like the roaming bandits. They had no choice but to march along the official road hugging the river.

This, in turn, handed the rebels a perfect ambush corridor.

On both sides of the official road between Liucun Village and the county town, rebel forces were hidden everywhere. They could launch ambushes at will, striking whenever they pleased.

In the past, government troops had not been particularly afraid of ambushes.

Once scouts confirmed enemy positions, soldiers could raise their shields, easily deflect the rebels' pitiful, broken arrows, and then wipe out the entire ambush force without difficulty.

But now, everything had changed.

The rebel ambushers were armed with flintlock rifles and repeating crossbows—equipment straight from border armies.

If government troops were caught in an ambush now, casualties would be severe.

Zhang Yingchang finished his explanation with indignation boiling over, summarizing bitterly:

"My general's troops are using standard garrison equipment, yet these rebels are wielding border-army weapons. Tell me—are they the rebels, or am I the rebel?"

He felt utterly wronged.

A dignified Provincial Commander-in-Chief.

A Grand General of the second rank.

And yet his men were worse equipped than bandits.

Who could he even complain to?

Bai Yuan found it slightly amusing, but he did not dismiss the danger. In such terrain, ambushes truly were a nightmare. Even he would find them troublesome.

Seeing the government troops practically begging him for help, Bai Yuan had no choice but to seek an even sturdier "leg" to lean on himself.

He lowered his voice and whispered to the gold-threaded Dao Xuan Tianzun emblem hanging on his chest.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun... are you there?"

The golden-threaded Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled.

Bai Yuan whispered again, "This humble one requests your guidance."

Dao Xuan Tianzun replied calmly, "Very well. Release the reconnaissance hot air balloon."

Bai Yuan was instantly overjoyed.

His biggest support was present.

He turned and barked orders at once.

"Release the reconnaissance hot air balloon!"

Ever since Shi Jian fought his battle in northern Shaanxi, the Gao Family Village militia had adopted reconnaissance hot air balloons as standard equipment during deployments.

Moreover, the newer balloons were no longer crudely made by pasting torn book pages with Dao Xuan Tianzun's image onto them.

These balloons were now crafted with extreme care.

After all, Dao Xuan Tianzun was deeply revered. Anything bearing His image could not possibly be made casually.

Each balloon was a fine handicraft, painted with exquisite detail, beautiful enough to be considered artwork.

Some balloons even featured eight panels, each depicting a different divine miracle manifested by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

When this magnificent balloon began to rise, Fan Shangzheng and Zhang Yingchang stared at it in complete confusion.

"What... is that?" Fan Shangzheng asked.

Bai Yuan answered matter-of-factly, "A reconnaissance hot air balloon."

Fan Shangzheng frowned. "And why are you launching it?"

Zhang Yingchang exclaimed in alarm, "This thing is so colorful and conspicuous! Once it rises into the sky, won't it just tell the rebels exactly where we are? Wouldn't that make ambushing us even easier?"

Bai Yuan patted the flintlock rifle slung at his side and grinned.

"Good. Let them come. If they come, we fight."

Zhang Yingchang clutched his face in despair.

"But it's an ambush—an ambush! They're the ones supposed to sneak up on us!"

Bai Yuan waved his hand casually.

"Relax. We won't be ambushed."

Then he said decisively, "Let's move out. We need to enter Lushi County town."

Zhang Yingchang's legs nearly gave out. He genuinely did not dare advance any further.

Fan Shangzheng, however, had more confidence in Bai Yuan. He agreed to move forward, though he still reminded him cautiously:

"Master Bai, do not underestimate the rebels. They are well-equipped now. If we're ambushed, the losses will be catastrophic."

Bai Yuan nodded.

"Governor, rest assured."

Fan Shangzheng hesitated, then asked quietly, "By the way... did Grandmaster Xiao come this time? His martial prowess is unrivaled. With him alone, we could hold off an entire army."

Bai Yuan laughed.

"Of course he came. He's sleeping in the carriage at the rear. When the old man doesn't feel like moving, it's best not to disturb him. At a critical moment, he'll act."

"Old man?" Fan Shangzheng blinked. "Such a young and extraordinary expert, and you call him an old man?"

But that wasn't important right now.

With militia in front and government troops behind, they departed Liucun Village and advanced along the official road beside the Luo River.

Above the marching column, the reconnaissance hot air balloon floated steadily at medium altitude.

From this height, Li Daoxuan's view was broad and unobstructed, yet not so high that trees or terrain blocked important details.

Meanwhile...

On a small hillside southwest of Liucun Village, a group of rebel soldiers lay concealed.

Their leader was known as Scorpion Block.

He had once been the fourth company captain under the great bandit Bu Zhan Ni. After Bu Zhan Ni fell in battle, Scorpion Block only grew stronger. His total forces now exceeded 10,500 men.

Scorpion Block personally commanded 4,000 troops stationed inside Lushi County town.

The remaining 6,000-plus were dispersed throughout the forests around the county, tightly monitoring the official road.

This particular force of roughly one thousand men, positioned southwest of Liucun Village, had been assigned specifically to ambush Henan's troops.

They were lazily chewing on looted provisions when a scout suddenly shouted:

"Look! A very beautiful object has risen over the official road near Liucun Village!"

The rebels all looked up.

Sure enough, a massive, multicolored reconnaissance hot air balloon floated in the distant sky, drifting slowly forward.

The scout ran to the edge of the hillside to take another look, then turned back laughing.

"It's the government troops who released it!"

The bandits burst into laughter.

"Are these government troops insane?" one mocked. "Afraid we won't notice them? They even light a lantern to announce themselves?"

"Brothers, time to work!"

"The Henan troops are useless," another sneered. "We'll greet them with flintlock rifles and repeating crossbows. They'll run straight back to Liucun Village."

The rebels laughed and joked as they picked up their new weapons.

This batch of flintlock rifles and repeating crossbows had been sold to them by a mysterious merchant. The bandits didn't know who the merchant was—but they all agreed he was astonishingly capable.

Among the thousand rebels, two hundred carried flintlock rifles, three hundred wielded repeating crossbows, and the remaining five hundred carried ordinary rebel weapons.

They crouched near the cliff edge.

The well-equipped rebels prepared ammunition and bolts.

The poorly equipped ones crept into the treeline, ready to wait.

Once the firearms shattered the government troops' morale, they would rush out, pursue the fleeing soldiers, slaughter them, and seize their spoils.

The government column slowly advanced along the official road, nearing the ambush zone.

The rebels smirked.

"This unit looks stupid," one muttered. "They didn't even send scouts."

"They don't look like regular troops," another said. "Their clothes are different."

"Like... militia?"

"Wait—what? Every one of them is carrying a flintlock rifle?"

"A militia of flintlock riflemen?"

"Is militia equipment this luxurious now?"

"Doesn't matter," the leader sneered. "They don't know we're here. Soon we'll kill them all and take their rifles."

Just then—

When the militia was still a hundred paces outside effective firing range, they suddenly halted.

At the front, a man dressed in white raised a tin megaphone and shouted toward the hidden hillside:

"I see you."

Chapter 799 Grew Up Eating Fish

The instant the man in white shouted, a ripple of unease spread through the rebel ranks hidden on the hillside.

"Damn it, he spotted us!"

"That's impossible! We're this far away, and we're hidden perfectly. How could he possibly see us?"

"This has to be a trick. He saw how dangerous these mountain woods are and guessed there might be an ambush, so he shouted at random. If we panic and expose ourselves, we'll fall right into his trap."

The leader's analysis steadied their nerves. The rebels quickly regained their composure.

"Exactly, exactly! This is definitely a ruse to flush us out."

They remained motionless, bodies pressed flat against the ground, not daring to lift their heads even slightly.

The man in white was naturally Bai Yuan.

After calling out several times, he raised his head and looked toward the hillside. It was quiet and peaceful. Not a single rebel showed themselves.

He let out a soft sigh. "Alas."

Zhang Yingchang walked up from behind him. "Mr. Bai, you've already tried such a ruse, yet no one revealed themselves. That hillside is completely silent. It seems there's no ambush after all. We should continue forward."

"No, there is an ambush up there," Bai Yuan replied with a faint smile. "I wasn't using a ruse just now. I was simply greeting them."

Zhang Yingchang froze.

Bai Yuan continued calmly, "When one encounters strangers in the wild, especially in desolate mountains like these, it is only proper to exchange greetings first. This is part of the 'rites' among the six arts of a gentleman. I am quite particular about such things."

Zhang Yingchang: "..."

Inside, he muttered, Is this man completely insane?

Bai Yuan shook his head slowly. "Alas, these rascals truly lack decorum. I greeted them, yet they did not respond. No refinement at all."

"No one cares about that!" Zhang Yingchang snapped.

Bai Yuan calmly lifted the tin megaphone again and shouted toward the hillside, "Then I shall act."

The hillside remained silent. Calm. Seemingly safe.

Zhang Yingchang was on the verge of tears. This man is insane. He's yelling at an empty mountain!

Bai Yuan set down the megaphone without a trace of emotion. He then took out a peculiar metal tube fitted with two glass lenses and raised it to his eyes, carefully examining the hillside for several moments.

Lowering the tube, he gestured to a nearby retainer. "The rifle."

The retainer immediately presented him with a custom-made firearm.

Its barrel was significantly longer than standard military weapons, and its craftsmanship was visibly superior. The rifling inside the barrel was spiraled rather than straight. The stock was inlaid with gold, and several pieces of fine jade were embedded into the grip, making it both lethal and ornate.

Bai Yuan took the firearm, aimed it toward the hillside, and issued orders at the same time. "All soldiers, prepare yourselves. In a moment, bandits will spring out from the hillside. You may fire when they do."

"Yes, sir!" the soldiers responded in unison.

Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, Bai Yuan squeezed the trigger.

Bang!

A gunshot echoed through the mountains.

From a patch of tall grass that moments ago appeared empty, a shrill cry of agony rang out. A rebel's body rolled down the slope, flattening ferns and grass as it tumbled, like a grotesque game of sliding down a hill.

Shock rippled through the rebels hidden above.

"Damn it! Can he actually see us?"

"How is that possible? From this distance?!"

"How can his firearm shoot that far? And with such accuracy?"

"It must be luck! A blind cat stumbling onto a dead mouse! He's still bluffing, trying to scare us!"

Zhang Yingchang was completely stunned. There really were rebels on that hillside? And he killed one with a single shot? From that far away? That has to be several hundred paces! What kind of terrifying marksmanship is this?

Bai Yuan casually handed the rifle aside. The retainer took it, swiftly reloaded it with practiced movements, and returned it to him.

Without hesitation, Bai Yuan raised the weapon again and fired.

Bang!

Another scream echoed through the air. Another rebel body rolled down the hillside.

At last, the rebels could no longer hold on.

"We've been exposed!" their leader roared.

"Chief, should we counterattack?"

"Counterattack my ass! Our firearms and repeating crossbows can't even reach that far! Damn it! Get up, move positions!"

The rebels sprang to their feet, scrambling to flee.

But the moment they stood up, they became living targets.

While Bai Yuan was firing, the Gao Family Village militia had already prepared themselves. Their firearms were loaded and ready. The instant a rebel exposed himself, there was no reason not to fire.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A volley of gunfire erupted.

Their marksmanship was nowhere near Bai Yuan's level, but sheer numbers made up for it. With so many barrels firing at once, hits were inevitable.

Screams rang out continuously. One rebel after another collapsed on the hillside.

"What the hell?! Why can their guns shoot farther than ours?"

"At this distance, we can't even return fire!"

"Damn it, I'll fight back!"

A handful of reckless rebels began firing wildly. Bird guns cracked sharply, Three-Eyed Arquebuses thundered, and repeating crossbows loosed bolts that whistled through the air.

But their desperate resistance was completely useless.

Smoothbore bullets and crossbow bolts simply could not travel that far. The laws of physics were merciless.

Moreover, smoothbore firearms only showed their true power when used in disciplined formations firing in volleys. Scattered rebels, firing one shot at a time from a hillside, had no chance.

Their bullets and arrows began to arc downward midway, falling harmlessly into the empty ground between the two forces.

Meanwhile, the militia's bullets continued forward, precise and relentless, cutting down rebels one by one.

"This is pointless! Retreat! Retreat!" the leader shouted in despair.

"Run!"

The rebels turned and fled once more. The hillside became a scene of chaos as figures scrambled uphill, desperately trying to crest the ridge and escape.

But every time a militia gun barked, another body was struck from behind and sent tumbling down the slope.

Their morale completely collapsed.

Zhang Yingchang, who had been dazed until now, suddenly snapped back to his senses.

As a commander holding the rank of zongbing, he knew exactly how to seize such an opportunity. Seeing the rebels break so thoroughly, he waved his hand and roared, "Pursue them!"

His personal guards charged first, blades flashing as they cut down several fleeing rebels with brutal efficiency.

The garrison soldiers behind them, seeing how overwhelming their advantage was, felt all fear vanish. What is there to be afraid of? Charge!

Garrison troops were notoriously unreliable in head-on battles, but when it came to turning a victory into a rout, they were experts.

Hordes of Henan garrison soldiers howled like wolves as they surged up the hillside, caught up with the fleeing rebels, and hacked them down mercilessly.

It didn't take long.

Over two hundred rebel corpses were left behind on the hillside. The remaining seven hundred or so fled in panic toward Luoshi County.

"Hahahaha! A total victory! A complete triumph!"

Zhang Yingchang was overjoyed.

He had suffered defeat after defeat in recent days, to the point of doubting his own worth. But today's battle was deeply satisfying. At last, he had an achievement worthy of reporting to the imperial court.

He walked back toward Bai Yuan, beaming, cupped his hands respectfully, and said, "Mr. Bai, you are truly miraculous. How in the world did you manage to discover their ambush?"

Bai Yuan smiled faintly.

"I grew up by Horseshoe Lake," he said. "I've eaten fish since I was a child. My eyesight is naturally good."

Chapter 800 The Artillery Commander's New Idea

With Dao Xuan Tianzhun's reconnaissance hot air balloons in his possession, Bai Yuan's march became completely unhindered. Advancing along the Luo River, he pressed steadily southwest toward Lushi County Town, his progress smooth and unimpeded.

Along the way, any marauders who attempted to ambush him were decisively crushed, forced to scatter in disarray and flee back toward the city.

Scorpion's Claw had originally commanded over ten thousand five hundred men. After accounting for those killed, wounded, captured, or lost during their chaotic retreats, fewer than eight thousand remained under his banner.

He had already sensed that these Henan government troops were not enemies to be taken lightly. Unwilling to risk being trapped inside the county town, he decisively abandoned Lushi County altogether and withdrew southwest toward Yunyang.

Thus, Bai Yuan—working in concert with Fan Shangzheng and Zhang Yingchang—successfully took control of Lushi County. At last, they had fulfilled the orders issued by Chen Qiyu, Governor-General of the Five Provinces.

Gao Family Village — Ordnance Bureau

Inside the Ordnance Bureau, the commander of the artillery battalion stood solemnly before Xu Dafu, the bureau's director.

Xu Dafu eyed him warily and said bluntly, "What do you want? Let me make this clear first—I won't agree to anything dangerous."

The artillery commander hurriedly waved his hands. "No, no, nothing dangerous at all. What I'm here for is actually quite simple."

"Oh?" Xu Dafu raised an eyebrow. "Then speak."

The commander explained, "Ever since the effective range of Gao Family Village firearms increased significantly, the Armored Grenadier Battalion was disbanded. Seeing that happen... I couldn't help but feel a little uneasy."

He hesitated for a moment, then continued, "I'm constantly worried that one day, our artillery battalion might simply vanish as well."

Xu Dafu snorted. "Ridiculous. The Armored Grenadier Battalion was disbanded because firearms now outrange hand-thrown grenades. Their battlefield role became obsolete. What does that have to do with your artillery battalion? Cannons are indispensable during sieges. You have nothing to worry about."

"But the artillery battalion is barely used these days," the commander insisted. "Just like the Armored Grenadiers before they were declared redundant. That feeling... it's terrifying. I don't want my battalion to disappear."

Xu Dafu looked at him as though he were listening to nonsense. "There's nothing I can do about that."

The commander leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. "That's why I've thought of a solution. A way to revitalize the artillery battalion."

Xu Dafu raised his eyebrows again, silently urging him to continue.

The commander took a breath. "The reason our artillery is rarely deployed is simple: the cannons are too cumbersome. Unless we're laying siege to a city, nobody wants to drag such heavy things around."

He spoke faster as his idea took shape. "But what if we had smaller cannons? Cannons similar in size to the weapons mounted on Dao Xuan Tianzhun's arms. Those could be carried anywhere."

Xu Dafu rubbed his temples, already feeling a headache coming on. "Small cannons also mean weak power. Those tiny iron balls fired from Dao Xuan Tianzhun's arms are mostly for intimidation or spectacle. They aren't suited for serious combat."

"I know that," the commander replied quickly. "But I was thinking—what if we used small cannon barrels, roughly the size of Dao Xuan Tianzhun's arms, to fire smaller grenades?"

He grew animated. "If such grenades exploded in the middle of enemy formations, the killing power would be tremendous. This would also completely solve the problem of hand grenades having insufficient range. Our artillery battalion could finally be deployed regularly again!"

Xu Dafu paused, his expression turning thoughtful. "Explosive shells?"

He shook his head slowly. "The imperial court has considered explosive shells for a long time. But the concept always remained theoretical. It's simply too impractical."

He continued sternly, "The force generated when a cannon fires is enormous. A simple grenade would never survive it. It would either be crushed flat or detonate prematurely. A barrel explosion is no joke—it would kill your artillerymen."

The commander's eyes lit up instead of dimming. "I've already considered that."

Xu Dafu blinked.

"We could place a small charge of gunpowder at the bottom of the barrel," the commander explained eagerly. "Then add a wooden plate, cushioned with cotton. After that, we ignite the grenade, place it on top of the cotton, and fire the cannon."

He gestured with his hands as he spoke. "The force would first push the wooden plate, which then pushes the grenade nestled in the cotton, launching it forward. Wouldn't that work?"

A flicker of genuine interest crossed Xu Dafu's face.

"A wooden sabot?" he murmured.

To be fair, while the idea sounded crude at first, when examined carefully, it actually made a strange amount of sense.

Xu Dafu stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Come with me. Let's go to the Thirty-Two Middle School and consult Song Yingxing, Young Master Bai, and Wang Zheng. We'll hear what they think."

A Few Days Later...

On the open ground behind the Ordnance Bureau, a large group of scientists and senior technical craftsmen gathered together.

All eyes were fixed on the artillery battalion commander, who was carefully handling an iron pipe roughly the thickness of an adult's arm.

A miniature cannon.

Due to its small size, the projectile it fired naturally couldn't be large—only about the size of a small grenade.

What truly caught everyone's attention was the grenade itself.

At its base was a small wooden sabot. Through the center of the sabot ran a fuse made of a special material.

This fuse could be easily ignited, yet it burned extremely slowly, unlike ordinary match cord.

It was a device meticulously reproduced from the technical blueprints provided by Dao Xuan Tianzhun, officially known as the "Wooden Tube Delayed Fuze."

This design was born directly from failure.

The scientists had already conducted multiple rounds of experiments. In the beginning, their process was simple: prepare the cannon, light the grenade's fuse, insert it into the barrel, and then ignite the cannon's powder charge.

During one experiment, however, the grenade's fuse burned too quickly while the cannon's fuse burned too slowly.

The result was catastrophic.

The grenade detonated before the cannon fired.

The small cannon barrel burst apart, nearly injuring several people standing nearby.

After that incident, the scientists worked frantically to develop a fuse with a stable burn rate. Unfortunately, their technological expertise was highly specialized rather than comprehensive. This was not a device they could develop on short notice.

Thus, Dao Xuan Tianzhun intervened once more, providing the detailed specifications for the Wooden Tube Delayed Fuze.

Only then did Xu Dafu successfully produce a truly stable fuse—one whose defining feature was precise timing. It would never burn too quickly, nor too slowly.

This made controlling the explosion far easier.

Moreover, this fuse did not need to be lit beforehand and then loaded into the barrel. Instead, it could be ignited at the exact same moment the cannon's powder charge fired.

This was vastly more convenient.

The grenade could be loaded directly without any pre-ignition step, and the safety margin increased severalfold.

The team removed the original fuses from all grenades, replacing them with the Wooden Tube Delayed Fuze and attaching a wooden sabot at the base.

A brand-new projectile was born.

Since it was no longer thrown by hand, it could no longer be called a hand grenade.

Naturally, everyone dropped the word "hand" and officially named it the Small Grenade.

The artillery commander propped the arm-thick cannon diagonally against the ground, aiming it skyward at a forty-five-degree angle.

He poured a carefully measured charge of gunpowder into the barrel.

Next, he picked up a Small Grenade, aligned the wooden sabot and fuse end toward the bottom of the barrel, and slowly lowered it inside.

A soft thump sounded as the Wooden Tube Delayed Fuze settled into place atop the gunpowder.

The wooden sabot slightly separated the grenade from the explosive charge, forming a critical buffer layer.

"Light it," Young Master Bai said, the boldest among them. "We've done everything we can. There's no reason for this to fail."

Xu Dafu nodded firmly. "Alright."

He raised his hand.

"Fire!"