

Great Ming 801

Chapter 801: The Lampmaker's Son

Even the usually cautious Xu Dafu had already given his approval. With that final confirmation, the artillery battalion commander no longer hesitated.

He pulled out his tinderbox, struck a spark, and carefully lit the fuse at the base of the cannon barrel. The moment the flame caught, he turned and sprinted away, putting as much distance as possible between himself and the small cannon.

"Boom!"

With a thunderous roar, the cannon fired.

The small grenade was violently spat from the barrel, carving a graceful arc through the air before landing roughly three hundred meters away, right in the middle of the pre-arranged scarecrows.

A brief pause—

Then another deafening sound echoed across the open ground.

"Boom!"

The small grenade detonated. Shrapnel and steel pellets sprayed outward in every direction, tearing through the scarecrows like a storm of blades. In an instant, they were completely shredded, riddled with holes, no longer even recognizable as targets.

For a heartbeat, the entire crowd fell silent.

Then—

Cheers exploded.

"It worked! Hahahaha! It actually worked!"

"We're definitely getting the Dao Xuan Tianzhun Special Prize for Scientific Invention this year!"

"If this works, then we should be able to design large grenades as well—ones that can be fired from bigger cannons!"

"Right! We could even replace the shells used by Hongyi cannons with grenades!"

"And the Frankish cannons mounted on warships—those could fire grenade shells too!"

"The best part is that we don't even need to change the cannon barrels. Just change the ammunition!"

"Let's do it!"

A sea of excited voices surged together as the scientists plunged headfirst into feverish discussion, their minds already racing toward the next wave of explosive-shell research.

Meanwhile...

In Song Yingxing's laboratory at Gao Family Village's Thirty-Two Middle School, the atmosphere was far quieter.

A single graduate student sat at a workbench, carefully tinkering with an electric lamp prototype—the very device Song Yingxing had proposed some time ago.

After the previous incident where a large group of scientists and graduate students had collectively siphoned electricity from the "celestial generator," Song Yingxing's laboratory had devoted itself wholeheartedly to researching electric lamps.

However, progress had been painfully slow.

The reason was simple: Song Yingxing himself was far too busy.

He was a man of boundless curiosity. Any new scientific or technological invention that appeared—no matter what field it belonged to—he wanted to see it, participate in it, and carefully sketch its structure.

As a result, his constant involvement in everything dramatically slowed the focused research on electric lamps.

Fortunately, while Song Yingxing was busy everywhere, not all of his students were.

This particular student, Ji Menghan, was different.

He had no distractions at all.

His only focus was the electric lamp.

He had absolutely no interest in anything else.

Ji Menghan was the son of a lampmaker from Xi'an.

Several years earlier, his father—the lampmaker—had fled Xi'an Prefecture together with the gunpowder artisan Xu Dafu and Xing Honglang, seeking refuge in Gao Family Village.

After arriving, Xu Dafu had been entrusted with major responsibilities. With opportunity after opportunity, he rose rapidly through the ranks, eventually becoming one of the most influential and respected figures in Gao Family Village.

Ji Menghan's father, on the other hand, although skilled in lampmaking and able to contribute to Gao Family Village's commercial prosperity, never truly struck it rich.

He earned money—enough to live comfortably—but never achieved a dramatic leap in status.

Later, the lampmaker returned to Xi'an, brought his wife and children back to Gao Family Village, and enrolled his son in the Gao Family Village School.

There, the boy received a proper education.

His given name had been Ji Dameng, but he felt it sounded overly rustic. With his father's permission, he changed it to something more refined and scholarly:

Ji Menghan.

Over the years, Ji Menghan often heard his father sigh and say,

"Your father and Xu Dafu both came from Xi'an. Yet our lives are worlds apart. Why? Because of technology... because of the gap in technical skill. Son, you must master technology. Only then can you truly make something of yourself in the future."

Those words carved themselves deeply into Ji Menghan's heart.

From that day on, he studied with obsessive dedication.

Although he started later than many others, his progress was astonishing. He graduated from middle school with outstanding results, then began self-studying high school materials while simultaneously entering Song Yingxing's research laboratory, becoming a full-fledged graduate student.

At first, he lacked direction. He didn't know what kind of invention he should pursue.

But the moment he saw the electric lamp Song Yingxing unveiled, everything became clear.

A lampmaker's son should make lamps.

His father's craftsmanship had never made him rich because lampmaking was a skill anyone could learn. Other people's lamps were simply less refined.

That slight difference in workmanship was not core technology.

And without core technology, true wealth and status were impossible.

The electric lamp, however, was different.

It was genuine core technology.

If he could master it—improve it—then he would surely earn Dao Xuan Tianzhun's favor, just like Xu Dafu had.

With that belief, Ji Menghan devoted every waking hour to electric lamp research.

The two carbon rods Song Yingxing had previously displayed could indeed emit light, but the light was blinding, painful to look at directly. Worse still, the rods burned out rapidly, lasting only a few hours at most.

They were completely impractical.

What Ji Menghan wanted was a lamp that could burn steadily for long periods—like the oil lamps his father used to make.

"The filament burns out because of high temperature... combustion..."

He scribbled furiously in his notebook.

"Combustion consumes the filament's lifespan. If there were a way to stop the filament from burning, it could last much longer. But how do I stop it from igniting?"

He was alone in the laboratory.

Every other graduate student had rushed off to watch the grenade-launcher experiments, leaving no one behind to work on electric lamps.

No one to discuss ideas with.

No one to argue with.

No one to share the burden.

Such loneliness.

Perhaps this was the unavoidable price of deep scientific research.

Just as a faint sense of emptiness welled up in his chest, a small metallic skeletal figure climbed onto his desk and sat beside his notebook.

Ji Menghan was startled. He leaned closer.

It was a CO₂ reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzhun, still under construction—which explained why it consisted of little more than a metal framework.

"Encountering difficulties?" the reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzhun asked.

Ji Menghan immediately bowed deeply.

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzhun, this humble one was merely lamenting the solitude of research."

The reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzhun chuckled.

"All great achievements come with a price—such as loneliness. If you truly cannot continue, you are free to give up. No one is forcing you to succeed."

Ji Menghan shook his head firmly.

"This is what I want."

"Then there is no problem," the reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzhun replied. "As long as it is something you truly love, you can give it everything."

He paused, then waved a hand dismissively.

"Alright, enough inspirational talk. I don't particularly enjoy this part. Let's get to the point. What exactly is troubling you?"

Ji Menghan quickly explained the issue of the filament burning out too quickly.

"I see," the reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzhun said, a faint smile appearing on its metallic face. "Tell me—what is required for combustion?"

"Air," Ji Menghan answered without hesitation.

"Correct," the reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzhun laughed. "Now think again. If you don't want the filament to burn, what should you do?"

Ji Menghan's eyes widened.

"Deprive it of air!"

"Hahaha! Very good," the reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzhun laughed loudly. "Work hard. I'll be waiting to present you with the Grand Prize for Scientific Invention."

With that, the reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzhun fell still, unmoving.

Ji Menghan, however, felt as if lightning had struck his mind.

Something had shattered open.

Ideas surged wildly, buzzing and colliding inside his head.

A new path lay before him.

Chapter 802 This Heir Apparent Will Make a Killing

Ji Menghan shot to his feet as if lightning had struck him.

If an electric lamp could not tolerate oxygen, then one thing was absolutely non-negotiable—it had to be sealed.

Perfectly sealed.

Traditional lampshades were immediately crossed off his list. Those things leaked air like sieves. They were fine for oil lamps and candles, but utterly useless for this.

So the question became simple.

What material could block air completely?

Ji Menghan's eyes lit up.

Glass.

Only glass would do.

Gao Family Village already possessed a mature glassworks. Not only could they produce massive windowpanes large enough to make wealthy households gasp, they also turned out glass cups, bottles, jars, and all manner of daily goods with impressive consistency.

Without wasting another breath, Ji Menghan rushed straight into the glass shop and bought a round-bodied, narrow-necked glass bottle.

Holding it up to the light, he examined it from every angle.

The shape was good.

The thickness was acceptable.

The transparency—excellent.

Now came the real problem.

How was he supposed to remove the air inside it?

Ji Menghan stared at the bottle.

And stared.

And stared some more.

This was no trivial problem.

He tried sealing it quickly. Failed.

He tried heating and cooling tricks. Failed.

He tried asking craftsmen. They scratched their heads.

Days passed.

Then weeks.

His research hit a wall.

One afternoon, Ji Menghan wandered aimlessly along the edge of a field, his mind still tangled in thoughts of air pressure and sealing methods, when a low, rhythmic rumble caught his attention.

He turned his head.

Not far away, Gao Family Village's steam-powered water pump was hard at work, its iron body chugging steadily as it drew water from the flooded fields and expelled it elsewhere.

Ji Menghan froze.

Then his pupils shrank.

A spark flared in his mind.

"Wait a moment..."

He slapped his thigh.

"What if I fill the glass bottle with water first—completely full—so there's no air inside at all," he muttered rapidly. "Then, use a powerful machine to pump the water out?"

His thoughts raced.

"A small force wouldn't work, but a water pump like that? It just might. If the water is extracted while the bottle remains sealed, then once the water is gone... there would naturally be no air left inside."

The more he thought about it, the brighter his eyes became.

The logic was sound.

But the execution?

Nightmarish.

The pump's suction hose wasn't perfectly airtight.

As water was drawn out, air would inevitably seep back in.

He'd also need a method to seal the bottle instantaneously the moment the water was gone.

One delay.

One leak.

And the entire attempt would fail.

In short—

A mountain of problems.

But Ji Menghan didn't retreat.

Not even for a second.

"How could the son of a lantern maker fail to create a proper lamp?" he muttered fiercely.

If this failed, he would simply try again.

And again.

And again.

—

Meanwhile—

The first section of the West Yan Railway was finally complete.

The stretch from Xi'an to Sanyuan County extended over sixty li, crossing plains, rivers, and painstakingly leveled terrain. The cost alone made treasurers break into cold sweat.

And today—

At long last—

It was time for the inaugural test run.

Xi'an North Station bustled with people.

Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's heir apparent, stood proudly on the platform, flanked by his principal consort, several secondary consorts, concubines, and an imposing guard detail.

Nearby stood Wu Shen, Shi Kefa, the Prefect of Xi'an, and a host of other civil and military officials.

Naturally, there were also stewards representing the imperial relatives and noble houses who had invested alongside Zhu Cunji in the railway.

These people had been waiting a long time.

Every extra day before opening was silver slipping through their fingers.

Zhu Cunji gazed at the black iron behemoth before him—the locomotive—and his face practically glowed.

"Do you all see it?" he declared loudly. "This train is mine!"

He laughed uproariously.

"I commissioned it for fifty thousand taels of silver and personally named it—the Cunji! Hahahahaha!"

Wu Shen muttered under his breath, "What a tasteless name."

"I heard that!" Zhu Cunji snapped, jabbing a finger toward Wu Shen. "You rotten civil official, don't test me! I invited you here out of generosity—don't stand there muttering nonsense!"

Wu Shen immediately shut his mouth.

Zhu Cunji swept his gaze across the crowd and spread his arms grandly.

"Today, we shall all ride this magnificent vehicle to Sanyuan County!" he proclaimed. "Who agrees? And who dares to object?"

Shi Kefa immediately stepped forward.

"This humble official objects!" he said firmly. "According to the ancestral laws of our dynasty, a prince may not leave his fiefdom. Your Royal Highness, traveling to Sanyuan County would constitute a capital offense."

"But Sanyuan County is right there!" Zhu Cunji protested. "I'll go and return immediately!"

"Absolutely not," Shi Kefa replied, shaking his head.

Zhu Cunji fell silent.

He looked around.

Every civil official was staring at him.

This was exactly why he had invited them—to force approval through sheer presence. If he went without their consent, such a grand event could never be hidden. Reports would fly to the capital like arrows.

Persuasion was his only path.

Zhu Cunji raised his hands solemnly.

"I know princes are forbidden from leaving their fiefdoms, to prevent rebellion," he said earnestly. "So today, I swear before Dao Xuan Tianzhun—if I harbor even the slightest rebellious intent, may Dao Xuan Tianzhun cast down a great bridge and strike me dead!"

The officials were stunned.

That oath was...

Uncomfortably vivid.

Seeing no reaction, Zhu Cunji suddenly wailed theatrically.

"Dao Xuan Tianzhun, save me! Please reveal your divine might and tell these officials to let me go! Let me go! I want to ride my own train!"

Dao Xuan Tianzhun, of course, paid him absolutely no attention.

Divine beings had standards.

At that moment, Wang Tang stepped out from the crowd.

"Your Royal Highness," he said calmly, "the great bridge bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzhun has not yet been tested under train weight. Are you truly certain you wish to ride on it?"

Zhu Cunji's face drained of color.

"T-that... a divine artifact granted by Dao Xuan Tianzhun... how could it possibly fail to support... a mortal machine?"

Wang Tang smiled faintly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzhun enjoys playing among mortals. Not every divine artifact is flawless. Even our Gao Family Village's solar public vehicles—also divine conveyances—occasionally end up flipped in ditches."

Zhu Cunji's face turned deathly pale.

"A-ah? Well... um... hmm... cough cough..."

He straightened abruptly.

"Upon careful reflection, this prince believes ancestral laws must absolutely not be violated! Princes must remain within their fiefdoms—this rule must be upheld!"

Wu Shen snorted.

"Coward."

Laughing, he boarded the train.

Shi Kefa followed, then the officials, then the shareholders' stewards.

Soon, only Zhu Cunji, his wives, and his guards remained on the platform, staring blankly as the Cunji let out a long whistle and began chugging northward.

"Quick!" Zhu Cunji shouted. "Ride ahead! Check if it crosses the Wei River safely!"

The guards spurred their horses.

Warhorses of this era were no slower than trains, and twenty li was nothing. They soon overtook the locomotive and reached the Wei River first.

There, they watched as the great train rolled steadily onto the magnificent bridge.

Windows opened.

Heads poked out.

Breaths were held.

But nothing went wrong.

The Cunji crossed smoothly, thundered off toward Sanyuan County, and vanished into the distance.

The West Yan Railway was officially open.

When Zhu Cunji received the news, he nearly danced.

"Hahahahaha! Sell tickets! Sell tickets!"

"Announce it immediately! Tickets from Xi'an to Sanyuan County go on sale tomorrow!"

"Third class—one hundred copper coins!"

"Second class—five hundred!"

"First class—one tael of silver!"

"Luxury carriages—five taels!"

"I'm going to make a fortune!"

"A massive fortune!"

"Hahahahahaha!"

Chapter 803 A Major Problem Arose

Although feudatory princes were bound by countless restrictions, once the Prince of Qin's estate—the foremost princely household of the realm—truly set its mind to something, the momentum it could unleash was still terrifying.

At Zhu Cunji's personal order, advertisements for the West Yan Railway's opening were plastered across every corner of Xi'an Prefecture.

Walls.

Street corners.

Market entrances.

Teahouse doors.

If there was a flat surface, there was an advertisement.

And the truly frightening thing was this—

Zhu Cunji's advertising methods were not crude.

They were, in fact... strangely refined.

This fellow had secretly absorbed an alarming amount of marketing knowledge simply by watching Gaojia News day after day. From Li Daoxuan's casual introductions of modern publicity concepts—brand exposure, repeated impressions, storytelling marketing—Zhu Cunji had unknowingly mastered a fair portion of the essence.

Even Li Daoxuan would have been mildly impressed... and a little alarmed.

After all, this was a prince who once thought "raising prices loudly" counted as business strategy.

Now?

Every alley in Xi'an had neatly written notices describing the comfort, speed, and divine nature of the train.

Storytellers were hired to sit in teahouses, clapping wooden boards as they spun tales of:

"A single day's journey, reduced to half an hour!

A divine carriage bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzhun himself!"

In taverns and brothels, singing girls performed newly composed songs about iron dragons crossing rivers, their melodies catchy enough that even drunk patrons began humming them on the streets.

No city officials interfered.

Firstly, there were no city management officers to begin with.

Secondly, even if there were, none would dare provoke the Prince of Qin's estate.

Thus—

The effect was immediate.

Train tickets sold like wildfire.

The Cunji's first official commercial run departed fully loaded.

Every carriage was packed.

Passengers craned their necks, whispered excitedly, touched the walls, and stared at the steam pipes as though they were sacred relics.

By the time the train returned, Zhu Cunji had earned several hundred taels of silver in a single trip.

Several hundred taels.

In one day.

That night, Zhu Cunji hosted a grand celebratory banquet at the finest tavern in the heart of Xi'an City.

Wine flowed like a river.

The shareholder representatives—each sent by imperial relatives or noble houses—sat beaming with delight.

These people had no real political prospects. Their daily lives consisted of maintaining ancestral estates and finding ways to spend money pleasantly.

They had never expected that simply investing silver into a strange iron road would produce such staggering returns.

Zhu Cunji raised his wine cup, his face flushed with triumph.

"Hahahahaha! Hundreds of taels every single day!"

He swept his gaze over the hall, his voice booming with confidence.

"Gentlemen, at this rate, ten thousand taels a month is effortless! Profits will be divided strictly according to shares—everyone here will get rich together!"

The representatives' eyes shone.

Zhu Cunji continued, growing more animated with each sentence.

"This railway business—this is the future! Once we stabilize this line, we will invest further capital and build more railways! Xi'an to Yan'an! Xi'an to Tongguan! One iron road after another!"

"Your Highness is farsighted!"

"We shall follow Your Highness in all endeavors!"

"To prosperity!"

"To wealth!"

"Drink!"

Cups were raised—

Just then.

A steward hurried into the hall, his expression stiff and awkward, as though he had swallowed something unpleasant.

"Your Highness," he said cautiously, "something... something has gone wrong."

Zhu Cunji's eyelid twitched.

He waved his hand impatiently.

"What now? Can't you see we're celebrating? Whatever it is, say it later."

The steward hesitated, then forced himself to speak.

"This matter... concerns precisely what you are celebrating."

Silence fell.

Wine cups paused halfway to lips.

All eyes turned toward the steward.

Zhu Cunji frowned. "Speak."

The steward swallowed.

"Those who traveled to Sanyuan County today all reported the same thing."

"They said... the ride itself was extremely comfortable and novel."

"But after arriving in Sanyuan County, there was little to do."

"They strolled around the county town, ate a meal, and then returned."

"Very few expressed interest in going a second time."

The hall grew unnervingly quiet.

Zhu Cunji's face stiffened.

"...So?" he asked slowly.

The steward lowered his head.

"Ticket sales for the second day did not sell out."

"They dropped... by about thirty percent."

"What?!" Zhu Cunji shot to his feet.

"Thirty percent?!"

His voice cracked slightly.

"Thirty percent of several hundred taels—that's over a hundred taels gone in a single day!"

"Over a month, that's thousands of taels!"

At once, the shareholders panicked.

"That won't do!"

"This is unacceptable!"

"Your Highness, we must find a solution immediately!"

Zhu Cunji felt his stomach twist.

He paced back and forth, hands clenched behind his back.

"Sanyuan County..." he muttered. "It is just a small county."

"Truthfully speaking, there's nothing much to see."

"Could it be that this railway will only become truly profitable once it extends to Yan'an?"

"The traffic between Yan'an and Xi'an is substantial..."

The shareholders shook their heads.

"That line is over four hundred li!"

"Construction will take years!"

"We can't wait that long!"

"We must make the Xi'an–Sanyuan line profitable first!"

The celebratory banquet had completely lost its flavor.

Zhu Cunji suddenly stopped pacing.

"I know!" he declared.

He turned sharply toward the door.

"I will go ask Mr. Li!"

"He understands business!"

"He understands people!"

"His ability to make money is ten thousand times greater than mine!"

"I'll return with a solution!"

The shareholders immediately bowed.

"Then we entrust everything to Your Highness."

Zhu Cunji ran through the streets like his life depended on it, heading straight for the fertilizer shop in Xi'an Prefecture.

Mr. Li was a strange man.

When he first arrived in Xi'an, he chose to live in a fertilizer shop—and never left.

Despite the smell.

Despite the surroundings.

As though such worldly matters meant nothing to him.

By the time Zhu Cunji arrived, the shop had long since closed.

He pounded on the door.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

After a long while, the door creaked open.

Wang Tang, wearing a gray sleeping robe, peered out.

"Who is it? It's already late."

"Is Mr. Li inside?" Zhu Cunji blurted out.

"Oh, it's Your Highness," Wang Tang said politely. "Our master has already gone to sleep. I can try to wake him, but—"

Zhu Cunji stared. "How can someone not wake up if you shake them hard enough?"

Wang Tang sighed inwardly.

"Our master... once asleep, even thunder won't wake him."

Zhu Cunji was stunned.

"How can such a person exist?"

Wang Tang thought silently: Because he's Dao Xuan Tianzhun's avatar. And shaking him would be blasphemy.

Just as he was panicking—

A calm voice sounded from behind.

"I happen to be awake."

Wang Tang turned joyfully.

Li Daoxuan emerged, holding a birdcage.

Zhu Cunji seized Li Daoxuan's arm immediately.

"Mr. Li! Save me!"

"The railway's ticket sales dropped thirty percent on the second day!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"Oh? That's all?"

Zhu Cunji froze. "All?"

Li Daoxuan smiled calmly.

"Isn't that inevitable?"

Zhu Cunji stared. "...You knew this would happen?"

"Sanyuan County is small," Li Daoxuan said casually. "No attractions. No regular traffic."

"Everyone rode once out of novelty."

"Why would they go again?"

"If you keep running it like this," he added mildly, "you'll eventually be pulling empty carriages."

Zhu Cunji's face turned pale.

"Empty... empty cars?!"

"Empty cars won't make money!"

From the birdcage, the mynah chirped cheerfully:

"What's the use of making money if you can't get it up anymore!"

Zhu Cunji's face went dark.

His patience... had reached its limit.

Chapter 804 Ways to Make Money

Zhu Cunji truly wanted to seize that annoying bird, snap its neck—half a twist, then another, a full two rotations—slam it onto the ground, and stomp it ten times just to be sure.

Unfortunately, that bird belonged to Mr. Li.

And so, even if Zhu Cunji didn't respect the monk, he still had to respect the Buddha.

He forcefully suppressed his urge. The anger he couldn't vent piled up in his chest, swelling and vibrating, practically visible as a restless ripple of suppressed emotion.

"Mr. Li, you absolutely must help me," Zhu Cunji said, puffing his cheeks in grievance. "I, this heir, have ordered so many steam trains and railway tracks from your blacksmith workshops. You've already made a huge fortune. Now you really should help me find ways to make money as well. Otherwise, how can I continue ordering more trains in the future? Mutual benefit—mutual benefit!"

"Hm, that's reasonable," Li Daoxuan replied lazily.

Teasing a prince and watching him suffer was, in fact, quite entertaining.

With a faint smile, he said, "Your Highness, if you want to make money, the best method is actually very simple."

"Oh?" Zhu Cunji leaned forward eagerly.

"Promote the movement of people between Sanyuan County and Xi'an."

Zhu Cunji froze. "Promote... people moving around? How does that make money?"

"You just need to find a way," Li Daoxuan explained calmly, "to make people from Xi'an want to go to Sanyuan County, and at the same time, make people from Sanyuan County want to come to Xi'an. As long as people are willing to travel, there will naturally be movement. And once there's movement, there's consumption."

Zhu Cunji listened with a completely bewildered expression. His eyes were round, his mouth slightly open.

"How... how do you do that?"

"If I start talking about economics, tax circulation, and market demand," Li Daoxuan said leisurely, "you'll fall asleep before I finish the second sentence."

Zhu Cunji did not deny it.

"So let's change angles," Li Daoxuan continued. "Let's talk about something you're good at."

His tone shifted slightly. "Your Highness—what are you best at?"

Zhu Cunji grinned immediately. "Eating, drinking, having fun, and enjoying myself."

Beside them, Wang Tang sucked in a sharp breath.

These are skills now? Truly astonishing. If I called you a useless wastrel, would you even dare argue back?

Unexpectedly, the Dao Xuan Tianzhun showed no intention of reprimanding Zhu Cunji at all. Instead, he casually reached out and patted Wang Tang on the shoulder, silently telling him to suppress his urge to retort.

Then he smiled faintly at Zhu Cunji. "Those four things you're best at are exactly what can stimulate the flow of people between these two places."

"Huh?" Zhu Cunji blinked. "These... actually work?"

"Absolutely," Li Daoxuan said firmly. "Your Highness, do you still remember the Huaqing Palace Hot Spring Resort I built in Lintong?"

"Of course!" Zhu Cunji said immediately. "That place is incredible! I, this heir, go soak there whenever I get the chance."

"Good," Li Daoxuan nodded. "Then go to Sanyuan County and spread the word. Tell the local gentry, wealthy families, officials, and nobles that Lintong in Xi'an has an excellent hot spring resort. If they want to enjoy it, they can come anytime."

"And once they come," he continued, "they'll take the train from Sanyuan County to Xi'an, walk from Xi'an North Station to the East Station, then transfer trains to Lintong."

Zhu Cunji's eyes widened, and he slapped his thigh.

"So that's how it is! Mr. Li's hot spring resort can even help me attract people from Sanyuan County onto the train—hahahaha! I get it now! Not only can I promote the hot springs, I can also talk about Xi'an's temples, pagodas, scenic spots, and all kinds of entertainment. I'll practically trick them into boarding the train to come play in Xi'an!"

Li Daoxuan felt quite pleased inside.

This fellow will definitely work very hard to advertise my businesses.

"Exactly," Li Daoxuan said. "Now look—haven't we put your 'play' expertise to good use? Think again. Out of eating, drinking, and having fun, what else can you utilize?"

Zhu Cunji immediately started brainstorming.

"I can promote Dongguanxiang! Let them come eat good food!" he said excitedly. "And the movie 'A Small Soldier from the Dalinghe Border Army'—I can recommend that too!"

Ideas poured out one after another. Unfortunately—or perhaps inevitably—every single one of them was aimed at bringing customers straight to Li Daoxuan.

After all, Xi'an's food, clothing, housing, transportation, entertainment, and leisure industries were now basically under Li Daoxuan's control.

After thinking for a long time, Zhu Cunji finally frowned again.

"Bringing people from Sanyuan County to Xi'an is easy. There's just too much to see and do here," he said. "But how do I persuade people from Xi'an to go to Sanyuan County?"

Li Daoxuan smiled, his expression turning sly. "Is there anything interesting in Sanyuan County?"

Zhu Cunji pondered for a long while before suddenly remembering something.

"The Sanyuan City God Temple," he said. "It was built in the eighth year of the Hongwu reign... but now it's, uh... cough... a bit run-down."

"That's not a problem," Li Daoxuan said smoothly. "Spend some money. Hire laborers. Renovate it properly. Paint it beautifully. Display ritual implements. Invite a few Daoist priests who look impressive enough to preside over it."

Zhu Cunji's eyes lit up. "Then I can publicize that the City God there is extremely efficacious!"

Li Daoxuan shook his head. "That won't work."

"Why?"

"The reputation of Dao Xuan Tianzhun in Xi'an is far too strong," Li Daoxuan explained calmly. "Everyone already comes to Xi'an to seek blessings. Just saying the City God is efficacious won't be enough. You'll need a different angle."

Zhu Cunji hesitated. "Then... what angle?"

"You'll need to make up a story," Li Daoxuan said casually. "Say that Dao Xuan Tianzhun and the Sanyuan City God are sworn brothers, joining forces to suppress demons and monsters."

Zhu Cunji's face darkened immediately.

"This... this heir wouldn't dare fabricate something like that."

"You wouldn't dare make that up," Li Daoxuan laughed, "yet you claim to believe in Dao Xuan Tianzhun?"

He shook his head. "Look at those Daoist priests—aren't they always inventing stories for their deities?"

Zhu Cunji shook his head vigorously. "No, no! Daoist priests make things up because their gods never show themselves. Who knows if they even exist? But Dao Xuan Tianzhun—this heir has personally witnessed his divine manifestations. I wouldn't dare fabricate stories about him."

That answer made Li Daoxuan burst out laughing.

"Fine," he said. "Then we'll change the story."

He leaned closer. "Just say that your Imperial Ancestor once visited the Sanyuan City God Temple, sat on a meditation cushion there, and made a wish. Claim that the same cushion has been preserved in your family. Then take any random cushion and place it in the temple."

He paused. "Would you dare fabricate that?"

Zhu Cunji chuckled lowly. "I dare to fabricate stories about the Imperial Ancestor."

Understanding dawned instantly.

"The Imperial Ancestor worshipped there and even used that cushion!" Zhu Cunji laughed loudly. "People will swarm there just to see it!"

"Exactly," Li Daoxuan nodded. "Now—does Sanyuan County have any specialty snacks?"

The moment food was mentioned, Zhu Cunji didn't hesitate at all.

"Sanyuan Geda Mian, Sanyuan Pao You Gao, Sanyuan Liaohuatang..." he rattled off smoothly. Then he suddenly burst into laughter. "I get it! I really get it! Gather all the vendors together, just like Dongguanxiang in Xi'an. Set up a food street!"

"Then I'll promote it in Xi'an," he continued excitedly. "Encourage wealthy households to take the train to Sanyuan County, eat the snacks, and visit the City God Temple!"

Even Li Daoxuan couldn't help swallowing slightly.

Wait... Sanyuan County actually has good food? I might need to take a train and try it myself.

Zhu Cunji became more and more inspired.

"Sanyuan County is also the hometown of Li Jing, the famous Tang Dynasty minister!" he said. "I can find any old broken house, declare it Li Jing's former residence, and lure people over—hahahaha! By the time they've had enough of Sanyuan County, my railway will already reach Yaozhou, and I can trick them into traveling there next!"

Li Daoxuan gently patted his shoulder.

"Your Highness truly is a genius," he said solemnly. "The AAAA-rated scenic area can officially begin development."

Chapter 805 The Northern Yuan's End Is Nigh

Shi Jian, Zao Ying, and Zheng Daniu stood atop the ancient fortress walls at Wangjia Fork, all three gazing silently toward the vast northwest.

Not long ago, this very fortress had been occupied by Wang Chenggong, who had raised the banner of rebellion here—only to be swiftly crushed by the Gao Family Village Militia and escorted straight into a labor reform camp.

With its former owner gone, Wangjia Fork Fortress now stood empty.

And an ownerless fortress?

There was no way Dao Xuan Tianzhun would let something like that remain unclaimed.

Following Dao Xuan Tianzhun's instructions, Shi Jian had sent a letter to Governor Hong Chengchou, explaining that he had recently been engaged in suppressing bandits across northern Shaanxi and that he was fully capable of taking responsibility for the Wangjia Fork fortress as well.

For Hong Chengchou, this was practically a blessing sent from heaven.

He was already stretched thin for manpower and had no spare troops to station here. Without the slightest hesitation, he handed command of the fortress over to Shi Jian.

Thus, Wangjia Fork Fortress was naturally absorbed into Gao Family Village's sphere of control.

Men were dispatched to repair the aging walls, and soldiers from Gao Family Village were assigned to garrison it.

Before long, this desolate stronghold had officially become a forward operating base for Gao Family Village.

And it was a truly remote one—farther even than Bai Yuan's previous journey to Luoyang.

Standing atop the fortress wall, Shi Jian couldn't help but sigh.

"This place is really too far from Gao Family Village. Supplying it is going to be a serious headache."

"Hard or not, we still do it!" Zheng Daniu said with a wide grin. "Dao Xuan Tianzhun has given the order."

Zheng Daniu was simple-minded, but among everyone who had joined Gao Family Village, he was undoubtedly one of the most loyal.

He and Gao Chuwu were cut from the same cloth—unwavering, unquestioning generals. They never worried about difficulties, nor did they bother thinking about whether something was reasonable or not.

If Dao Xuan Tianzhun spoke, then it was to be done. End of discussion.

His words made Shi Jian smile.

"Daniu, your understanding is very enlightened," Shi Jian said approvingly. "If Dao Xuan Tianzhun tells us to do something, there must be a deeper reason. No matter how troublesome it looks, we just do it. That's all there is to it."

As he spoke, Shi Jian pulled out a rolled bundle of documents and waved it toward Zao Ying and Zheng Daniu.

"These are intelligence reports my people gathered—information about the Mongolian Wushen Tribe."

Zheng Daniu glanced at the papers and snorted. "Don't read it. Can't understand."

Zao Ying laughed. "Don't make it hard on him. Just read it out loud."

With no other choice, Shi Jian began reading.

"The Mongolian Wushen Tribe resides deep within the Maowusu Desert. They belong to the larger Ordos confederation. The Ordos, in turn, descend from the lineage of Genghis Khan and are currently ruled by Ligdan Khan. We of the Central Plains collectively refer to this regime as the 'Northern Yuan.'"

Zheng Daniu frowned deeply.

"That sounded like... nothing at all."

Shi Jian sighed and switched tactics.

"To put it simply," he said, "Dao Xuan Tianzhun wants us to absorb the Wushen Tribe and incorporate them into our forces. But the Wushen Tribe isn't just some isolated tribe—it's technically part of a larger state, the Northern Yuan."

Zheng Daniu finally nodded.

"Oh."

Shi Jian continued, "In other words, what we're about to do is essentially invade Northern Yuan territory and seize a city called Wushen."

Zao Ying frowned slightly.

"Defeating a single tribe wouldn't be difficult," she said, "but I'm worried we might stir up a hornet's nest. If the entire Northern Yuan comes after us, we'll be constantly fighting without rest."

Before Shi Jian could reply, the small cotton figurine of Dao Xuan Tianzhun hanging on Zheng Daniu's chest suddenly twitched.

Then it smiled.

A voice echoed forth.

"There's no need to worry about the Northern Yuan."

"Ah!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzhun!"

All three immediately bowed deeply.

The cotton Dao Xuan Tianzhun spoke calmly, "I have divined it. The Northern Yuan is nearing its end."

The three were stunned.

They didn't doubt Dao Xuan Tianzhun's words—but hearing such a heaven-shaking secret spoken so casually still left them momentarily speechless.

The cotton Dao Xuan Tianzhun continued, "The Manchus are fiercely ambitious. Their targets are not limited to our Great Ming. Before long, they will also turn their blades toward the Northern Yuan."

"In the near future," he said lightly, "the Northern Yuan will be completely destroyed by the Manchus."

Zao Ying was the first to react.

"Once the Northern Yuan collapses," she said slowly, "its tribes will become leaderless dragons, thrown into chaos. That's when we move in."

Her eyes sharpened.

"If we act too slowly, those tribes will submit to the Manchus and eventually be forced to fight against us. But if we're faster, they'll become our subjects—and later fight for us against the Manchus."

Shi Jian nodded, impressed.

"Truly the thinking of a former horse bandit," he said. "We can't wait until the Northern Yuan is completely destroyed. By then, it'll be too late."

"We need to establish contact with some of these tribes before the collapse," he continued. "That way, when the Northern Yuan falls, they'll naturally align themselves with us."

Seeing that they understood, the cotton Dao Xuan Tianzhun didn't waste any more words.

"The Wushen Tribe is the closest to us," he said. "So we'll start with them."

He paused deliberately.

The three immediately straightened, knowing something important was coming.

"The nomadic tribes of the steppe are different from our agricultural people," Dao Xuan Tianzhun said, his tone turning serious. "Treat farmers well, and they'll follow you loyally. But steppe tribes are born with wolf-like natures."

"Kindness alone won't work."

He chuckled softly.

"You must be stronger than them. Only then will they submit sincerely."

Zao Ying laughed bitterly. "That's exactly how horse bandits think. We only follow the strong. The weak... are just prey."

Shi Jian nodded slowly. "So we demonstrate our strength."

Zheng Daniu clenched his massive fist, eyes lighting up.

"I understand now!" he said loudly. "First, beat them up good. Then talk sense!"

The Wushen Tribe had been having a very hard time recently.

The tribe was small to begin with—only a few thousand people in total, with barely half of their young men capable of riding and fighting.

Several days earlier, the Wushen tribal leader had led over a thousand young warriors on a "raid for supplies" into Great Ming territory.

Near Wangjia Fork Fortress, they had stumbled upon a battle between Ming forces and rebel troops.

Driven by greed and hot-headed ambition, the tribal leader decided to try and seize the Ming army's cannons.

The result...

Hundreds of young cavalymen were killed, and the rest fled back in complete disorder.

For a tribe of only a few thousand, losing several hundred able-bodied men in a single incident was catastrophic.

The Wushen Tribe's strength plummeted overnight, instantly turning them into the weakest tribe within the Ordos confederation.

And among the nomads—

The weak were always bullied.

Recently, the Wushen Tribe had been tormented relentlessly.

The Etuoke Tribe, located not far to their west, took every opportunity to harass them.

Today, a few horses would disappear.

Tomorrow, dozens of sheep would be driven away.

Such things were painfully common among the steppe tribes.

If you're weak, you deserve to be beaten.

This brutal logic had governed the grasslands since ancient times.

With no other option, the Wushen people could only desperately try to increase their numbers.

One day, as the Wushen tribal leader was diligently "creating new people" inside his tent, frantic shouting suddenly erupted outside.

"The Etuoke are here!"

"The Etuoke are here!"

Instantly, the entire camp exploded into chaos—men shouting, horses neighing, warriors scrambling for their mounts.

The tribal leader sprang up in shock, abandoning his current task without hesitation.

Throwing on a robe, he rushed out of the tent, leapt onto his horse, and roared, "The Etuoke again?!"

"Fight!"

"This time, we must win. If we lose again, they'll trample us into the dirt!"

He gathered the remaining seven or eight hundred young warriors of the tribe.

Together, they spurred their horses forward—

Charging straight toward the enemy.

Chapter 806 Beware Their Muskets

The Wushen tribe leader surged forward at the head of his men, immediately colliding with the Ordos forces.

The disparity in numbers was obvious at a glance.

The Wushen could only muster seven or eight hundred riders, while the Ordos had well over fifteen hundred cavalymen. Their formation spread wide across the grasslands, banners snapping violently in the wind.

The Wushen leader cursed inwardly.

If we hadn't lost more than four hundred men at Wangjia Fork... I wouldn't be afraid of you, Ordos scum.

But regret was useless.

On the battlefield, there was no such thing as "if only."

There was only forward.

The two cavalry formations let out thunderous roars, hooves pounding the earth as both sides prepared for a direct collision—

Just then—

From the southern grasslands, two scouts came galloping in at full speed.

One wore the garb of the Wushen tribe.

The other belonged to the Ordos.

Under normal circumstances, the two would have shot arrows at each other the instant they met.

Yet now—

They rode side by side.

Their horses foamed at the mouth as the two scouts shouted at the top of their lungs:

"Don't fight! Don't fight!"

"The Han people are here! The Han people are here!"

At those words, both tribes froze.

The Wushen cavalry slowed.

The Ordos cavalry reined in.

All eyes turned toward the two panting scouts.

"H- Han cavalry!"

"About a thousand of them!"

Both scouts reported simultaneously.

"They appear to be subordinates of Yansui Regional Commander Shi Jian!"

The moment he heard the name, the Wushen leader's eyes turned bloodshot.

"That bastard!" he roared. "He's the one who slaughtered our men last time! How dare he come onto the grasslands again?!"

On the other side, the Ordos leader burst out laughing.

"A Ming regional commander?" he scoffed. "Those are all useless trash. Do they really think they can seek death on the grasslands? Hahaha!"

The Wushen leader snapped his head around.

"Ordos!" he shouted. "Let's deal with the Han people together first. After that, we can settle our own accounts. What do you say?"

The Ordos leader didn't hesitate for even a breath.

"Good!"

No flowery words.

No empty formalities.

In an instant, two enemies became allies.

Such was the grasslands.

Both leaders turned their gaze southward.

On the open plain, a cavalry unit appeared.

Not many men—only around a thousand.

Three banners flew prominently.

One read: Yansui Regional Commander Shi

The other two read: Yansui Company Commander Zao

and Yansui Company Commander Zheng

Three massive banners for a force of only a thousand men.

It was... oddly comical.

The Ordos leader laughed loudly.

"I get it now," he said knowingly. "A regional commander brought two company commanders—but both of them embezzled soldiers' pay, so they only have five hundred men each. Added together, that's just a thousand."

Classic Ming army behavior.

Nothing surprising at all.

The Ordos leader raised his saber high.

"Sons of the grasslands!" he roared.

"Charge! Slaughter the Ming army!"

"Their weapons and armor—whoever takes them, keeps them!"

"Awooo!"

"Awooo!"

The Mongol cavalry let out ferocious howls.

The Wushen leader hesitated, then shouted urgently, "Be careful! Their muskets are dangerous! We suffered heavy losses because of them last time!"

The Ordos leader snorted.

"I've only ever heard of Ming infantry using muskets," he said dismissively. "I've never seen cavalry with anything worth fearing."

"At most, they'll be using Three-Eyed Arquebuses on horseback," he continued. "Those things are useless trash."

The Wushen leader paused, then muttered uncertainly, "That... does sound reasonable."

"Enough talk!"

The Ordos leader lowered his saber.

"Charge!"

"Charge!" the Wushen leader echoed.

The two Mongol cavalry forces surged forward simultaneously, hooves pounding the earth like rolling thunder.

They charged straight toward the so-called "Ming army."

—

This "Ming army" was, of course, Zao Ying's cavalry battalion.

When they saw the Mongol cavalry charging, a ripple of tension ran through the Gao Family Village riders.

Mongol cavalry were famous across the land.

Every man here knew it.

In archery and horsemanship, they were inferior.

Fortunately—

They didn't use bows.

The cavalrymen recalled their training drills almost reflexively.

In unison, they drew their cavalry muskets.

These muskets were also breech-loading, but their barrels were a full thirty centimeters shorter than the infantry versions. Their effective range was reduced—but they were far easier to use on horseback.

The Gao Family Village cavalry began loading.

One soldier's hand trembled.

The bullet slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground.

On horseback, there was no way to retrieve it.

Grinding his teeth, he discarded it and hurriedly grabbed another.

Seeing this, Zao Ying burst out laughing and shouted, "What are you panicking for?! Stick to your training! Fire steadily—don't be afraid!"

"Click—clack!"

Bullets slid into chambers one after another.

In mere moments, all thousand cavalymen finished loading.

The Mongol cavalry was closing fast.

Two hundred meters.

Then less.

"Within range!" Zao Ying shouted.

"Fire!"

"Bang!"

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

A line of blue smoke erupted from the short muskets.

Though compact, these were still rifled, breech-loading firearms.

Their range far exceeded that of the Ming army's long, smoothbore bird guns.

The Ordos cavalry at the front fell in rows.

Men and horses crashed to the ground, bodies tumbling through the grass.

The Ordos leader's eyes nearly popped out of his skull.

"What?!" he roared. "Mounted muskets that aren't Three-Eyed Arquebuses?! They can shoot this far?!"

The Wushen leader's heart sank.

Damn it... just as I feared.

The cavalry fired once—

Then immediately began reloading.

But seeing the Mongol cavalry closing the distance again, panic crept into the militia riders' expressions.

Zao Ying laughed loudly.

"What are you standing around for while loading?!" she shouted.

"We're cavalry! Move!"

"Reload while running!"

"Move!"

Realization struck.

The inexperienced cavalymen finally reacted.

They reined their horses around and began galloping backward.

Feet pressed into the stirrups.

Legs clamped tightly to their horses' flanks.

Their bodies stayed balanced as both hands worked frantically to reload.

Their retreat speed was slower than a full Mongol charge—

But it was enough.

Distance remained.

Much later, a practical math problem would be assigned at Gao Family Village Thirty-Two Middle School:

The Gao Family Village cavalry retreats at 50 km/h, maintaining a 200-meter lead. The Gao Family Village cavalry retreats at 50 km/h, maintaining a 200-meter lead.

The Mongol cavalry pursues at 70 km/h. The Mongol cavalry pursues at 70 km/h.

How long before they catch up?

Zheng Daniu couldn't calculate such a problem.

But he knew one thing—

It would take far longer than it took him to reload.

In a blink, his musket was ready.

He turned casually in the saddle and fired.

"Bang!"

The closest Mongol cavalryman pitched forward, dead before he hit the ground.

Zheng Daniu laughed uproariously.

"Hahaha! Not only am I good at throwing grenades—turns out I'm great with a musket too!"

Zao Ying laughed and teased, "You're amazing, Daniu!"

Shi Jian roared, "You idiots! Stop flirting on the battlefield!"

"Bang!"

"Bang! Bang!"

The cavalry continued firing backward as they galloped.

The Ordos tribe suffered mounting casualties.

The Ordos leader felt his scalp go numb.

"What... what kind of Han people are these?!"

The Wushen leader shouted urgently, "I told you to beware their muskets! We can't chase them anymore!"

"If we chase, they shoot!"

"If we chase again, they shoot again!"

"We'll just die for nothing!"

The Ordos leader clenched his teeth.

"Dammit!"

"Stop chasing!"

"Halt!"

The two Mongol cavalry forces came to a stop simultaneously.

Smoke drifted across the grasslands.

And the balance of fear had completely reversed.

Chapter 807 Striking Their Settlements Directly

As the Mongol riders finally reined in their horses, dust still hanging thick in the air, Zao Ying—riding at the very front—did not hesitate in the slightest.

She threw her arm forward and roared, her voice cutting through the wind like a blade.

"Turn around! Turn around!"

The order was short.

Sharp.

Absolutely unmistakable.

The Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion did not ask questions.

They did not hesitate.

Almost in the same breath, the entire formation wheeled their horses around, movements crisp and practiced. Hooves thundered across the grassland as the cavalry carved a wide, elegant arc through the open plain.

From a distance, it looked almost artistic—

a sweeping semicircle etched into the steppe itself.

Then laughter erupted.

Loud, unrestrained laughter burst from the riders' throats as they galloped, echoing across the grassland.

This maneuver—

This tactic—

Was something the Mongols knew far too well.

It was their tactic.

The world-famous Mongol light cavalry technique:

Hit and Run.

The Wushen tribe leader and the Ordos tribe leader realized it at almost the same moment.

Their expressions changed violently.

"No good!"

"Damn it!"

They shouted nearly in unison.

"Those bastards are charging us again!"

Sure enough.

The Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion completed their arc with terrifying precision. Without slowing, they turned once more and surged forward, bearing down on the Mongol formation again.

They were still at a considerable distance—

A distance that Mongol cavalry traditionally considered safe.

But the riders did not draw bows.

They raised carbines.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

The gunfire erupted once more.

The sharp cracks tore across the steppe, punching straight through the confidence of the Mongol cavalry. Riders who had just managed to steady their horses were struck again, bodies jolting violently as several were blasted clean off their mounts.

Blood splashed onto the grass.

Horses screamed.

Formation collapsed.

"Damn them!" a group of enraged Mongol cavalymen cursed furiously.

They kicked their horses forward, spurring them into another desperate charge toward the Gao Family Village riders.

But before they could even close the distance—

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Another volley.

More riders fell.

Then, as smoothly as before, the Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion swept into another wide arc and galloped away, leaving only smoke, corpses, and shattered nerves behind.

The moment the Han cavalry completed their turn, excitement suddenly rippled through the Mongol light cavalry at the front.

"They're within bow range!"

One of them shouted wildly, eyes blazing.

"These damned Han people have finally entered our bow range!"

A Mongol soldier immediately drew his bow, muscles taut, movements fluid and precise. He nocked an arrow, took aim, and loosed it.

The arrow screamed through the air.

Truly worthy of a Mongol light cavalryman—

his archery was flawless.

Even at the absolute edge of effective range, the arrow struck its target squarely in the vital area of the militia soldier's back.

Yet—

Thunk.

The arrow hit.

And stopped.

Its remaining momentum was so weak it could not pierce even the thinnest silk.

The cotton armor absorbed it completely.

The soldier barely felt more than a dull tap.

However—

That did not mean he escaped punishment.

Zao Ying's face darkened instantly.

Her temper flared.

"I told you all," she snapped sharply, voice carrying even over the galloping hooves, "to practice your horsemanship properly!"

She pointed straight at the unlucky soldier.

"Look at you! You can't even judge distance for a proper hit-and-run tactic, and you still managed to get hit!"

She glared.

"Good thing it didn't hit your eye. Otherwise, you'd be a one-eyed bandit."

A pause.

Then the verdict fell like thunder.

"Go back and write me a five-hundred-word self-critique!"

The soldier's soul nearly left his body.

Being scolded was nothing.

But a self-critique?

For an illiterate?

That was a fate worse than death.

Five hundred words?!

By the ancestors—

that was worse than heartbreak.

Clutching his carbine, his eyes immediately turned red—not with fear, but with pure, undiluted resentment.

If he had to suffer, someone else was going to pay.

With a sharp click, he reloaded, swung around in the saddle, and fired.

"Boom!"

A Mongol soldier fell straight off his horse.

By now, the Mongols finally understood.

If they charged—

The Han fled, firing as they retreated.

If they stopped chasing—

The Han turned back and charged, firing as they advanced.

It was painfully familiar.

In the past, they had used this exact tactic against others.

Never, in their wildest dreams, had they imagined it would one day be turned against them.

Only now—

only after enduring it themselves—

Did they truly understand how tormenting it was.

The torment!

The agony!

With a weapon range disadvantage of over a hundred meters, this battle felt suffocating. Every instinct screamed at them to charge, yet charging meant death.

Still—

The Mongol cavalry retained one advantage.

Their horsemanship.

If they truly committed to fleeing, the Han cavalry would never catch them.

The Wushen tribe leader and the Ordos tribe leader made their decisions almost simultaneously.

"Withdraw!"

"Disengage!"

The two Mongol cavalry forces split apart, one fleeing northwest, the other northeast, vanishing across the grassland in opposite directions.

For a moment, the Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion hesitated.

Zheng Daniu frowned.

"Which way do we chase?"

Zao Ying narrowed her eyes, thinking.

"Our main target is the Wushen," she said slowly. "Perhaps we—"

Before she could finish, Shi Jian spoke up.

"Neither."

Everyone looked at him.

He thought carefully for a moment, then spoke with absolute certainty.

"We won't catch them."

He raised his hand and pointed.

"In a situation like this, there's only one correct move."

"We strike their settlement directly."

Mongols did not have fixed homes.

They migrated constantly.

But when they found fertile pastureland, they would pitch their tents and settle temporarily. Over time, these camps expanded into vast settlements of yurts.

The problem was—

They moved often.

Han people could rarely locate them accurately.

But Gao Family Village was different.

A reconnaissance hot air balloon rose quietly into the sky.

Moments later, the supreme directive arrived.

From Dao Xuan Tianzhun.

"Eighteen li to the northeast."

No explanation.

No elaboration.

Absolute certainty.

Shi Jian grinned.

"Let's go."

Zao Ying laughed.

"Well then," she said, eyes gleaming, "it's our turn to plunder the Mongols."

The cavalry battalion ignored both fleeing Mongol forces.

Instead, they thundered straight toward the Wushen tribe's current settlement.

When the Wushen tribe leader realized their trajectory, his face drained of color.

"Damn it!" he shouted. "They're heading for our tribe!"

The Ordos tribe leader, watching from afar, actually laughed.

"Well now," he murmured, amused, "this is going to be interesting."

The Wushen tribe leader nearly exploded.

"Quick! We must return to defend!"

A subordinate hesitated.

"How do we defend?" he asked bitterly. "How do we fight cavalry armed with those firearms?"

The leader fell silent.

For a brief moment, he had no answer.

But even knowing it was futile—

They had no choice.

If they didn't try, everything would be lost.

Their tents.

Their cattle and sheep.

Their women and children.

Grinding his teeth, the Wushen tribe leader roared:

"Chase them down!"

What would they do once they caught up?

He didn't know.

Thus, an absurd scene unfolded across the grassland.

The Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion rode ahead.

The Wushen cavalry chased desperately along their flank.

And far behind, the Ordos cavalry watched like spectators.

One after another, all three forces arrived at the Wushen settlement.

Yurts dotted the land.

Cattle and sheep grazed freely.

At the center, the settlement resembled a small Han market—women sitting, working, talking.

Then came the thunder of hooves.

The women froze.

They looked up.

When they realized the approaching riders were not Mongols—but Han soldiers—

Panic erupted.

They screamed, scrambling desperately into their tents.

Along the borderlands, raids were common.

Mongols raided Han.

Han raided Mongols.

It was a brutal cycle.

Mongol women feared Han cavalry just as much.

They were human.

They feared slaughter.

But this time—

They encountered Gao Family Village.

The cavalry did not massacre.

They did not butcher the weak.

They fired a few symbolic shots, deliberately raising their muzzles, bullets tearing through empty air.

"Boom! Boom!"

The sound alone was enough.

The women fled screaming, terrified beyond reason.

From afar, the pursuing Wushen cavalry could no longer endure it.

They roared as one, eyes bloodshot, and charged.

"Don't go!" the Wushen tribe leader screamed hoarsely. "Don't go over there—!"

No one listened.

Only the cold reply of carbines answered them.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

And once again—

Wushen riders fell.

Chapter 808 Next Time, Have Commander Chen Come

From afar, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen—the Ordos tribe leader—watched the entire spectacle unfold.

The dust, the gunfire, the collapsing Wushen lines, the terrified retreat.

His face slowly drained of color.

By the time the Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion fully seized control of the Wushen settlement, Elinchen's expression had turned ashen, as if all the blood in his body had frozen.

"The Wushen tribe..." he muttered hoarsely, eyes fixed on the distant tents.

"...is finished."

A subordinate riding beside him swallowed nervously and lowered his voice.

"Should... should we go save them?"

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen turned his head and stared at the man as if he had just heard the most ridiculous joke in the world.

"Save them?" he repeated flatly.

Then he shook his head.

"Nonsense."

His voice was low, firm, and utterly devoid of hesitation.

"Of course not."

He looked once more toward the distant Han cavalry, then decisively turned his horse around.

"We don't have the ability to save them," he said. "Not even close."

After a brief pause, he added quietly:

"Let's go."

"We'll pack up and move."

"Move even further away from these Han people."

No one objected.

The Ordos tribesmen immediately turned their horses and rode off, vanishing into the grassland without a second glance backward.

They understood one thing clearly:

The world at the border had changed.

Meanwhile, at the edge of the Wushen settlement, the Wushen tribe leader stood frozen in place.

His cavalry circled restlessly nearby, but none dared advance.

They could not break through.

They could not save anyone.

Inside the settlement, chaos reigned.

Cattle and sheep, startled by gunfire and shouting, scattered in every direction. Children cried. Women screamed. Tents flapped violently in the wind.

And at the center of it all—

The Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion moved with chilling efficiency.

They did not massacre.

They did not burn tents.

They simply controlled.

Within a short time, the entire settlement was firmly in their hands.

Shi Jian dismounted and led a small squad toward the largest yurt.

Inside were four women and five children.

The wives and children of the Wushen tribe leader.

The women clutched the children tightly, faces pale, bodies trembling uncontrollably.

Shi Jian stepped forward.

He deliberately lowered his voice, making it cold, slow, and menacing.

"Behave yourselves," he said. "Obey quietly."

"For now, we won't kill you."

He paused, letting the silence stretch.

"Otherwise," he continued evenly, "you'll all be cut into minced meat and fed to the dogs."

The effect was immediate.

The threat was brutally effective.

The women gasped, trembling so violently they could barely stand. The children froze, eyes wide with terror, not daring to cry.

Shi Jian's men stepped forward, blades drawn, pressing cold steel lightly against their backs.

The women and children were forced out of the tent.

Then—

Shi Jian raised his blade.

He pointed the gleaming edge directly at the head of the eldest child.

His voice rang out across the settlement.

"I'll count to three," he roared. "All Mongol cavalry—come here and surrender!"

"Otherwise, I'll chop off his head with one strike."

"And then—one by one—I'll kill every woman and child in this settlement."

Even as he spoke, a part of Shi Jian's heart was pounding violently.

Please surrender, he prayed inwardly.

Please surrender quickly.

His words alone weren't vicious enough.

Zao Ying noticed.

She nudged him lightly with her elbow and gestured behind him.

A fierce-looking old bandit stepped forward.

This subordinate's face was crisscrossed with saber scars—deep, jagged marks that told stories of countless battles and killings. His eyes were cold, his expression vicious.

He raised his blade.

"ONE!"

The Wushen tribe leader's heart nearly burst.

"TWO!"

"No—!"

The leader screamed in desperation.

He spurred his horse forward wildly, leapt off before it fully stopped, and tumbled to the ground, scrambling forward on his hands and knees.

The remaining Mongol cavalry followed suit.

One by one, they dismounted.

One by one, they lay flat on the ground.

They surrendered.

Only then did Shi Jian finally exhale.

Deeply.

He had been genuinely terrified.

If the Mongols hadn't surrendered...

He didn't know whether he could really bring himself to kill a child.

He glanced at Scarface.

Maybe he could, Shi Jian thought. He looks terrifying.

But strangely enough, Scarface's eyes were calm, even gentle—cold on the surface, but burning with a kind of quiet loyalty.

Fortunately...

It hadn't come to that.

Shi Jian straightened his back and spoke loudly, making sure everyone heard.

"Today, I am here to inform you."

"My name is Shi Jian."

"Regional Commander Shi Jian of Yansui."

From now on, he declared—

"This entire border region around Yulin belongs to me."

"Since I have arrived, everything around here goes by my word."

"Anyone who disobeys—will be shot."

The Mongols lay prostrate, faces pressed into the dirt, not daring to make a sound.

Shi Jian pointed directly at the Wushen tribe leader.

"You," he said. "You're the leader here, aren't you?"

The leader slowly pushed himself up and nodded.

"Yes..."

Shi Jian nodded.

"Good."

"Do you understand who you should obey from now on?"

The leader clenched his fists.

Humiliation burned in his chest, but he swallowed it whole.

"I will obey Regional Commander Shi Jian of Yansui," he said hoarsely.

"Good that you understand."

Shi Jian waved his hand casually.

"I didn't come here for nothing."

"Bring me ten cattle and one hundred sheep."

"I'll spare your women and children."

There was no room for negotiation.

The leader lowered his head.

"...Do as he says."

Several Mongol cavalymen immediately rose and went to herd the livestock.

Soon, a vast procession of cattle and sheep was driven forward.

Zao Ying's bandits—experts at herding—took over without a word, efficiently gathering the animals while cavalymen kept watch.

Before leaving, Shi Jian turned back and threw out one final sentence:

"I'll be back in a few days."

"Have cattle and sheep ready to entertain me."

"If you dare resist, you'll all be slaughtered."

"But if you obey quietly—and someone bullies you on the plains later..."

He paused.

"Just tell them my name."

With a sharp wave of his hand—

"Go!"

The Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion withdrew southward.

Only when they were far away—

Far, far away—

Did Shi Jian finally collapse slightly in the saddle and let out a long breath.

"Dao Xuan Tianzhun," he reported earnestly, touching the puppet at his chest,

"your subordinate has fortunately not failed the mission."

"And... I believe I did a convincing performance as a fierce and wicked Han general."

The puppet Dao Xuan Tianzhun tilted its head.

"No good," it said flatly.

Shi Jian stiffened.

"Your acting was terrible."

"Not fierce at all."

"Let alone wicked."

Shi Jian: "..."

The puppet continued mercilessly.

"Once you return, immediately summon Commander Chen."

"From now on, he will handle Mongol affairs."

Everyone sucked in a breath.

At the mention of Commander Chen, not a single person objected.

Because when it came to playing villains—

There was no one more terrifying in Dao Xuan Tianzhun's domain.

In Gao Family Village, if a child cried at night and refused to sleep, parents only needed to say one sentence:

"If you cry again, Commander Chen will come."

The child would immediately fall silent.

Using Commander Chen to intimidate Mongols?

Perfect.

Shi Jian hesitated.

"Dao Xuan Tianzhun... aren't we going a bit far?"

"We're killing people, seizing livestock, threatening them—only violence, no benefits."

"Will they really obey?"

"This," the puppet replied calmly, "is exactly what works."

"They have a wolf culture."

"They respect strength."

"The stronger and more domineering you appear, the more obedient they become."

"If you show weakness, they'll challenge the alpha."

Shi Jian sucked in a cold breath.

"Hiss... why are there such people in the world?"

"Because of their harsh environment," Dao Xuan Tianzhun replied.

"Of course, suppression alone isn't enough."

"After sufficient suppression, you give them a little benefit."

"Just a little."

"Then they'll become devoted."

"This is called..."

"Stockholm Syndrome."

Shi Jian stared blankly.

Zao Ying stared blankly.

Zheng Daniu suddenly slapped his thigh.

"Oh! I get it!"

Shi Jian and Zao Ying spun around in shock.

"You understood?!"

Zheng Daniu grinned broadly.

"We'll have mutton tonight."

"...That's it?"

"What else?" Zheng Daniu said innocently.

He waved his hand.

"Whatever Dao Xuan Tianzhun says, we do."

"Why overthink it?"

"Divine revelations aren't for mortals to understand."

Shi Jian and Zao Ying exchanged looks.

At last, they understood why Zheng Daniu and Gao Chuwu were so favored.

They didn't think.

They just obeyed.

The puppet Dao Xuan Tianzhun continued:

"These methods are temporary."

"Once the Mongols are sufficiently assimilated, once they learn Han culture and abandon wolf instincts..."

"They'll be treated as brothers."

"...That will take a very long time."

"No rush."

"Understood," Shi Jian said solemnly.

"Understood," Zao Ying echoed.

Meanwhile...

Back at the Wushen settlement.

The Wushen tribe leader sat before his tent, surrounded by his four wives, five sons, loyal subordinates, and the gathered men, women, and children of the tribe.

Silence stretched.

At length, he raised his hand.

"That Han man—Shi Jian..."

"...is too formidable."

"We cannot oppose him."

He took a deep breath.

"We move."

"Northward."

No one objected.

Chapter 809 Heroes Emerge from Chaotic Times

Early Chongzhen, Seventh Year.

Across the Central Plains, a vast net was being slowly drawn tight.

Grand Coordinator of the Five Provinces, Chen Qiyu, had finally laid out his grand encirclement plan—mobilizing multiple armies across provinces, sealing roads, rivers, and mountain passes alike, determined to suppress the roving rebel forces in one decisive operation.

Among the four main encircling forces—

Gao Family Village alone commanded two.

Luo Xi, Flat Rabbit, Zheng Gouzi, and Flying Mouse were stationed at Shangnan County, forming a firm northern pressure point.

Bai Yuan was stationed at Luoshi County, coordinating directly with imperial forces and acting as one of the central anchors of the encirclement.

Meanwhile, to the west, Lu Xiangheng and Qin Liangyu blocked the rebels' route into Sichuan, their forces sealing off the mountainous passages like iron gates.

With the west blocked and the north sealed—

The rebels had only one choice left.

South.

They turned their blades once again toward Xiangyang.

The Broken Plank

Huguang Provincial Governor Tang Hui personally rushed to Xiangyang with Hubei garrison troops, engaging the rebels in a brutal, bloody confrontation.

At first glance, the outcome should not have been in doubt.

Yet reality was cruel.

Somehow, the rebels had acquired a large quantity of border army equipment—

Arquebuses.

Three-Eyed Arquebuses.

Ambush repeating crossbows.

Not only did their numbers exceed Tang Hui's forces, their equipment was superior.

Gunfire tore through the battlefield.

Formations collapsed.

Governor Tang Hui was defeated in crushing fashion, his troops scattering in disorder as he fled in retreat.

And with that—

The encirclement broke.

Like water finding the weakest crack in a dam.

The rebels surged east into Tongbai County, then abruptly turned north, slipping back into Henan.

Luoshi County

When the news arrived, Fan Shangzheng felt his vision darken.

He slammed the urgent military report onto the table in front of Bai Yuan.

"Mr. Bai, look at this! Just look at it!" he said angrily. "It's infuriating beyond words! That Huguang Provincial Governor is utterly useless. Completely useless!"

"He couldn't even stop the rebels!"

"They smashed through him, split into three columns, bypassed Luoshi County entirely, looped through Hubei territory, and slipped straight back into Henan!"

Bai Yuan picked up the report, then unfolded the map beside it.

He traced the rebel movements slowly with his finger.

After a long pause, he sighed softly.

"...Ah."

"These rebels," he said, "are truly a handful."

This was the exact scenario Dao Xuan Tianzhun had warned them about before.

The bucket theory.

When water fills a bucket, it doesn't matter how tall most of the planks are—

if even one plank is short, the water spills from there.

Among the four armies, three were strong.

But Huguang's contingent was weak.

And the rebels had flowed straight through that weakness.

Fan Shangzheng said grimly, "They've re-entered Henan. I must immediately recall my troops to respond."

Bai Yuan nodded. "Go, then. We all must go."

He looked at the map again, brows furrowed.

"But without a proper encirclement," he added quietly,

"these troublesome rascals will never be truly eliminated."

Fan Shangzheng produced another document.

"Grand Coordinator Chen has already adjusted the deployment," he said. "He's ordered me to garrison Nanyang Prefecture, and Zuo Liangyu to garrison Runing Prefecture."

"As long as these two points hold," Fan Shangzheng continued, "the rebels won't be able to re-enter Henan. They'll be forced back into the encirclement."

Bai Yuan examined the map carefully.

The arrangement was sound.

There was nothing more to say.

"Then let's move," he said.

The army immediately began marching from Luoshi County toward Nanyang Prefecture.

Over three hundred li.

Several days of forced marches.

Along the way, messengers from Chen Qiyu arrived one after another, continuously fine-tuning troop positions, adjusting routes, and desperately trying to tighten the net once more.

Fan Shangzheng was not a brilliant commander.

But he had one great virtue—

He obeyed orders exactly.

Runing Prefecture

On the city wall of Runing Prefecture stood a man of thirty-five.

Zuo Liangyu.

At the prime of his life, his posture was straight, his expression confident, his eyes sharp as he gazed down upon the army assembled below.

At thirty-five, he had already risen to Assistant Military Commissioner and Chief Commander of Aid and Suppression.

Such a rise could not be explained by seniority alone.

He commanded three thousand loyal household troops, elite soldiers who followed him personally.

Beyond that—

He controlled large numbers of garrison troops.

But that wasn't the most important thing.

The core of Zuo Liangyu's strength lay elsewhere.

His army contained a vast number of surrendered and pacified bandits.

As the official in charge of bandit suppression, Zuo Liangyu had fought the rebels repeatedly—and won.

Almost every battle ended in victory.

Under such pressure, countless rebels surrendered.

Zuo Liangyu did not execute them.

Nor did he hand them over to civil officials like Wu Shen.

Instead—

He selected the strongest and fiercest among them.

He absorbed them into his own army under the banner of

"atoning for crimes through meritorious service."

These former bandits fought alongside him in suppression campaigns.

And his forces expanded rapidly.

Quietly.

Secretly.

By now, his true strength had grown to nearly ten thousand men.

Of course—

When reporting upward, he always said three thousand.

Never more.

As for the surrendered bandits?

They were never reported at all.

No one knew.

Except him.

Unreported troops meant no court provisions.

No pay.

No rations.

So where did the money come from?

From plunder.

From massacres.

From innocent heads falsely claimed as bandit kills.

A subordinate stepped forward and reported:

"General, your subordinate led men to cleanse a village. We obtained over three hundred heads. How shall we handle them?"

Zuo Liangyu's eyes lit up.

"Oh?" he said with interest. "Over three hundred?"

He leaned forward slightly and lowered his voice.

"Good."

"Pick out the head of a sturdy man."

"Call him the fierce bandit... let's see... 'Dumpling Boiler.'"

The subordinate blinked.

Zuo Liangyu continued calmly, almost cheerfully.

"Find a woman's head. Say she was his female subordinate—'Dancing Red Sleeve.'"

"Then an old man's head. Claim he was Dumpling Boiler's strategist."

"Name him... 'Little Brains.'"

Zuo Liangyu chuckled.

"Draft a memorial to the throne."

"Say I annihilated the notorious bandit Dumpling Boiler and captured the heads of his female general and strategist."

"Send it up and claim merit."

The subordinate grinned broadly.

"As you command."

As the man hurried away, Zuo Liangyu laughed softly to himself.

Once the rewards come down, that money can raise even more troops.

Nearly ten thousand soldiers.

Not rabble.

Not starving mobs.

But young, strong, well-fed men.

Well-armed.

Well-trained.

"I am powerful now," he thought smugly.

"Who in this world can restrain me?"

At that moment—

A messenger rushed up the stairs.

"General! Orders from Grand Coordinator Chen Qiyu!"

"The rebels have moved north from Tongbai County, split into three columns, and are heading toward Runing Prefecture!"

"Please deploy your troops immediately and block them from entering Henan!"

Zuo Liangyu nodded indifferently.

"Understood."

"Tell the Grand Coordinator I will comply."

Once the messenger left, Zuo Liangyu's lips curled into a cold sneer.

"Chen Qiyu?" he scoffed. "A mere civilian official."

"You think you can command me?"

"I could crush you with one hand now."

He waved his hand.

"Let's go."

"Fight a few skirmishes."

"If we meet large forces, avoid them."

"If we meet small groups, capture them."

"Absorb the strong ones."

Only strength protects a man.

His lieutenants stepped forward in unison.

"As you command!"

Zuo Liangyu looked down at the map of the Great Ming, spread before him.

In his heart, a single thought echoed—

Heroes emerge from chaotic times.

"And I," he smiled coldly,

"am destined to rise."

Chapter 810 The Wushen Tribe

The Wushen Tribe, a lingering remnant of the Northern Yuan, continued their slow and difficult retreat northward.

They had originally believed that once they moved far enough away, once the grasslands widened and the horizon stretched endlessly, their troubles would finally ease.

Unfortunately, reality proved otherwise.

Halfway through their migration, they ran headlong into an old enemy—the Otog Tribe.

The Otog were also moving north.

On the boundless steppe, where pasture was life itself, the meeting of two migrating tribes could only end one way.

Disputes erupted almost immediately.

While the Wushen tribe's cattle and sheep were grazing, Otog riders swept in brazenly and drove off entire herds without even bothering with excuses.

Thefts led to insults.

Insults led to blades.

And before long, yet another violent clash broke out between the two tribes.

The result was painfully predictable.

The Wushen Tribe, already weakened after losing many of their young warriors in earlier disasters, stood no chance. They were crushed outright. Not only were huge numbers of their cattle and sheep stolen, but even many of their women were seized and carried off by the Otag.

The blow was devastating.

Unwilling to swallow such humiliation, the Wushen chieftain immediately sent envoys to seek help from their traditional overlord—the Ordos Tribe.

Yet when those envoys finally reached the Ordos encampment, they were met with grim news.

The Ordos Tribe's leader, Ligdan Khan, was in the middle of a campaign against the Great Ming.

Not just any campaign.

Over the past year, Ligdan Khan had launched five separate large-scale offensives, repeatedly clashing with the Ming's Supreme Commander of the Three Borders, Hong Chengchou.

And every single time—

He lost.

He failed to break through Ming defenses.

He failed to seize grain.

He failed to achieve anything at all.

The endless failures had crushed not only morale but also Ligdan Khan's body. He was gravely ill, his condition deteriorating by the day, his life hanging by a thread.

In such circumstances, who would care about a minor feud between the Wushen and the Otog?

No one.

There was no one to arbitrate justice, and no one willing to lend strength.

With no hope of defeating the Otog on their own, the Wushen Tribe had no choice but to withdraw even farther, retreating to the northwestern fringes of the Yulin region.

As they fled, the Wushen chieftain clung to a fragile hope.

"We are nomads," he thought. "Our camps move constantly. Shi Jian managed to find us once... but surely he won't find us again."

It was a simple, almost childlike belief.

With that faint optimism, he hoped to quietly recover, rebuild their strength, and disappear into the vast grasslands.

Unfortunately for him—

Reality had never been kind to the Wushen Tribe.

Less than half a month later, disaster arrived again.

A Han man with a terrifying appearance rode into their camp, leading a troop of flintlock cavalry. His face was hard, his eyes vicious, and his presence alone radiated hostility.

This was clearly not someone who came to negotiate.

The man dismounted, stared coldly at the trembling Wushen chieftain, and spoke.

"The name's Chen Qianhu."

His lips curled into a cruel grin, exposing large, yellowed teeth.

"I'm not like Shi Jian," he said flatly. "He talked too politely. Too gentle. The higher-ups said he was soft, spineless, useless trash."

Chen Qianhu leaned forward slightly, his eyes burning.

"So they stripped him of his command... and sent me."

His voice dropped, heavy with menace.

"I have no intention of being demoted."

He pointed directly at the Wushen chieftain.

"I'll say this once. Hand over your chief wife, An Jile, and your eldest son, Zhebu. They'll be taken back as hostages and locked up."

A pause.

Then, slowly—

"If you refuse, I'll boil them alive and feed them to the dogs."

The words were delivered calmly, almost casually.

But the terror they inspired was absolute.

Faced with Chen Qianhu's twisted gaze and murderous expression, who would dare resist?

The Wushen chieftain's entire body trembled. Without the slightest hesitation, he obediently presented his chief wife, An Jile, and his eldest son, Zhebu.

Chen Qianhu nodded in satisfaction.

Then, as if it were an afterthought, he demanded two hundred more sheep.

Once the sheep were handed over, Chen Qianhu mounted his horse and prepared to leave, his flintlock cavalry falling into formation behind him.

Before departing, he glanced back.

"You've been quite obedient this time," he said lazily. "Since you behave so well, I'll take you in as my subordinate."

He sneered.

"If anyone bullies you in the future, remember to mention my name."

The Wushen chieftain hesitated.

Fear gnawed at him, but desperation won.

Gathering his courage, he spoke in a trembling voice.

"General Chen... that... this humble one... we are being bullied right now."

Chen Qianhu stopped.

"Oh?" His eyes narrowed. "Who dares?"

The Wushen chieftain immediately replied, "The Otog Tribe! They're on the northern plains, not far from here."

Chen Qianhu nodded as if this was perfectly ordinary.

"I see," he said. "Very well. Follow me."

"I'll take a ride across the northern plains and settle this matter for my subordinate."

The Wushen chieftain was overjoyed.

"Then we leave everything to General Chen!"

Among the Mongols, strength was revered above all else.

Even though they had just been victims of a greater power, the moment that power turned to support them, pride surged uncontrollably.

Almost instantly, the Wushen tribesmen straightened their backs.

They became swaggering again.

The Wushen chieftain prepared to guide Chen Qianhu toward the Otog settlement—

Only to realize it wasn't necessary.

Chen Qianhu didn't ask.

He didn't hesitate.

He rode straight ahead, as if he already knew exactly where the Otog Tribe was.

The Wushen tribesmen were stunned.

"How do these Han people locate Mongol camps so precisely on such vast grasslands?" they whispered.
"Is this divine assistance?"

Soon, someone shouted—

"We're here! That's the Otog Tribe!"

But before the words fully left his mouth, Chen Qianhu's cavalry had already surged forward.

Gunfire erupted.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Otog Tribe, completely unprepared, collapsed under the assault just as easily as the Wushen had before them.

The flintlock cavalry stormed into the settlement, seizing cattle and sheep in large numbers.

Only then did the Wushen tribesmen snap out of their daze.

"Wait—those are our cattle and sheep!"

With wild howls, they charged forward, joining the looting.

Some couldn't resist mocking the Otog people as they pillaged.

"You dared to bully the Wushen Tribe?" they roared with laughter. "Now you see our strength! With the Han helping us, your Otog Tribe will obey us from now on!"

The settlement descended into chaos.

In truth, Chen Qianhu's men committed relatively few atrocities.

It was the Wushen tribesmen—turning on their own kind—who proved far more brutal.

Just like puppet troops throughout history, they were crueler than their masters.

After the devastation, the Otog Tribe was left broken and silent, forced to declare submission to the Wushen.

The Wushen Tribe, meanwhile, swelled with arrogance.

Not only had they reclaimed what was stolen, but they had also plundered even more livestock from the Otog—effectively replenishing everything the Han had taken from them earlier.

In their eyes, it was as if the Han had never stolen from them at all.

And, with twisted delight, they also took women from the Otog Tribe to bear children.

To them, this was a joyous outcome.

The Wushen chieftain's ambitions began to grow.

With Han support behind him, he launched successive campaigns—first attacking Ulaan Tolgoi, subjugating three minor tribes, then marching on Sumitu Sumu and conquering four more.

As more tribes submitted, the Wushen Tribe's power and arrogance expanded rapidly.

They even began to openly challenge Northern Yuan nobles, disregarding the authority of the Ordos Tribe altogether.

At this time, Ligdan Khan lay gravely ill, on the brink of death.

Many Mongol tribes had already defected to the Manchus or allied with them.

The Northern Yuan existed in name only, teetering on the edge of collapse.

And now—

The sudden rise of the Wushen Tribe added yet another layer of chaos to an already crumbling world.

