

Great Ming 811

Chapter 811 I Proved the Pressure of Air

At the bustling central intersection of the Gao Family Village Business District—right in the heart of Gao Family Village itself—

This was ordinarily the busiest crossroads in the village, a place where people came and went without pause.

But today, it was even livelier than usual.

The reason was simple.

A most unusual experiment was scheduled to take place here.

Ji Menghan, the son of the lantern maker of Gao Family Village, had announced through Thirty-Two Middle School that he would be conducting an experiment in public, inviting everyone to witness it.

Most villagers didn't know Ji Menghan personally.

But once Thirty-Two Middle School put its name behind something, curiosity spread like wildfire.

After all, when had the school ever promoted anything that wasn't important—or strange?

And so, the entire Gao Family Village buzzed with anticipation.

It was just after dinner.

The workers had finished their shifts, farmers had returned from the fields, and merchants were closing their shops. Aside from a handful of industries still running, the village had entered its most leisurely hour.

Crowds poured into the intersection.

Workers, farmers, merchants—everyone scrambled for a good spot, afraid of missing even a single moment.

Soon, people noticed something even more unusual.

San Shier, the highest administrative official of Gao Family Village, was standing among the spectators.

Not only him.

Song Yingxing was there.

Young Master Bai was there.

Wang Zheng was there.

Behind them stood a group of graduate students, all watching attentively.

Even the elder statesmen of the village had arrived—Gao Yiye, the Village Chief, and Gao Laba.

The lineup alone made people swallow nervously.

This was no ordinary show.

The villagers exchanged looks, whispering among themselves.

What exactly are we about to witness?

Just as the murmurs grew louder—

The lantern maker appeared.

The old man, already past fifty, walked with a slight stoop. Yet today, his face shone brighter than any lantern he had ever made.

He barely stepped forward before he began stammering.

"Ev... everyone... just a moment... my son will be here right away... right away..."

The crowd burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha! Master Ji, what has your son come up with this time?"

"Still keeping us in suspense?"

The lantern maker scratched his head, embarrassed yet clearly delighted.

"I... I can't even explain it myself..." he said honestly. "It's young people's stuff. I don't understand it. I only know my son... my son has really made something of himself! Hahahaha!"

He laughed so hard he nearly lost his breath.

At once, Xu Dafu—the head of the Ordnance Bureau—pushed through the crowd, reaching out to steady him and patting his back.

"Old friend, take it easy. Watch your breathing."

The two men were both originally from Xi'an.

Once upon a time, their statuses had been similar.

Later, they had drifted far apart.

Xu Dafu's fine clothes and official bearing stood in stark contrast to the lantern maker's humble attire. In the past, the lantern maker would instinctively lower his head when meeting his old friend, feeling inferior.

But today—

Today, he stood straight.

"Xu brother!" the lantern maker said proudly. "Watch my son's performance today! Hahahaha! His invention was personally praised by Dao Xuan Tianzun this time!"

He laughed again, almost choking.

"Even though I don't understand it... it feels incredibly amazing!"

Xu Dafu's interest was instantly piqued.

At that moment, the crowd parted.

Ji Menghan emerged.

He led a tall, fine horse by the reins, while behind him came several graduate students of similar age, each also leading a horse.

One by one, they stepped forward.

Sixteen horses in total.

Strong, well-fed, magnificent beasts.

Gasps rippled through the crowd.

Ji Menghan stepped into the center, a faintly smug smile on his face.

"Hello everyone," he said. "My name is Ji Menghan, and I am my father's son."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

Then—

"Hahahahaha!"

The crowd roared with laughter.

"If you weren't your father's son, that would be a serious problem!"

Ji Menghan froze, his face instantly red.

"Apologies! I was too excited and misspoke!" He coughed awkwardly. "Ahem... as the son of a lantern maker, I've aspired since childhood to become a lantern maker myself. I want to create lamps even better than my father's."

He raised both hands.

In them were two hemispherical copper covers.

"Everyone, look," he said. "These are two hemispherical copper covers. When placed together like this—"

He fitted them together neatly.

"They form a hollow copper sphere."

The crowd murmured.

"What's that supposed to do?"

Ji Menghan straightened his back.

"Today," he declared, "I will prove to everyone that air has pressure."

The reaction was immediate.

"Nonsense!"

"Utter rubbish!"

"Air has pressure? Who ever heard of that?"

Ji Menghan didn't argue.

Under everyone's watchful gaze, he brought the copper sphere forward and poured water into it through a small hole.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Until the sphere was completely filled.

The crowd watched in confusion.

Then Ji Menghan produced another strange contraption.

"This," he said solemnly, "is a vacuum-creating machine."

No one understood what that meant.

He connected the machine to the copper sphere using a peculiar tube, attaching it to the same small hole.

Then he began pumping.

Furiously.

Everyone could see the water being drawn out of the sphere.

When it was completely emptied, Ji Menghan pressed a mechanism at the hole, sealing it with a rubber stopper.

Only then did he remove the machine.

He lifted the copper sphere with both hands.

"Now," he said with a smile, "there is no water inside."

"And there is no air either."

"There is nothing at all."

He paused, then added reverently, "Dao Xuan Tianzun calls this kind of space a vacuum."

The crowd exchanged glances.

They didn't understand.

But it sounded terrifyingly profound.

"So... it's really empty?"

"There's no air inside?"

Ji Menghan nodded.

"Originally, there was air pressure inside the sphere, and air pressure outside it. The two forces canceled each other out. That's why we could easily separate the two covers."

He tapped the copper sphere lightly.

"But now, there is no air inside—while the air outside continues to press down."

"It presses the two hemispheres together."

"This force is far greater than human strength."

"Which is why—"

"We can no longer open it."

"Rubbish!" a burly man shouted, leaping out of the crowd. "I'll open it!"

He grabbed the iron rings attached to both sides of the sphere and pulled with all his might.

Nothing happened.

His face turned red.

Then purple.

Veins bulged.

Still nothing.

He released his grip, panting.

"Impossible!" he roared. "How can my strength be inferior to air?!"

Ji Menghan laughed heartily.

"The truth is," he said cheerfully, "no human strength can surpass the pressure of air."

"Not even horses."

With a wave of his hand, the graduate students led the sixteen horses forward.

Ropes were tied to the rings.

Eight horses on one side.

Eight on the other.

The crowd fell silent.

One horse could pull a thousand catties.

Eight horses meant eight thousand catties.

Sixteen horses pulling in opposite directions—

The horses strained.

Their muscles tightened.

Sweat poured down.

And finally—

THUMP!

The copper sphere split apart.

For a heartbeat, the world froze.

Then—

"Incredible!!!"

The crowd erupted.

Ji Menghan laughed, radiant with triumph.

"This is air pressure!" he shouted. "Hahahaha! I have proven the pressure of air!"

Only then did someone suddenly realize something was off.

"Wait a moment..."

"Didn't you say you wanted to make better lamps than your father?"

"Yes!"

"What does air pressure have to do with lanterns?"

The laughter surged again, echoing across the intersection.

Chapter 812 Shi Kefa's Further Studies

Only after the crowd began questioning him about the lamp did Ji Menghan suddenly snap back to his senses.

"Oh—right!" he exclaimed, slapping his forehead. "I almost forgot the main event!"

Everyone stared at him.

"The air pressure experiment was just something I stumbled upon while researching my lamp," Ji Menghan said hurriedly. "That wasn't the focus at all. The real focus... is the lamp itself!"

The crowd exchanged blank looks.

Ji Menghan waved his hand decisively. "Students! Quickly—bring out what we prepared earlier!"

A group of graduate students immediately scurried off, moving with suspicious enthusiasm. They disappeared into an adjacent room, and a moment later returned—dragging behind them a long electrical wire.

Only then did everyone realize that the wire had already been routed here in advance, cleverly hidden in the room.

Along with the wire, they carried out a strange object.

It was round, transparent, and resembled a glass bottle. Inside it were thin, unfamiliar carbon filaments, twisted and arranged in a way no one present had ever seen before.

The graduate students placed the object carefully onto a table and connected the wire.

Ji Menghan straightened, his face glowing with excitement.

"This," he announced, "is my invention!"

The crowd stared at it.

They still understood absolutely nothing.

Ji Menghan had clearly anticipated this. He didn't bother explaining further. Instead, he walked over, found a switch attached to the wire, and pressed it down with a soft click.

Instantly—

The carbon filaments inside the glass bottle flared to life.

A brilliant white light flooded outward, illuminating the entire intersection as bright as day.

"—!"

The crowd gasped in unison.

"Wow!!!"

Ji Menghan threw his head back and laughed. "I call it the electric lamp!"

"It doesn't need oil. It doesn't need a flame. As long as you connect the wire, you can use it anywhere!"

Although the villagers had no idea how it worked, they were instantly convinced of its value.

It was brighter than any oil lamp.

Cleaner.

More convenient.

Xu Dafu reached out and slapped Ji Menghan's father on the shoulder, his eyes shining.

"Old friend! Your Ji family truly has an heir to its craft," he said with feeling. "To create such a lamp... this time, the Dao Xuan Tianzun Special Prize is practically guaranteed!"

Ji Menghan's father laughed until his face turned red.

"My son... my son has truly brought honor to the Ji family! Hahahahaha!"

At that moment, the Village Chief squeezed his way through the crowd, raising a hand.

"How much is one of these lamps?" he asked loudly. "Actually—never mind the price. Come install one in my house immediately!"

"I want one too!"

"And me!"

The wealthiest households of Gao Family Village began shouting all at once, afraid they'd be left behind.

Ji Menghan waved his hands awkwardly. "Not so fast! Not so fast... I'm still planning to set up an electric lamp factory. Mass production will take time, so please don't rush."

A few days later—

Construction began on the Ji-style Electric Lamp Factory.

Ji Menghan used the large silver ingot he had received from the Dao Xuan Tianzun Special Prize as startup capital. He purchased an empty plot of land, erected factory buildings, commissioned specialized glass bottles from a glassworks, hired workers to produce the carbon filaments, and even constructed a large number of vacuum-manufacturing machines to evacuate the air from the bottles.

Once everything was in order, Ji Menghan returned to Thirty-Two Middle School to continue his studies and research, leaving the lamp factory in his father's care.

For the first time in many years, Ji Menghan's father walked with his head held high.

At last, he felt he had truly caught up to Xu Dafu.

It seemed that following Xing Honglang from Xi'an to Gao Family Village all those years ago had not been a mistake after all.

Early one morning.

A solemn-looking man arrived at Gao Family Village.

It was Shi Kefa.

His expression was heavy as he stepped off the train, moving slowly, deliberately. He surveyed the bustling, vibrant Gao Family Village, its factories humming and people flowing like a living organism.

Then, without lingering, he turned and began walking toward Thirty-Two Middle School.

"Hey! Isn't that Master Shi?"

A voice called out from the roadside.

"Master Shi, from Shi Kefa's Legal Enlightenment!"

Someone waved enthusiastically. "I love watching your program!"

Shi Kefa forced a smile. "I'm glad it's of help."

The passerby tilted their head. "Huh? Master Shi, you don't look very well."

Shi Kefa let out a small, awkward laugh. "No, no... I'm fine."

He waved farewell and continued on his way.

When he reached the school gates, the gatekeeper recognized him immediately.

"Master Shi?" the man exclaimed. "Good heavens, I never thought I'd meet someone from the mirror in person! Could you sign an autograph for me? My child adores your program!"

Shi Kefa signed without complaint.

The gatekeeper beamed. "Master Shi, what brings you all the way from Xi'an to Thirty-Two Middle School?"

A self-conscious smile crept onto Shi Kefa's face.

"Well... to be honest..." He hesitated. "I came here to... learn."

Saying it aloud felt unexpectedly difficult.

A man of his age, coming to a school to study—it was deeply embarrassing.

The gatekeeper froze for a moment. "Master Shi, you're joking. You're already a learned man."

Shi Kefa sighed. He knew there was no point explaining further. He simply shook his head and walked inside, heading straight for the principal's office.

He knocked.

Principal Wang opened the door—and was stunned.

"Master Shi?"

Shi Kefa didn't waste words. "Principal Wang, does Thirty-Two Middle School still accept students? I wish to study here—to learn practical skills."

Principal Wang jumped in surprise. "Master Shi, are you serious?"

Shi Kefa nodded.

"After watching A Minor Soldier of the Daling River Border Army, I became obsessed with serving the nation," he said quietly. "But the more I thought about it, the more I realized... I don't actually know how to help."

His face flushed faintly.

"I'm useless at civil administration. I'm no good at military strategy. All the things coming out of Gao Family Village—improving grain yields, boosting commerce, enhancing military equipment—I understand none of it."

Principal Wang nodded slowly. "I see."

"I only worry," Shi Kefa continued, "that my age might disqualify me."

Principal Wang smiled. "On that point, Master Shi can rest assured. Since the school's founding, Dao Xuan Tianzun laid down a rule: regardless of age, as long as one wishes to learn, this school will accept them."

Shi Kefa's eyes lit up. "Truly?"

"Of course."

Shi Kefa hesitated, then asked carefully, "Then... I shouldn't need to start from the lowest grade, should I? I wish to study knowledge directly useful for governing the world."

Principal Wang stroked his beard. "Such subjects are usually handled by our graduate students."

Shi Kefa took a deep breath. "Then may I enroll directly into graduate studies?"

Principal Wang coughed lightly.

"That... is not entirely my decision," he said. "Dao Xuan Tianzun personally oversees this school. No matter who you are, the rules must be followed. Violating a divine decree would be—"

Shi Kefa shuddered.

Violating an imperial edict was one thing.

Violating a decree of Dao Xuan Tianzun was something else entirely.

"I will naturally follow the rules," Shi Kefa said solemnly. "What are they?"

Principal Wang swiftly produced a thick stack of papers and placed them on the desk.

"Entrance examinations," he said. "Whichever level you pass determines where you may study."

Shi Kefa didn't hesitate.

He extended his hand.

"Bring me the graduate entrance exam."

Chapter 813 This Test Paper Requires a Score of 60

The graduate-level examination papers—several pages thick, with an intimidating sense of weight entirely unrelated to physics—landed softly on the desk in front of Shi Kefa.

Thud.

Shi Kefa felt calm. Confident, even.

After all, he was an Imperial Scholar.

Did these people even understand what an Imperial Scholar represented?

In the Great Ming Dynasty, that title alone was proof of surviving a nationwide intellectual meat grinder. Only the sharpest minds, the most stubborn souls, and the most calligraphy-calloused hands could crawl out the other side.

Shi Kefa lowered his gaze.

The first half-page was poetry.

"Sunlight on Incense Burner Mountain creates purple smoke..."

Shi Kefa almost laughed.

Is that it?

This wasn't a question—it was muscle memory. Years of grinding classics had etched these verses directly into his bones. He didn't need to think. His hand moved on its own.

Swish.

Swish.

Swish.

The brush danced across the paper, strokes smooth and elegant, the kind of calligraphy that—if accidentally discovered by future collectors—would immediately cause several auction houses to fight to the death.

By the time he finished the half-page, Shi Kefa was certain of one thing:

Whoever grades this is about to feel deeply inadequate.

Then—

He flipped the page.

And froze.

Completely.

High school freshman mathematics.

Shi Kefa's fingers tightened around the brush.

They trembled.

Just slightly.

He stared at the page as though it were staring back at him.

"...Principal Wang," Shi Kefa finally said, voice dry, "what... what in heaven's name are these questions?"

Principal Wang didn't even hesitate.

"These are first-year high school math problems," he replied calmly. "All of our graduate students are self-studying this material. Whether someone can reach this level basically determines if they qualify for graduate studies."

Shi Kefa's mind stalled.

"...What kind of work," he asked carefully, "requires this sort of knowledge?"

Principal Wang chuckled, the sound light and utterly unconcerned with Shi Kefa's dignity.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has said that mathematics is the foundation of all sciences. Without mastering mathematics, one cannot properly study anything else."

Cold sweat slid down Shi Kefa's spine.

"I feel," he admitted after a long pause, "that the realm of graduate studies may be... slightly beyond my current cultivation. Perhaps this official should begin by self-studying high school material first."

Principal Wang nodded, entirely reasonable.

"To enter high school, one must score at least sixty percent on the middle school graduation exam."

Shi Kefa straightened. Confidence returned.

"That will pose no difficulty," he declared. "Bring forth the papers."

Swish.

Several more pages were placed before him.

This time, Shi Kefa had learned his lesson. He barely spared the first half-page of poetry a glance. His eyes flicked over it; his brush followed like a loyal servant, dispatching the verses with ruthless efficiency.

Then he turned the page.

He inhaled.

Fill in the Blanks

(1 point per blank, 27 points total)

There are only () types of electric charge in nature. Clothes made from certain synthetic fabrics tend to get dirty easily, mainly because synthetic fabric is prone to () phenomena.

When a machine performs work, the extra, unavoidable work we undertake is called ().

An object with magnetic properties is called a (), and the process by which a non-magnetic object acquires magnetism is called ().

Shi Kefa's hand began to tremble again.

This time, noticeably.

"...Principal Wang," he said weakly, "what... what connection do these questions have to practical governance and utility?"

Principal Wang smiled faintly—the sort of smile that suggested you will understand someday, but not today.

"Of course they are useful. This is physics. Dao Xuan Tianzun has said that only by mastering physics can one comprehend the principles governing all things—and only then can one truly manage the world."

Shi Kefa swallowed.

"You just said," he asked slowly, "that middle school graduates can score above sixty on this test. Does that mean... the Gao Family Village middle school graduates I've met before—like Shopkeeper Wang Tang—can answer these questions?"

Principal Wang laughed.

"Ah, Wang Tang! My adopted son. An excellent child. He scores above ninety on these questions."

Shi Kefa's brain short-circuited.

Wang Tang.

The man ran inns. Carriage services. Grain stores. A pile of ordinary businesses that barely deserved the word remarkable.

Shi Kefa had always assumed he was simply a clever clerk.

And now he was being told that this same man could casually score ninety on questions that made an Imperial Scholar break into a cold sweat.

Sweat gathered on Shi Kefa's forehead.

"Wang Tang is... terrifying," he said honestly. "Given time, he will surely rise to great heights."

Principal Wang waved a hand.

"An exaggeration. He is diligent, yes—but still far behind our graduate students."

Then his eyes lit up.

"Come, let me show you something."

He walked to the side and flipped a switch.

Click.

Above Shi Kefa's head, an electric lamp flared to life.

Light flooded the room.

Shi Kefa gasped.

Principal Wang gestured upward.

"This is the result of physics. The electric lamp factory is already under construction. Soon, Gao Family Village will use these lamps extensively. We also plan branch factories in Puzhou—and certainly one in Xi'an."

He paused, letting the light speak for itself.

"This is what applying physics to governance and utility looks like."

Shi Kefa stared at the lamp, then at the papers, then at his own hands.

His knowledge felt... painfully insufficient.

"...Very well," he said at last. "This official is unfit to begin at high school. I shall start from first-year middle school."

Principal Wang nodded.

"To enter first-year middle school, however, one must score at least sixty percent on the elementary school graduation exam."

Swish.

Another stack of papers appeared.

This time, Shi Kefa didn't even pretend.

He skipped the poetry.

Straight to the back.

Elementary school mathematics.

The greatest common divisor of 12 and 18 is ().

The least common multiple of 16, 24, and 48 is ().

Shi Kefa exhaled slowly and set down his brush.

"It seems," he said with quiet dignity, "that this official must begin his studies... from elementary school."

Principal Wang hesitated.

"As long as Lord Shi can accept it..."

Shi Kefa immediately understood.

Elementary school classrooms were filled with children.

Very young children.

An Imperial Scholar. A judicial commissioner. Sitting among toddlers.

This was not humiliation.

This was annihilation.

In the end, Principal Wang found a solution.

A "distinguished visitor's seat" was placed at the very back of the classroom. It was publicly announced that Lord Shi Kefa was inspecting educational standards at Thirty-Two Middle School.

Thus, everyone believed he was observing.

No one suspected he was studying.

Shi Kefa skipped language arts classes and attended only mathematics.

Every lesson, he took meticulous notes.

Every concept, he pondered deeply.

Several times, when the teacher posed a question, his hand nearly shot up on instinct—eager, competitive, completely forgetting the audience.

Each time, he stopped himself just in time.

Unbeknownst to him...

Shi Kefa had fallen in love.

These strange new forms of knowledge awakened something long-dormant.

After all, one does not become an Imperial Scholar without loving learning.

Once the door was opened, he was like a fish returned to water.

Xi'an Prefecture.

Wu Shen pulled aside one of his subordinates.

"Why haven't I seen Shi Kefa lately?"

The subordinate hesitated.

"I heard Lord Shi has fallen gravely ill and hasn't attended to his duties for several days. The cases in the yamen..."

"...are being handled by the Xi'an Prefect."

Wu Shen's face changed.

"What? Brother Shi is ill? Quickly—prepare gifts. I must visit him at once."

Chapter 814 Heaven's Will Is Hard to Resist

The seventh year of Chongzhen.

The rebel army rolled forward like a black tide, pouring through Runing Prefecture.

On paper, the task of stopping them belonged to Zuo Liangyu, commander of the Runing garrison. He had sworn—loudly and repeatedly—to intercept the rebels and block their advance.

In practice...

Zuo Liangyu demonstrated a masterful understanding of a time-honored military art:

Avoidance.

He bypassed the main rebel force entirely, engaging only a handful of straggling detachments. Those unfortunate fragments were wiped out with decisive efficiency, their severed heads neatly bundled and submitted as proof of merit.

Evidence, after all, mattered.

As for the main body of the rebels?

They marched past unhindered.

Zuo Liangyu reported, with a perfectly straight face, that he had "done his utmost" but simply "could not stop them all."

History, as always, quietly recorded the lie.

The rebel army surged westward, trampling through Henan like a natural disaster that paid no attention to official paperwork.

The Governor of Henan, Fan Shangzheng, was already at the edge of despair.

Even with Bai Yuan assisting him, the situation remained dire. Bai Yuan's own troops were limited in number, and the Gao Family Village arquebusiers—as terrifying as they were—had one fatal weakness:

They required Gao Family Village's logistics.

The Ming supply system, glorious in name and catastrophic in execution, simply could not sustain their ammunition consumption.

As a result, Bai Yuan's forces could not stray far from the Yellow River.

By now, he had already withdrawn to Luoyang, clenching his teeth and waiting.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," Bai Yuan said solemnly, his expression heavy. "I humbly request reinforcements be dispatched to Henan. Defeating the rebels in one or two battles is meaningless. Only by deploying a grand army—advancing from multiple directions and encircling them completely—can we eradicate them."

The golden-thread avatar on his chest shimmered faintly.

Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke.

"Your request is reasonable."

Bai Yuan's spirits instantly lifted.

"Truly?" he exclaimed. "Then I request that our strongest units be deployed together—He Jiu's team, Lao Nanfeng's team, Bai Mao's team, and Xing Honglang's team. Just like last time against Zijing Liang—multiple fronts, full encirclement!"

The golden-thread figure sighed.

"...However, I cannot deploy them at this moment."

Bai Yuan froze.

"Ah? Why not?"

"Because something far more critical demands their immediate attention."

Bai Yuan's heart skipped.

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued calmly, "I have already sent Tie Niaofei to investigate. Once his findings return, I will decide. If the situation is manageable, troops will be sent to assist you. But if what he discovers is dire..."

The golden-thread figure paused.

"...then the rebels must be set aside temporarily."

Bai Yuan inhaled sharply.

"Tie Niaofei?" he said in disbelief. "Could it be... a border crisis?"

"Yes," Dao Xuan Tianzun confirmed. "Tie Niaofei should have arrived by now. I will personally observe the situation."

And with that—

His consciousness shifted.

Tie Niaofei's caravan had just completed the delivery of a large shipment of grain and weapons to Zhang Zongheng, Supreme Commander of the Xuan-Da Command.

The moment Tie Niaofei stepped into the camp, he felt it.

The air itself was heavy.

Oppressive.

Like a storm gathering just beyond the horizon.

"Supreme Commander Zhang," Tie Niaofei asked cautiously, "what has happened? Why does everyone look like they're attending a funeral?"

Zhang Zongheng's expression was grave.

"In recent years, the Later Jin have repeatedly attacked the Chahar Mongols. Just days ago, Borjigin Ligdan Khan—their Great Khan—died of illness."

Tie Niaofei nodded.

Zhang Zongheng continued, "Afterward, the Later Jin withdrew their troops. But instead of resting, they passed through the northern steppes... and turned their gaze toward us."

He clenched his fist.

"Earlier today, Huang Taiji sent an envoy. His words were arrogant beyond belief. He claimed our Ming army disturbed their borders, killed their people, and harbored fugitives. He demanded that we hand them over immediately—or face invasion."

Tie Niaofei stared.

"What fugitives? Why would we harbor them?"

Zhang Zongheng shook his head slowly.

"There are none. They are merely seeking a pretext."

Tie Niaofei cursed under his breath.

"They're coming," Zhang Zongheng said flatly. "I've already sent an urgent dispatch to the capital—eight hundred li a day. Now we wait to see what the court decides."

As if summoned by fate itself—

A messenger burst into the tent, panting.

"Report! An Imperial Edict has arrived!"

Zhang Zongheng straightened instantly.

Tie Niaofei followed suit, adopting a respectful posture.

The decree was read aloud.

Its contents were... concise.

Every official was to defend their city.

If any city fell, its defending official would be executed.

That was all.

Zhang Zongheng's face darkened.

"...Is that truly everything?" he asked. "No reinforcements? No supplies?"

The messenger shook his head.

"None."

Zhang Zongheng drew in a sharp breath.

Tie Niaofei couldn't help himself.

"What's the use of a decree like that?" he blurted out. "At least I can send supplies! How is the Emperor less useful than me?"

Zhang Zongheng shot him a lethal glare.

"Even if it's true," he said coldly, "you can't speak like that. His Majesty may not be skilled at governance, but he is unmatched at silencing people."

Tie Niaofei instantly shut his mouth.

Zhang Zongheng sighed and bowed toward the decree.

"Your humble servant obeys."

The messenger departed.

Silence swallowed the camp.

After a long while, Zhang Zongheng waved his hand.

"Send word to all officials in Xuanfu and Datong. Every county. Every city. Inform them of the imperial command."

A subordinate hesitated. "Once this spreads... the local officials may panic."

Zhang Zongheng snorted.

"And what? Are we supposed to hide the order?"

The subordinate fell silent.

"At this point," Zhang Zongheng said quietly, "we can only submit to fate."

He turned to Tie Niaofei.

"Master Tie, do not return here for the next few months. If your caravan were intercepted by the Later Jin, it would be equivalent to aiding the enemy."

Tie Niaofei clasped his fists.

"I understand."

Without another word, he departed.

The caravan moved south.

Tie Niaofei's face was grim.

Only after walking far enough that no Ming soldiers were in sight did he pull back the tarpaulin covering one of the carts.

Inside was no grain.

No weapons.

But a two-meter-wide, button-shaped miniature camera.

It was still running.

Recording everything.

Tie Niaofei pressed firmly against it.

The indicator light went dark.

He lowered his head and spoke softly to the golden-thread avatar on his chest.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun. The task you entrusted to me is complete. Everything has been recorded."

"Good," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied immediately. "What was destined to happen has arrived at last. Though we created countless butterfly effects, the wings of a butterfly are still too weak to resist history's corrective force."

He sighed.

"This... is Heaven's Will."

Tie Niaofei understood very little of that.

He only grasped one phrase.

Heaven's Will is hard to resist.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he asked, "what should we do now?"

"Transport the camera back at once," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "With utmost speed. As for Bai Yuan's request..."

"...it must be put aside for now."

Chapter 815 Special News

As night fell over Xi'an, the city gradually slipped into a strangely dreamlike state.

Lanterns lit the streets. The marketplace buzzed. And above the clamor of daily life, one shared anticipation quietly united everyone.

It was time.

News time.

On a second-floor platform overlooking the street, Zhu Cunji, heir to the Prince of Qin, arrived early—again.

This platform was his proud creation: a "private viewing seat," built at great expense and even greater smugness. As he settled in comfortably, guards immediately brought out an assortment of strange snacks:

Want-Want senbei crackers.

Popping candy.

Potato chips.

And a bottle of something known as "Happy Fat Water."

Zhu Cunji took a sip, sighed in satisfaction, and leaned back.

His consort sat beside him, smiling gently, eyes bright with amusement.

From above, they could see the Prefect of Xi'an, Censor Wu Shen, and a crowd of other officials standing awkwardly at the street corner below.

Zhu Cunji laughed.

"Look at them," he said smugly. "Not a single one clever enough to build a private viewing platform. They're stuck squeezing with the common folk."

He took another bite of chips.

"Tragic."

Below, the marketplace intersection was already packed.

People stood shoulder to shoulder, craning their necks toward the towering Immortal Treasure Mirror. This scene repeated itself every single evening.

Entertainment was scarce in these times.

And the news—somehow—had become everyone's favorite show.

The appointed hour arrived.

Wang Tang walked up to the Immortal Treasure Mirror with practiced ease. With a few swift motions, he powered on the tablet.

The broadcast began.

On the screen appeared the familiar figure of Saintess Gao Yiye.

She was as elegant as ever—but tonight, her expression was grave.

"Today," Gao Yiye said slowly, "we must first broadcast a special report."

Her voice carried a weight that instantly quieted the crowd.

"Please watch this footage sent by reporter Tie Niaofei from Xuanfu and Datong."

The screen darkened.

Then lit up again.

Zhang Zongheng, Supreme Commander of the Xuan-Da Command, appeared.

At that moment, everyone—from nobles to officials to commoners—felt it.

Something was wrong.

No one blinked.

They watched as the Later Jin fabricated a pretext for war.

They watched the imperial decree arrive.

They heard the cold words ordering officials to defend their cities—or be executed.

When the footage ended—

Silence.

Zhu Cunji's mouth hung open.

Wide.

Very wide.

He stayed like that for a long time.

His consort panicked and tugged his sleeve.

"Don't speak!" she whispered urgently. "Our family is different from others. They can complain. We cannot. Not a single word!"

Zhu Cunji swallowed.

Hard.

Every thought, every curse, every complaint was shoved violently back down his throat.

He did not dare utter a sound.

The first to break the silence was Wu Shen.

"Is this a joke?!" he shouted. "Handling matters like this—utter madness! The Emperor is completely reckless!"

Publicly criticizing the Emperor.

Only a Censor would dare.

And of the Great Ming's Censors, nine out of ten were famously unhinged.

With Wu Shen leading the charge, the dam broke.

The crowd erupted.

"The Manchu are invading!"

"Just like that play—A Border Soldier at Daling River!"

"They're already in Shanxi! That's close to us!"

"The Emperor should send reinforcements! Weapons! Supplies! How can he just issue one order and wash his hands of it?"

"Hush!" someone hissed. "Are you courting death? How dare you criticize the Emperor?"

"Shi Kefa's on sick leave anyway!"

"You think the Jinyiwei disappear just because Shi Kefa isn't here?"

"...Uh."

At this point, even if Jinyiwei were mixed into the crowd, they wouldn't know where to start.

Thousands of people were openly cursing Zhu Youjian.

Arrest everyone?

Good luck.

Meanwhile—

In Gao Family Village.

In Puzhou City, Chengcheng County, Heyang County.

Across Hedong Circuit, Pingyang Prefecture, Yan'an Prefecture—

Everywhere Dao Xuan Tianzun had placed Immortal Treasure Mirrors, people gathered.

They watched.

They discussed.

They argued.

Once upon a time, most common folk were illiterate, trapped within the narrow radius of their villages.

But years of daily broadcasts had changed that.

News from hundreds, even thousands of li away now reached them effortlessly. Their worldview expanded. Their judgment sharpened.

They no longer blindly believed in "imperial authority."

They no longer comforted themselves with excuses like:

"The Emperor is good, it's just corrupt officials."

"It's all the eunuchs' fault."

They understood something fundamental:

If the bureaucracy rotted, if the nation suffered—

the Emperor bore responsibility.

In Xi'an, a militia soldier undergoing ideological training shouted:

"Send me to Xuanfu and Datong! I'll fight the Manchu to the death!"

"Me too!"

"Is it too late to enlist?"

"I'll bring a hoe if I have to!"

"Shut up!" a fishmonger roared. "You don't know formations or martial skills. You'll just get in the way. If you want to help, help properly!"

"I'll donate a dou of rice to the border army!"

"But how do we make sure it reaches them?"

"Then we'll find a way! If the Emperor won't send supplies—we will!"

Emotion surged like a rising tide.

Outside the diorama box—

Li Daoxuan shifted perspectives again and again, watching city after city.

A deep sense of relief welled up inside him.

Years of comics.

Plays.

Films.

Education disguised as entertainment.

It had worked.

The people were awake.

And with the support of the people...

Anything was possible.

Li Daoxuan shifted his consciousness once more—this time into the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun carried by Gao Chuwu.

This puppet, once used to terrify Huang Yunfa in Hedong Circuit, had long since become one of Gao Chuwu's treasured items.

The moment Li Daoxuan entered—

Something felt wrong.

Two chubby hands were kneading him.

Squeezing.

Tugging.

He focused his vision.

It was Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang's infant son, barely a few months old, happily flipping the puppet over and over.

Li Daoxuan: "...Oh."

"Hello there," he said warmly. "You've grown quite a bit."

The infant replied enthusiastically:

"Waa! Waa! Waa!"

A talking puppet would terrify any adult.

But the baby?

He was thrilled.

He babbled louder, waving his arms, squeezing the puppet even harder.

Li Daoxuan fell silent.

...Perhaps Heaven's Will could wait a moment.

Chapter 816 Another Upgrade

The baby's sudden crying immediately summoned Gao Chuwu.

He hurried over and scooped his son into his arms, gently patting him.

"Gao Zhengjing, why are you crying? Are you hungry?"

Only after speaking did he notice something strange.

In the chubby little hands of the baby, the Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet was actually moving, its arm waving slightly as if greeting him.

Gao Chuwu's eyes lit up.

"Oh! Dao Xuan Tianzun! Long time no see!"

The Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet replied calmly,

"The Hedong Circuit has been quite peaceful lately, so I have not visited often. I did not expect your son to grow this big already. What did you just call him?"

Gao Chuwu grinned.

"Gao Zhengjing."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun sucked in a breath.

"You named your child... that?"

Gao Chuwu continued smiling, completely unbothered.

"My wife chose the name. I originally wanted to name him Gao Chuliu, but my wife refused. She said the child needed a 'serious' name. My wife is smarter than me, so if she says so, it must be right. That is why we named him Gao Zhengjing."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun fell silent.

"...."

A "serious" name.

So that was what she meant.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun covered his face.

As expected. He truly lived up to his reputation as one of the three greatest "idiot" generals of Gao Family Village. So many years had passed, yet he remained unmatched in his particular excellence.

On second thought, the name Zhengjing was not completely unacceptable. Even in modern times, plenty of people were named Li Zhengjing or Zhang Zhengjing. There was no real problem.

Gao Chuwu asked eagerly,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, do you have any orders this time?"

Li Daoxuan pulled his thoughts back to business.

"Where is Xing Honglang? There are many things I need to discuss with her, things that are hard to explain to you."

Gao Chuwu immediately shouted,

"Honglang! Honglang! Come quickly! Dao Xuan Tianzun is calling you!"

"Oh? Coming!" Xing Honglang's voice came from inside. She hurried out.

She looked a little plumper than before. That was normal. Women who had just given birth often ate more to ensure the child's health and sufficient milk.

Xing Honglang had always been tall and powerfully built. With the added weight, she now truly looked like a walking mountain.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, what are your orders?"

Li Daoxuan said,

"The news of the Manchu invasion has already been broadcast throughout the Hedong Circuit. You have seen it, right?"

"Yes," Xing Honglang replied solemnly. "The Manchu are despicable."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"You are now a court appointed official and cannot leave the Hedong Circuit lightly, so you will not be going north. Count your troops. Leave the minimum needed to defend Hedong, and hand the rest over to Gao Chuwu. He will lead them north to resist the Manchu under the guise of a spontaneously organized civilian militia."

Xing Honglang answered firmly,

"I obey!"

"A civilian militia suddenly heading north will definitely attract attention," Li Daoxuan continued. "To avoid trouble, write a letter to the Governor of Shanxi, Dai Jun'en, and inform him."

Hearing the name Dai Jun'en, Xing Honglang immediately remembered the old man who pretended to be mad and constantly talked about writing poetry. A faint smile appeared on her lips.

"Understood. I will write to him immediately."

"Good," Li Daoxuan said. "Then I will head to Puzhou."

He was just about to use Co sensing.

Crack.

A clear snapping sound rang out.

Gao Zhengjing's two chubby little hands pulled with all their might, and the neck of the Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet snapped.

"Ahhh!" Xing Honglang screamed.

"Ahhh!" Gao Chuwu screamed.

The couple reached for the child at the same time, ready to spank him.

But the Dao Xuan Tianzun's head, now separated from its body, simply smiled calmly.

"It is nothing. Do not hit the child. He is only a baby and does not understand anything. Why hit him? He is only a few months old and already managed to break a puppet. Incredible. This boy will grow up to be a fierce general."

Only then did the couple breathe a sigh of relief.

"Thank you for your mercy, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Whoosh.

Li Daoxuan vanished using Co sensing, heading to Puzhou to continue gathering people.

Only then did Xing Honglang speak again.

"I will write the letter to Dai Jun'en and count the troops."

Chuwu, hurry and find a craftsman to make a new neck for Dao Xuan Tianzun. And from now on, absolutely do not let the child touch Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatar again."

Gao Chuwu nodded vigorously.

"Never again. That boy is too reckless."

The couple each went about their tasks.

By the time the craftsman Gao Chuwu found repaired the Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet's neck, Xing Honglang's letter was also finished.

In the letter, she informed Dai Jun'en that the people of the Hedong Circuit were extremely angered by the news that the Manchu planned to attack Xuanfu and Datong Prefectures.

The common people had therefore spontaneously organized a civilian volunteer force to head north and resist the Manchu.

Such a reason might sound ordinary in later generations, but in the historical context of the late Ming Dynasty, it was utterly inconceivable. Yet no matter how absurd the explanation, it had to exist. This was a matter of attitude.

Five hundred garrison troops were left behind in the Hedong Circuit, led by Xing Honglang.

The remaining two thousand five hundred soldiers were all handed over to Gao Chuwu.

After leaving the Hedong Circuit, Gao Chuwu followed the official road north to Pingyang Prefecture.

As soon as he arrived, he found the place bustling with activity.

Lao Nanfeng had just arrived with his troops. Bai Mao and Wang Er had already been waiting for a long time.

The generals were delighted to see one another.

"Back when Gao Family Village was small, we met all the time," one of them said. "Now that our territory has expanded, meeting like this has become difficult."

"Speaking of which, is everyone here?"

"Not yet. Dao Xuan Tianzun said Instructor He Jiu would also come."

"What? Even Instructor He Jiu, the deputy of General He Kegang?"

"Was he not just a common soldier?"

"When did he become a deputy?"

"I heard the movie deliberately portrayed him as a common soldier to conceal his true identity. In reality, he is General He Kegang's deputy."

"So that is how it is."

The generals could not help but look at him with reverence.

At that moment, a scout ran over, shouting excitedly,

"Instructor He Jiu has arrived, leading the main Gao Family Village militia!"

Everyone cheered.

"They are here!"

"Ever since watching A Common Soldier on the Daling River Frontier Army, I have wanted to meet Instructor He Jiu!"

In the distance, a very low key army appeared, not flying a single banner.

Cheng Xu was always cautious. He deliberately disguised his forces to look exactly like an ordinary civilian volunteer corps, avoiding the court's attention.

As soon as he reached them, Cheng Xu spoke bluntly, without any pleasantries.

"The Governor of Shanxi, Dai Jun'en, did not suspect us, right?"

"Do not worry," Bai Mao said. "He would never guess that you are He Kegang's deputy."

Cheng Xu froze.

"What?"

Lao Nanfeng added with a grin,

"Being able to fight the Manchu again, Instructor He Jiu must be delighted. The chance to avenge General He Kegang has finally arrived."

Cheng Xu stood there stunned.

"What. What. What?"

The generals spoke in unison,

"Instructor He Jiu, there is no need to pretend. We all understand. And we will absolutely not speak a word of this."

Chapter 817 Who Will Save the Common People?

In the seventh year of Chongzhen, the Manchus split their forces into four columns, sweeping south like steel floodwaters into Xuanfu and Datong Prefectures.

They did not rush to siege cities.

They did not seek strategic strongpoints.

They did only one thing.

They plundered.

Villages.

Forts.

Hamlets.

Anywhere where people lived—but walls were thin.

"They aren't attacking cities," the officials quickly concluded.

That single realization decided the fate of countless commoners.

The Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, issued a harsh decree:

Any official who loses a city shall be executed.

With that sword hanging over their necks, every local official reached the same conclusion.

As long as the city doesn't fall, my head stays attached.

So they stayed behind their walls.

They did not send troops out.

They did not rescue villages.

They did not reinforce one another.

The Manchus weren't attacking cities anyway.

As for the common people outside the walls?

They could pray to Heaven.

The Manchus, of course, noticed.

"Oh?"

"They won't come out?"

"All the cities are isolated?"

Then—

Why not try attacking cities too?

Thus, the plunder escalated.

The first city they assaulted was Lingqiu.

The county magistrate, Jiang Bingcai, raised troops and defended the city to the death.

The garrison commander Shi Qi died.

Officer Chen Yanwu died.

Officer Ma Ruzhi died.

Judicial officer Zhang Biao died.

Instructor Lu Dengfu died.

When Lingqiu finally fell, Magistrate Jiang Bingcai hanged himself.

His entire family followed him in death.

No one survived.

Next—

Daizhou.

On Daizhou's city walls stood Sun Chuanting, clad in armor, his fists clenched so tightly that blood seeped between his fingers.

Below the walls—

Smoke.

Screams.

Chaos.

He wanted to charge out.

He wanted to fight.

But reason chained him in place.

With what?

He had only his household guards.

Without court orders.

Without reinforcements.

Charging out would be nothing more than throwing eggs at a mountain.

All he could do—

Was assist the Prefect of Daizhou in holding the city.

Then suddenly—

A roar erupted outside the walls.

A sea of refugees surged toward Daizhou.

Young men ran at the front, faces pale, legs pumping desperately.

Far behind them—

The elderly.

Women.

Children.

Their steps were slow.

Their breaths ragged.

Behind them—

The thunder of hooves.

Manchu cavalry.

"Open the gates!" Sun Chuanting roared.

"Let the people in—now!"

The Prefect of Daizhou hesitated.

Only for a moment.

"Open the gates!"

The gates swung wide.

The fastest young men poured inside.

But the elderly... the women... the children...

They were too slow.

The cavalry arrived too fast.

Over a thousand were intercepted outside the walls.

The Prefect's face hardened.

"Close the gates!"

Sun Chuanting turned on him in disbelief.

"Don't close them!" he shouted.

"Open the gates again! We must charge out, repel them, and save those people!"

This time—

The Prefect ignored him.

"Close them."

The guards strained at the capstan.

CLANG!

The gates slammed shut.

Outside—

Wails tore into the sky.

Inside—

Those who had made it in time scrambled onto the walls, collapsing as they watched their families trapped outside.

The Ming soldiers did not dare fire arrows.

One arrow might provoke an assault.

So they stood there.

Watching.

The Manchu cavalry laughed.

With casual swings of their blades—

They slaughtered every elderly person.

Women and children were spared.

Not out of mercy.

But because they were useful.

Productive.

They were driven north like livestock.

The elderly?

Useless.

Not even worth enslaving.

Sun Chuanting's eyes turned blood-red.

With a hoarse roar, he lunged toward the gate mechanism.

His household guards rushed forward, restraining him.

"Master, no!"

"We can't fight them!"

"We don't have the strength!"

Sun Chuanting screamed:

"Where is Zhang Zongheng, the Grand Commander of the Xuan–Da Command?!"

Why hasn't he come to rescue Daizhou?!"

A guard replied bitterly:

"The Manchus split into four columns, Master. Zhang Zongheng can barely hold off one."

Sun Chuanting collapsed against the wall.

Tears streamed down his face.

He raised his head to the sky and cried out:

"Someone... anyone... please... save the common people!"

"Report! The Manchus are plundering Chunxian!"

Taiyuan, provincial capital of Shanxi.

Governor Dai Jun'en sat in the main hall, his face dark and drawn.

A household guard reported:

"The Manchus seized over a thousand women and children in Chunxian. When they passed Daizhou, the captives recognized their families on the walls and cried out. The city guards did nothing. After the Manchus left, Chunxian officials emerged and reported to the court that they had 'gloriously recaptured' the city."

Dai Jun'en sneered.

"'Gloriously recaptured'?"

"How glorious."

The guard asked quietly, "Master... what should we do?"

Dai Jun'en shook his head.

"What can we do?"

"Xuanfu and Datong belong to the Xuan–Da Command. If I intervene, it's overstepping authority."

He sighed deeply.

"And the troops I command?"

"They're useless."

"Sending them would only get them killed."

Just then—

Another guard rushed in.

"Master! A letter from Xing Honglang, Commissioner of Military Preparations of Hedong Circuit!"

"Oh?" Dai Jun'en said. "Read it."

The guard reported:

"The gentry of Hedong Circuit, outraged by the Manchu rampage, have spontaneously organized militias and armed volunteers. They've prepared weapons and provisions and are heading north as reinforcements. They will pass Taiyuan in a few days."

Dai Jun'en froze.

Then let out a soft laugh.

"Militias and armed volunteers..."

He remembered his visit to Hedong Circuit.

Remembered Xing Honglang.

A 'pacified bandit.'

A woman who truly cared for the people.

Militias?

No.

That was her army.

Disguised.

"Well played," Dai Jun'en murmured.

"If that's the case... I absolutely must not interfere."

He issued an order:

"All checkpoints in Taiyuan Prefecture are to grant passage."

The message spread.

And just like that—

The government troops saw nothing.

Heard nothing.

Knew nothing.

The Gao Family Village Militia passed Taiyuan unimpeded.

Days later—

Dai Jun'en stood atop Taiyuan's city walls, watching.

Below—

A vast force marched past.

Armor gleaming.

Formation disciplined.

Equipment pristine.

A guard whispered nervously:

"Master... they're at least ten thousand strong. If Xing Honglang rebelled..."

Dai Jun'en snapped:

"Don't say it."

"Don't think it."

"We saw nothing."

"We know nothing."

As the army disappeared northward—

Only one question lingered in the air:

If officials would not save the people...

Who would?

Chapter 818 Eliminating the Scouts

"The Manchu forces are here! The Manchu forces are here again!"

The shrill shout echoed through the Prefect of Daizhou's residence, shattering the quiet of the early morning.

The Prefect of Daizhou was still half-asleep. Dressed only in a moonlight-white inner garment, he struggled upright from his bed, irritation written plainly on his face.

"What's the panic for?" he grumbled. "So what if they're here? They passed by last time too, didn't they? This is a prefectural city, not some tiny county seat. The Manchu forces won't dare attack."

"This time is different!" the household retainer cried, nearly in tears. "They've brought siege equipment. They're setting up outside the city. They're preparing to attack!"

The Prefect froze.

"What did you say?"

His drowsiness vanished instantly. He hastily threw on his outer robe, then armor, and rushed toward the city walls. As a civil official, he was unaccustomed to wearing armor; every step felt heavy. By the time he reached the ramparts, he was already panting, his face pale.

Sun Chuanting was already there.

He too wore armor, but stood straight-backed, his breathing steady. His gaze was fixed outside the city, calm and cold.

Sun Chuanting had already taken command. Household guards and local militia were being deployed methodically along key sections of the walls. Orders were issued clearly and without panic.

Compared to him, the Prefect felt painfully out of place.

"Master Sun..." the Prefect forced himself to speak. "What exactly is happening?"

Sun Chuanting did not answer. He simply raised his hand and pointed beyond the city wall.

The Prefect followed his gesture.

The sight made his legs go weak.

Outside Daizhou City, the Manchu army was fully arrayed. Infantry stood in dense ranks at the center, armor gleaming beneath the morning light. On both flanks, Manchu and Mongol cavalry stretched outward, their formations wide and menacing. Countless banners fluttered in the wind.

It was not a raiding party.

It was an army.

"They... they're serious?" the Prefect stammered. "But didn't intelligence say they wouldn't attack cities? They only raid the countryside!"

Sun Chuanting's expression darkened. "They didn't intend to at first. But they've learned."

"Learned what?"

"That the Great Ming no longer dares to fight," Sun Chuanting said bluntly. "When every city hides behind its walls and refuses to support the others, the enemy grows bolder. First counties, then prefectures. This is the natural result."

The Prefect's face turned ashen. "Then... what do we do?"

"Defend," Sun Chuanting replied. "Until the last arrow."

Before the Prefect could say more, war drums thundered outside the city.

The Manchu army began to advance.

Far from Daizhou, the Gao Family Village Militia was moving north at speed.

A reconnaissance hot air balloon floated high above, tethered by a rope wrapped around Gao Chuwu's wrist. From the sky, the terrain and troop movements were clearly visible.

Li Daoxuan, controlling his mass-produced Model 3 avatar, frowned slightly.

"The Manchu army has begun attacking Daizhou," he said.

The surrounding commanders were startled.

"So fast?" Cheng Xu muttered.

"They're desperate," Lao Nanfeng said. "Or greedy."

Li Daoxuan shifted his perspective through the balloon again, scanning the plains ahead. His gaze sharpened.

"Five li ahead. Manchu scouts."

Everyone immediately understood the implication.

"If they spot us now," Cheng Xu said, "they'll report back. The Manchu army will be on guard before we arrive."

Lao Nanfeng stepped forward. "I'll take men to deal with them."

"I'll go as well," Li Daoxuan said.

Lao Nanfeng hesitated. "Heavenly Lord, your body—"

"I won't ride," Li Daoxuan replied.

He crouched, and the silicone covering his feet parted. Two wheels extended, then four more from his shoulders and waist. The generals stared.

"The Heavenly Lord... has wheels?"

Li Daoxuan moved forward low to the ground, using terrain and grass for concealment. After a brief, undignified stumble, he abandoned elegance entirely and switched to steady propulsion.

Metaphysics solved what physics could not.

Lao Nanfeng no longer hesitated. He spurred his horse forward with six veteran scouts, spreading into a loose formation.

Soon, the Manchu scouts appeared ahead.

Ten men.

They spotted Lao Nanfeng's group and judged the numbers quickly. Seeing fewer opponents, they chose to attack.

Before the distance closed fully, one Manchu scout suddenly fell from his horse.

Then another.

The Manchu leader's heart sank.

"There's an ambush!"

Li Daoxuan emerged from the grass at close range. His metal arm lifted briefly.

A dull report sounded.

Another Manchu scout collapsed.

The remaining scouts tried to retreat, but Lao Nanfeng cut across their escape route. The engagement was short and decisive.

When it ended, all ten Manchu scouts lay dead.

No survivors.

The militia cleaned the area efficiently. Bodies were dragged away. Tracks were scattered and trampled. Blood was covered with soil.

From a distance, the plains looked untouched.

Li Daoxuan gave the order. "Advance immediately. Keep the balloon high. No banners."

Outside Daizhou City, the Manchu army continued its assault.

No scouts returned.

No warnings arrived.

Inside the city, Sun Chuanting fought steadily, unaware that reinforcements were already closing in.

The battlefield had changed.

But only one side knew it.

Chapter 819 Skirmish

The skirmish officially began.

For large armies, scouts were not an afterthought. They were eyes and ears, the difference between knowing and guessing. The side with better scouts could see farther, react faster, and choose when to fight or withdraw. The weaker side would be blind, forced to grope forward step by step.

In past years, the Manchu scouts had always held the advantage.

They were numerous, experienced, and accustomed to fighting on horseback. Against them, most Ming scouts could only avoid contact, rarely daring to engage head-on.

This time, however, the situation was different.

Both sides spotted each other almost simultaneously.

The distance closed rapidly.

A border soldier from Guyuan instinctively reached back for his cavalry carbine, but before he could pull it free, Lao Nanfeng shouted, "Don't fire!"

The soldier froze.

"You'll scare them off," Lao Nanfeng barked. "Draw closer first. Kill them cleanly."

The border soldier immediately understood. Firearms were loud, conspicuous, and would reveal the presence of a larger force. If the Manchus fled too early, they might still escape with information.

He abandoned the carbine and drew his Kaiyuan bow instead.

The two groups of cavalry galloped toward each other, hooves pounding the earth. Wind rushed past their ears. The distance between them shrank to arrow range.

Lao Nanfeng moved first.

His bowstring snapped, and an arrow streaked straight toward a Manchu scout's face.

The scout reacted instantly. He leaned low, using his horse's body as cover, letting the arrow pass harmlessly overhead. With a practiced motion, he rolled back upright and loosed an arrow of his own.

Compared to that smooth maneuver, Lao Nanfeng's reaction looked clumsy.

He seemed startled. His body shifted half a beat too late. The arrow struck him squarely in the chest with a dull thud.

Lao Nanfeng cried out and slumped forward, collapsing onto his horse's back.

His warhorse continued galloping, carrying his unmoving body onward.

The Manchu scout burst into laughter. "A soft Han dog dares to trade arrows with me?"

The other Manchu scouts joined in, loosing arrows at the remaining five Guyuan border soldiers. The Ming scouts struggled to evade, shouting in anger and grief.

"Brother Nanfeng!"

"Brother Nanfeng!"

Their voices sounded desperate.

The Manchu scouts laughed even harder.

Then the horse carrying Lao Nanfeng's "corpse" charged straight into their formation.

One Manchu scout reached out instinctively, grabbing for the reins. A good warhorse was valuable loot.

The instant his hand extended, the "corpse" sprang upright.

A blade flashed.

The Manchu scout's arm was severed at the elbow with a wet crack. Blood sprayed violently as the man screamed.

Lao Nanfeng did not stop.

His scimitar swept again, clean and ruthless, cutting straight across the scout's neck. The head flew upward, spinning in the air before crashing down. Blood poured out like a burst wineskin, splattering Lao Nanfeng's face and armor.

Lao Nanfeng grinned broadly, teeth stark white against a mask of red.

"First blood is mine again!" he roared. "If the Heavenly Lord doesn't give me another movie role after this, I'll complain!"

With that, he plunged horse-first into the middle of the Manchu scouts.

One against nine.

Any ordinary scout would have been torn apart instantly.

Lao Nanfeng felt no fear at all.

A saber came slashing toward him. He parried with a sharp clang. The two horses collided shoulder to shoulder before separating at speed.

An arrow whistled toward his back.

He ignored it.

The arrow struck his armor and bounced away with a metallic ring.

Only then did the Manchu scouts realize something was wrong.

This man wore simple clothes, like a light cavalryman—but beneath them was heavy, finely made armor. This was not a scout's equipment.

It was a general's.

"Kill him!" someone shouted. "Cut him down!"

The remaining scouts charged.

Behind them, a bowstring twanged.

A Manchu scout jerked violently as an arrow punched into his body.

In that moment of chaos, Lao Nanfeng twisted in the saddle and slashed. Another head flew into the air.

"Where are you looking?" he laughed loudly. "Your opponent is right here!"

Steel rang against steel. Two quick parries. A sharp counter.

Lao Nanfeng burst out of the encirclement.

At the same time, the other five Guyuan border scouts finally closed the distance.

Eight Manchu scouts remained.

Eight against six.

The Manchus still believed they could win.

Then one Guyuan scout suddenly pulled out his cavalry carbine.

The Manchus hesitated. "A firearm?"

"Bang!"

The shot was deafening at close range.

Instead of a single bullet, a spray of lead pellets tore forward. The Manchu scout caught the blast full-on. His face and chest were riddled with holes. He collapsed without a sound. His horse, struck as well, fell sideways, throwing up dust.

Man and horse crashed together.

Lao Nanfeng clicked his tongue. "You ruined the horse. Wasteful."

Before he could finish complaining, two sabers slashed toward his face.

He blocked both, the horses flashing past each other in a blur.

In that instant, Lao Nanfeng drew his own carbine and fired backward without looking.

"Bang!"

A Manchu scout was hit squarely in the back. His horse screamed and bolted, carrying the corpse forward before collapsing.

Lao Nanfeng laughed loudly. "This thing is wonderful! Killing people in the blink of an eye!"

A subordinate shouted, "Didn't you just say it was useless because it hurts the horses?"

"I did not," Lao Nanfeng snapped.

"You did!"

"The hell I did!"

Now only six Manchu scouts remained.

Six against six.

The Manchus finally felt fear.

Their leader roared, "Retreat! Warn the siege army! Ming reinforcements have arrived, and they have strange weapons!"

The six scattered in different directions.

"Chase!" Lao Nanfeng shouted.

He drew his bow while galloping and released an arrow that struck a fleeing scout in the back of the neck. The man toppled from his horse.

Elsewhere, carbine shots rang out. One by one, Manchu scouts fell.

Only a single rider remained, fleeing at full speed.

The Guyuan scout behind him had fired his last shot and could not reload in time. His horsemanship was inferior.

The distance slowly widened.

It seemed that at least one scout would escape.

And that was when a low shadow burst from the grass ahead.

Dao Xuan Tianzhun arrived.

Chapter 820 Advance, Advance, Advance

As the scout looked as though he was about to escape, the Guyuan border army scouts pursuing him instantly grew frantic.

This was not panic born of cowardice, but the sharp, professional anxiety of men who understood exactly what failure meant.

The other five scouts had already finished off their respective targets. They turned their heads almost at the same time, only to see the last Manchu scout spurring his horse harder and harder, the distance between them stretching by the breath.

Too far.

Far enough that even a perfect arrow shot would be gambling with fate.

They could only watch helplessly as the scout sped farther and farther away, his figure shrinking against the rolling earth.

If he escaped, everything would be exposed.

The ambush route.

The militia's direction.

The timing of the attack.

All of it would be gone.

Just as everyone felt powerless—just as the thought "This mission has failed" began to settle in their hearts—

Something exploded out of the tall grass with a violent whoosh.

The sound was not the thundering hooves of cavalry, nor the hiss of an arrow slicing the air.

It was a strange mechanical whirring, completely out of place on a Ming–Qing battlefield.

It was none other than Production Model 3.

The Heavenly Lord.

Li Daoxuan.

His mystical propulsion wheels spun at terrifying speed. Four-wheel drive, oversized rubber tires, shock absorption tuned for broken terrain—his off-road performance was, without exaggeration, far superior to most military vehicles of later eras.

In an instant, he closed the distance.

From the Manchu scout's perspective, it was pure nightmare fuel.

He heard the noise first.

A buzzing, rolling sound, like some kind of demon grinding its teeth.

He turned his head.

And saw a figure—covered in wheels—driving toward him at unbelievable speed, pressed low to the ground in a prone position, like a metal beast hunting prey.

For a brief moment, his mind failed to process what he was seeing.

Then instinct kicked in.

The Manchu scout shrieked in absolute terror.

"What are you?! Stay away from me! Noooo!"

Li Daoxuan did not answer.

There was no time, and frankly, no obligation.

He closed the final distance and leaped.

Mid-air, the four wheels retracted smoothly into hidden compartments. There was no time to deploy the silicone outer shell.

As a result, the form revealed in that instant was neither human nor machine—but something deeply unsettling in between.

A half-human, half-mechanical Terminator T-800, descending from the sky.

This was not a sight that only terrified ancient people.

Even in modern films decades later, this kind of visual would still make audiences grip their seats.

The Manchu scout was so petrified that his breathing stopped entirely.

The next moment—

Li Daoxuan delivered a flying kick, squarely into the man's face.

He had originally intended to knock the scout off his horse and take him alive. Intelligence was valuable, after all.

Unfortunately, he had seriously underestimated one thing.

His own weight.

And his own strength.

The kick landed with a sickening crunch.

Facial bones shattered on impact, collapsing inward as if struck by a siege hammer.

There was no scream.

Just a dull thud as the scout and his horse crashed to the ground together.

Li Daoxuan landed, straightened up, and calmly pulled the silicone shell back into place, restoring his perfectly "normal" human exterior.

He dusted off his hands.

"...Damn it," he muttered. "Didn't get a live one."

He glanced at the corpse, then at the mangled face.

"Oh well. No big loss," he added. "Probably nothing useful to ask anyway."

Lao Nanfeng rode up from behind, reining in his horse beside him, a wide grin on his face.

"Heavenly Lord! The enemy scout squad to the southwest has been completely wiped out," he reported briskly. "No survivors. No messages sent. We can launch a surprise attack on the main Manchu army from this direction."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Good. Then the rest is up to you."

He did not say anything dramatic.

There was no need.

Meanwhile, the battle for Daizhou City had already descended into desperation.

The official troops led by the Prefect of Daizhou were simply no match for the Manchus.

At this time, the Manchu Eight Banners had not yet rotted from within. They were still disciplined, ferocious, and terrifyingly effective—able to claim, without exaggeration, the title of Asia's strongest army.

Their warriors were skilled, savage, and utterly indifferent to death.

Across the entire Ming Empire, only a handful of famous forces—the Guanning Iron Cavalry, the Qi Family Army, the Tianxiong Army, and the White Pole Soldiers—could truly face the Eight Banners head-on.

As for the rest?

They were soft-bellied soldiers in name only.

Daizhou City was on the brink of collapse.

Sun Chuanting, despite being proficient in both civil administration and military command, simply did not have enough men.

The city walls were under siege on all sides.

Manchu elite warriors had already climbed onto the battlements, forming stable combat formations. More soldiers continued scaling up behind them like an unending tide.

Sun Chuanting saw the situation clearly.

The balance had already tipped.

Daizhou City was finished.

"My lord, we must leave!" his retainers pleaded, rushing toward him.

"We cannot leave!" Sun Chuanting roared. "We can still fight!"

A retainer gritted his teeth. "My lord, you are not an imperial official at present. There is no need to die here. Look—the Prefect is the one who truly cannot escape."

High atop the Bianjing Tower, the Prefect of Daizhou stood motionless, his face pale as ash.

The imperial decree echoed endlessly in his mind.

Whoever loses a city shall be executed.

He was finished.

If death was unavoidable, then there was no reason to wait.

He laughed twice—hollow, empty laughs—and stepped off the tower.

His head struck the ground first.

With a sickening sound, it split open.

Sun Chuanting could only stare, utterly speechless.

"My lord! We must go!" the retainers shouted again.

They seized him from both sides, preparing to force him toward the south gate.

And then—

From the southwest flank of the Manchu siege army, a new force appeared.

No warning.

No signal.

They emerged as if from thin air.

The Manchu army had been completely focused on Daizhou City. No one had imagined an enemy appearing from that direction.

Because—

No scouts had returned.

In battle, nothing was more terrifying than an enemy appearing from an unknown quarter.

The effect on morale was devastating.

The Manchu army instinctively split in two.

One half continued assaulting the city.

The other half turned, without waiting for orders, to face the sudden threat.

It was not strategy.

It was instinct.

Sun Chuanting, viewing the battlefield from the city wall, saw everything clearly.

The approaching army carried no banners.

No standards.

"...Ah."

Suddenly, he remembered.

Tie Niaofei had given him a telescope.

He hurriedly pulled it out and focused on the new force.

At the very front—

Tie Niaofei himself was waving at him.

Sun Chuanting's heart surged with joy.

"The Jin merchants... organized a militia to help me?"

"Advance, advance, advance!"

The martial song rose.

For the first time, the Gao Family Village Militia advanced as a full army of ten thousand.

Cheng Xu commanded the center.

Lao Nanfeng led the vanguard.

Gao Chuwu guarded the left.

Bai Mao and Wang Er held the right.

Pride swelled in every soldier's chest.

And behind them—

The artillery battalion advanced.

The battalion commander was practically glowing.

"Brothers!" he shouted. "We've been ignored for too long! But now—with our light mortars and small grenades—the future battlefield belongs to us!"

"Let's go!" the artillerymen roared.

"Primary preparation!"

"Secondary preparation!"

"Fire!"

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Small grenades arced into the sky.

Moments later—

The Manchu formation shattered.

Cheng Xu raised his saber.

"Infantry—advance!"

"Advance, advance, advance!"

Volley fire.

Rolling fire.

The Manchu army collapsed.