

Great Ming 821

Chapter 821: They Pay More

From atop Daizhou's city walls, Sun Chuanting watched the battle unfolding outside and fell completely silent.

He was not someone easily stunned.

In fact, among the Ming officials, there were very few who understood the Manchus better than him. Years spent handling frontier affairs had taught him one simple truth: when Manchus fought seriously, they were terrifying.

Fast.

Ruthless.

Efficient.

And yet—

What he was witnessing now didn't match any battle record he knew.

The Manchus weren't being pushed back inch by inch.

They weren't locked in a bitter stalemate.

They were being crushed. Cleanly. Efficiently. Almost... professionally.

Sun Chuanting frowned slightly.

This is too fast.

The mysterious militia opened with a round of artillery bombardment—short, sharp, and precise. Before the Manchus could even reorganize, dense ranks of musketeers followed up with volley after volley of disciplined fire.

The two armies hadn't even fully collided.

And yet the Manchu front line had already collapsed.

Sun Chuanting felt a strange sense of unreality.

What kind of militia is this?

The Manchu infantry formation had cavalry deployed on both flanks, a classic Eight Banners configuration. In countless previous battles, the infantry would pin the enemy, and once the balance tilted, the cavalry would sweep in from the sides like a closing trap.

That tactic had broken countless Ming armies.

But now—

The infantry in the center hadn't "tilted."

They had shattered outright.

The cavalry on both flanks froze.

Charge?

Retreat?

Regroup?

There was no time to decide.

On the left flank, Gao Chuwu raised his arm and roared, "Open fire! Attack!"

On the right flank, Wang Er shouted just as fiercely, "Target their cavalry! Don't let them scatter!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Continuous musket fire erupted like tearing cloth.

Manchu cavalry fell.

Mongolian horsemen fell.

Men and horses collapsed together, tangled into bloody heaps.

Sun Chuanting suddenly snapped out of his daze.

This was no longer the time to watch.

"Garrison soldiers inside the city, listen to me!" he bellowed. "The Manchus outside have been routed! We must press the attack! Charge!"

With the Prefect dead, Daizhou's garrison had been leaderless, their morale hanging by a thread.

But Sun Chuanting's roar cut through the chaos like a blade.

The defenders instantly understood.

This was it.

The one and only chance.

If they hesitated, the opportunity would vanish.

"Charge!"

The defenders gathered their last strength and surged forward, following behind the Sun family retainers, slamming into the Manchu soldiers who had already breached the walls.

Even the common folk of Daizhou could no longer hold back.

Farmers.

Artisans.

Shopkeepers.

They grabbed hoes, poles, knives—anything they could lift—and swarmed onto the walls.

"I'll beat you to death, you dog bastard!"

"Give me back my wife and children!"

The Manchu elite soldiers inside the city panicked.

Their main force outside had collapsed.

Their vanguard inside the city was now isolated.

Cut off.

Surrounded.

There was no formation to rely on.

No morale left to burn.

They broke almost instantly.

Once the Manchus inside the city were completely cleared out, the people of Daizhou finally dared to breathe again.

They climbed the walls and looked outward.

What they saw made their hearts race.

The main Manchu army was already in full retreat.

And that mysterious army—still flying no banners—was relentlessly pursuing them.

Musket fire echoed intermittently across the plains.

With every volley, Manchu soldiers fell, leaving a trail of corpses marking their escape route.

Seeing their former masters being beaten so thoroughly, the Mongolian cavalry made a decision that came as naturally as breathing.

This was their traditional "wolf logic."

Strong leader?

Follow.

Weak leader?

Replace.

With a sudden clamor, the Mongolian cavalry scattered, each unit peeling off independently, displaying horsemanship so refined it looked almost artistic.

In moments, they vanished.

The Gao Family Village Militia didn't bother chasing them.

Their objective had never been the Mongolians.

They focused entirely on the Manchus.

The pursuit continued for fifteen li.

The Manchus threw away armor.

Dropped weapons.

Abandoned wounded comrades.

Only then—utterly humiliated—did they manage to escape with their lives.

As evening descended, the setting sun burned red across the horizon.

The shadow of Bianjing Tower stretched long and somber.

A group of garrison soldiers carefully placed the Prefect of Daizhou's body into a coffin, preparing to carry it out of the city.

On the north wall, Tie Niaofei approached Sun Chuanting, clasped his hands, and bowed deeply.

"Mister Sun, I arrived late and almost failed to save the people of Daizhou. I am deeply ashamed."

Sun Chuanting hurriedly returned the gesture. "Mister Tie, you're far too modest. Without you, Daizhou would already be a sea of blood."

After a pause, curiosity crept into his voice.

"Mister Tie... where did you find such a terrifying reinforcement force?"

Tie Niaofei smiled and waved his hand. "Oh, that's simple. Allow me to introduce someone."

He pulled Cheng Xu forward. "This gentleman's surname is He, given name Jiu. He's a militia instructor. The reinforcements today were recruited and trained by him."

"A militia?" Sun Chuanting stared at the musketeers still cleaning up the battlefield. "That... is a militia?"

"Indeed."

"Not the New Divine Machine Camp?"

Tie Niaofei laughed. "Of course not. The Divine Machine Camp doesn't have that kind of money."

Sun Chuanting fell silent.

Seeing this, Tie Niaofei quickly added, "The militia was funded by Jin merchants, salt smugglers, traders, local gentry, and artisans. It cost a great deal."

Then he smiled meaningfully.

"And it's all thanks to Mister Sun's story."

"My... story?" Sun Chuanting was baffled.

"The Story of a Border Soldier from Dalinghe," Tie Niaofei explained. "Once people read it, they despised the Manchus and feared suffering the same fate. Those with money donated, those with strength contributed labor. That's how this militia came to be."

Sun Chuanting considered this explanation.

It made sense.

The court certainly couldn't afford this.

Only private wealth could.

Turning to Cheng Xu, Sun Chuanting clasped his hands. "Instructor He, thank you for your aid. Your firearm unit is truly impressive."

Cheng Xu immediately shook his head. "It's not my skill. It's money. If Mister Sun had those funds, he'd train an army far better than mine."

Sun Chuanting smiled bitterly.

If only.

Finally, he asked, "What are your plans next?"

Cheng Xu replied calmly, "We're unfamiliar with border strategy. We ask for your guidance."

Sun Chuanting picked up a charred stick and drew on the ground.

"The Manchus split into four columns after capturing Shangfang Fortress. They're mobile, difficult to track. Our scouts are blind outside the city."

He circled several points.

"They'll likely converge at Yingzhou. To protect the people, we should guard Zijing Pass and Yanmen Pass, and send forces toward Wanquan Left Guard and Shangfang Fortress..."

The war, it seemed, was only just beginning.

Chapter 822: Knowing It By Heart

The Mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzhun Unit 3 stood a step behind Cheng Xu, observing Sun Chuanting's gestures over the map. In short order, Sun Chuanting meticulously analyzed the terrain around Xuanfu and Datong, the distribution of Ming forces, and the routes of the four Manchu armies.

He added crucial passes and strongholds, pinpointed passable and impassable routes, and indicated where civilians needed rescue versus areas where they were sparse and could be left alone.

A torrent of information cascaded from him.

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but muse,

"This man truly is a walking encyclopedia of border affairs. Getting this information from him is far quicker than observing from my own divine vantage point."

After a long discourse, Sun Chuanting finally reached into his robes and pulled out a thick stack of papers, handing them to Cheng Xu.

"Instructor He," he said, "this is my 'Memorial on the Inherent Weaknesses of the Enemy.' It details the Manchus' vulnerabilities. If you have a moment, I encourage you to read it."

Cheng Xu took the papers and, with a brief glance, was utterly awestruck.

He turned to look at the Mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzhun Unit 3, and the Dao Xuan Tianzhun nodded.

Cheng Xu then turned to a logistics soldier.

"Arrange for some men to transcribe several copies of Master Sun's 'Memorial on the Inherent Weaknesses of the Enemy.' Distribute them to all officers above the rank of centurion in the Gao Family Village Militia. Everyone must know this document by heart—even backwards."

Gao Chuwu, standing nearby, gasped in surprise.

"Backwards? I can't even recite it forwards! How could I possibly do it backwards?"

Cheng Xu shook his head, a mixture of exasperation and amusement on his face.

"It's just an idiom, Gao Chuwu! I don't actually expect you to recite it in reverse."

Gao Chuwu grinned.

"Speaking, backwards, this like!"

Cheng Xu stared.

Gao Chuwu clarified,

"I'm trying to say what I usually say, but in reverse! Haha, it's really not that hard!"

Cheng Xu burst out laughing.

It had been a while since he'd seen Gao Chuwu, and now, the memory of being terrorized by the 'Gao Family Village Three Idiots' returned, making him shiver. Fortunately, Zheng Daniu, the second "idiot," was currently stationed at Wangjia Fork, "infiltrating" the Northern Yuan alongside Chen Qianhu and Zao Ying.

As for Flat Rabbit, the third "idiot," he was apparently managing the labor reform camp on Tianzhu Mountain in Shanyang County.

Only one of the three idiots was present—a tolerable number for Cheng Xu.

If all three were assembled, Cheng Xu would surely spend his days on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

"To the north lies the garrison for the government troops of Xuanfu and Datong," Cheng Xu explained to Sun Chuanting. "Our unconventional militia isn't suited to share a main camp with the regulars. Instead, let's establish Daizhou as our primary base of operations and then deploy our forces from there."

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"Daizhou, guarding Yanmen Pass, is indeed an excellent location for a main camp. However... I am merely a member of the gentry, currently holding no official position, so I cannot make such a decision."

"Who holds authority here?" Cheng Xu inquired.

"The Prefect of Daizhou," Sun Chuanting replied.

As they finished speaking, both men turned their heads in unison. Outside the city walls, a contingent of government soldiers was digging a grave, preparing to bury the Prefect's coffin.

"What about the other officials?" Cheng Xu pressed.

Sun Chuanting replied, a hint of awkwardness in his tone,

"All perished in battle."

"Well then, if they're all gone," Cheng Xu declared, "this area should naturally fall under local self-governance by the defense system and the militia. Master Sun, you must be the most prominent local defense chief here, wouldn't you agree?"

Sun Chuanting was indeed the local defense chief of Daizhou; in the absence of other officials, his word was law. With that settled, the Gao Family Village Militia established Daizhou as their frontline command post and settled in.

The small city of Daizhou, measuring two li long and two li wide, already housed a considerable population. When the Manchus attacked, it had been further inundated with refugees from surrounding counties. Now, with an additional ten thousand militiamen crammed inside, the tiny city was bursting at the seams, unable to accommodate another soul.

Sun Chuanting offered his own manor in the county town for the militia to occupy, but that limited space was far from sufficient. He then reached out to the city's wealthy merchants and prominent families, asking them to open their homes for use as barracks.

These prominent families were quite reluctant, fearing that once the army moved in, they would plunder their wealth or molest their womenfolk.

However, they soon discovered that the militia soldiers were exceptionally disciplined and courteous. Those quartered in the guest rooms of these grand homes were impeccably well-behaved, not disturbing a single item.

And the soldiers who couldn't fit into the guest rooms pitched their own tents in the gardens. They stayed quietly and orderly within their tents, rarely emerging unless necessary, showing no signs of disturbing the local populace whatsoever.

The city's wealthy families couldn't help but marvel to themselves:

This militia is truly something else.

That very night, Sun Chuanting convened all the prominent families and wealthy merchants of Daizhou for a meeting.

"Gentlemen!" Sun Chuanting announced, making a deep, formal bow. "Daizhou was nearly breached by the Manchus, and we almost all met our maker. Fortunately, Tie Niaofei mobilized a large number of Jin merchants to fund and recruit this militia, which arrived as reinforcements and finally stabilized our Daizhou. Each of your lives and fortunes were saved by these militiamen."

The prominent families had no objection to his words. Claspng their fists in agreement, they chorused,

"Indeed! We owe them a debt of gratitude; otherwise, our entire families would have been wiped out."

"These militia soldiers have traveled a great distance to garrison Daizhou, and in doing so, they protect us," Sun Chuanting continued. "It is only right that we, the local gentry, show our appreciation. I propose that each family contribute some silver, money, and grain to support the militia's operations..."

No one opposed this suggestion. The wealthy merchants all clasped their fists in unison, declaring,

"It is only proper."

They were just about to discuss how much each family would contribute when—

At that very moment, a Sun family retainer rushed in.

"Master! A transport convoy has arrived on the official road south of Daizhou! So many carts and horses, and an immense amount of supplies! My goodness, it's incredible—there's just too much!"

Sun Chuanting looked baffled.

The wealthy merchants exchanged bewildered glances.

Everyone quickly exited the meeting room and hurried to the south city wall to witness the sight. On the official road, carts and horses stretched for several li, each vehicle laden to the brim, winding their way toward the city, and soon reached Daizhou's gates.

Cheng Xu was already waiting there. Seeing Sun Chuanting and the others arrive, he clasped his hands and offered a slight bow, a smile on his face.

"Master Sun, esteemed residents of Daizhou, forgive our minor commotion. Our transport convoy has arrived."

Sun Chuanting was taken aback.

"You have your own logistics team? I was just organizing donations of money and supplies from everyone."

Cheng Xu laughed heartily.

"We appreciate your kind intentions, gentlemen. However, we are different from the government troops and local volunteers you may have encountered before. We have our own robust logistics system, so there's no need for you to trouble yourselves."

As he spoke, the first vehicle of the transport convoy reached the city gate.

Sun Chuanting quickly ordered the gates opened. A man, whose demeanor was entirely unlike that of a common soldier—more akin to a meticulous clerk—strode into the city. He snapped to attention, saluted Cheng Xu crisply, and, with both hands, presented a single sheet of paper.

"Logistics Captain Zhuge Wangchan, reporting for duty," he declared.

"I have successfully delivered the hundred carts of supplies I was tasked with escorting. Here is the manifest; please review and sign it, Instructor He."

Chapter 823: Bearing the Burden

"Ahead lies Gao Family Village's main stronghold."

The scarred cavalryman riding at the front spoke in a hoarse, battle-worn voice. His face bore knife marks and sunburn scars, the kind that didn't come from one fight, but from decades of bandit life turned mercenary under Zao Ying.

"Soon, you will meet our Gao Family Village's Dao Xuan Tianzhun," he continued coldly. "Be careful with your words. If you offend him, that is blasphemy."

His eyes narrowed.

"And if that happens, we will slaughter every man, woman, and child of your Wushen tribe. Understand?"

An Jile didn't understand a single word of Han.

She only understood one thing: the man was threatening them.

Zhebu, however, understood every word.

His throat tightened as fear crawled up his spine. He leaned close to his mother and whispered urgently, his voice trembling, "Mother... the one receiving us is a Han Living Buddha. If we offend him, it's blasphemy against the Han deity. They will wipe out our entire tribe."

An Jile sucked in a sharp breath, her body stiffening.

"I'm not good with words," she whispered back. "Then I won't speak. Son, you must handle this carefully."

Thus, carrying fear heavier than shackles, the mother and son stepped into Gao Family Village's main stronghold.

This stronghold had been placed into the box by Li Daoxuan in the seventh year of the Tianqi Era.

Eight years had passed.

Wind and rain had washed over it countless times. Moss crawled along stone walls. Wooden beams darkened with age. Yet instead of decay, it radiated something else entirely—weight.

Authority.

Order.

As they walked through it, An Jile felt as though she were stepping into the belly of some enormous beast.

The corridors were cold and narrow, stone underfoot echoing with each step. Their footsteps sounded unnaturally loud, as if the walls themselves were listening.

Neither dared to speak.

They finally arrived at a three-story watchtower.

Inside the ancestral hall on the first floor, a towering statue stood.

Dao Xuan Tianzhun.

The statue's gaze was calm, distant, and mercilessly neutral, as if it could look at slaughter and harvest with the same expression.

Knowing it was a Han deity, mother and son didn't dare hesitate. They knelt at once and bowed deeply, foreheads nearly touching the ground.

Only then did they ascend the stairs.

On the third floor, they saw two figures waiting.

One was Gao Yiye.

She sat upright, refined and composed, her posture elegant yet firm. Though young, she carried an unmistakable air of authority. It made one instinctively lower their eyes.

Beside her sat Li Daoxuan.

He wore a Daoist robe. His appearance was solemn, his presence heavy. The moment An Jile and Zhebu saw him, their hearts skipped.

It was him.

The statue downstairs.

Come to life.

An Jile didn't know Han. She knelt immediately and bowed repeatedly, not daring to raise her head.

Zhebu swallowed and spoke in a low voice, "Greetings, Living Buddha."

Li Daoxuan: ...Huh? Living Buddha?

Right. Mongols of this era... Yellow Hat? Red Hat? Honestly, I can't tell.

Modern people like me only know one thing: if you glow a bit and sit still, you're probably a Living Buddha.

Fine. Living Buddha it is.

Li Daoxuan, who had always disliked excessive pomp, didn't put on a divine tone. He smiled casually and said, "You've had a difficult journey."

He thought this was a friendly smile.

He did not, at any point, consider how terrifying a smiling silicone puppet might look.

Mother and son dared to glance up.

What they saw made their hearts seize.

The Living Buddha's smile did not reach his eyes. His tone was gentle, but his face was... wrong. Empty. Still. Like a calm lake concealing something sharp beneath the surface.

An Jile's hands trembled.

Zhebu gathered what little courage he had left and asked softly, "Living Buddha... what are your commands?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "You should already know that you are hostages. However, I respect even prisoners of war, let alone hostages. You don't need to worry about inhuman treatment."

Zhebu's face turned pale.

He whispered rapidly to his mother, "The Living Buddha is warning us. He says we must remember we are hostages. We are less than prisoners of war. We shouldn't expect respect or to be treated as human. If we resist, we'll face inhuman treatment."

An Jile shuddered.

Li Daoxuan continued calmly, "You'll live here in the main stronghold. Food, clothing, daily necessities—everything will be provided."

Zhebu immediately prostrated himself. "As you command!"

Then he whispered again, translating, "He says he will provide food and clothing only if Mother stays here with him."

An Jile had prepared herself long ago.

She knew this moment would come.

On the grasslands, such things were common. Survival always came with a price. She exhaled softly and bowed. "As you command."

If a Han man were in Zhebu's place, he might have drawn a blade on the spot.

But Zhebu didn't see it that way.

This was simply how the world worked.

He only asked, uncertain, "What about me?"

Li Daoxuan looked at him carefully. "You... you're not particularly old, nor particularly young. Frankly, you're a bit troublesome."

Zhebu's heart nearly stopped.

Is he going to kill me?

Li Daoxuan said, "Go enroll in first grade at school."

Zhebu: "???"

An Jile whispered anxiously, "Son, what did the Living Buddha say?"

Zhebu replied weakly, "This time... I didn't understand either."

Seeing their confusion, Li Daoxuan laughed. "It means he'll attend a private academy."

Zhebu froze.

"The Living Buddha wants me to study at a Han academy," he whispered.

An Jile frowned. "He won't let you practice archery or horsemanship... he wants you to study. That means he intends to make you useless."

Zhebu clenched his fists. "I understand. I'll train my body in secret."

Li Daoxuan waved his hand. "That's all. You may leave."

Zhebu stood and fled downstairs.

An Jile stayed behind.

Li Daoxuan tilted his head. "Hm? Why are you still here?"

She didn't understand.

With no translator left, An Jile could only rely on instinct.

The Living Buddha was looking at her.

As if asking: Why aren't you doing what you're supposed to do?

Understanding dawned.

Han men... didn't wait until night?

Her face flushed with humiliation. She bit her lip and reached for her clothes.

A massive question mark rose above Li Daoxuan's head.

Gao Yiye slammed her palm on the table and jumped up. "What are you doing?! Get out! Get out!"

The question mark wobbled... then popped.

Gao Yiye fumed. "Dao Xuan Tianzhun, that Mongol woman is shameless! She's old, doesn't even know her age, and still tries to seduce Dao Xuan Tianzhun! Disgraceful!"

Li Daoxuan blinked. "Oh? She was seducing me? I thought she looked wronged. Yiye... are you jealous?"

Gao Yiye's face turned red. "N-No! I'm not jealous! Jealousy is bad! I wouldn't— Fine! I just don't want to see Dao Xuan Tianzhun with other women! I am jealous, alright?!"

She blurted it all out.

Li Daoxuan laughed. "Then you handle them. As a woman, she won't misunderstand you again."

Chapter 824: Let's Go See

Zhebu accepted his fate with a level of stoicism that even surprised himself.

He did not cry.

He did not resist.

He did not attempt to escape.

The moment he stepped out of Gao Family Village's main fort, he obediently enrolled in first grade.

Yes.

First grade.

If this were told back on the grasslands, no one would believe it.

As Zhebu walked along the main road of Gao Family Village, he could clearly feel the gazes falling upon him from all sides.

Han people stared at him.

Some eyes carried wariness.

Some held scorn.

Some showed disdain.

Some contained naked hatred.

It felt like every unpleasant emotion imaginable had been packed into those glances and thrown at him all at once.

Yet mixed among them were gazes Zhebu couldn't understand at all.

Sympathy.

Pity.

That confused him.

Not everyone in Gao Family Village treated the Mongolian boy with hostility. Quite a few looked at him with an almost gentle concern, the kind that made Zhebu instinctively uneasy.

He didn't know that these people were the new generation of Gao Family Village.

They were children and youths who had received modern education. They had studied textbooks personally selected and modified by Li Daoxuan.

Their thinking had already ascended to another level.

They understood something extremely important:

If you let children from other ethnic groups learn Han language, Han writing, Han values...

Then the final result would only be one thing.

Assimilation.

So they treated Zhebu with an odd, almost strategic kindness.

At the entrance of the school, a teenager stopped him.

"What's your name?"

Zhebu tensed and replied carefully, "My name is Zhebu."

"Hm." The teenager nodded with satisfaction. "Good name."

He smiled brightly. "You're new, right? There must be lots of things you don't understand. I'll be your friend. If you don't know anything, just ask."

He slapped his chest proudly.

"My name is Liu Maopao. Everyone calls me 'Handsome Enough to Bubble.' My father is Shopkeeper Liu—he runs a fresh noodle shop. Everyone calls him 'Rich Enough to Drip Oil.'"

Zhebu was secretly stunned.

What kind of place is this?

Why are the nicknames so... aggressive?

As he entered the school grounds, even more teenagers greeted him.

Some smiled.

Some shook his hand.

Some asked him where he came from.

Before he knew it, Zhebu felt dizzy.

Is this really the enemy camp?

Are Han people... like this?

Of course, kindness alone couldn't shake someone raised with a wolf mentality.

On the grasslands, children were taught from birth: respect strength, fear power, despise weakness.

Zhebu didn't feel grateful.

Only confused.

He would only truly understand gratitude after learning enough Han culture.

For now, what he admired... was power.

That evening, after a full day of cautious vigilance, Zhebu returned to the main fort.

Gao Yiye had arranged a small room for him and his mother beside the watchtower.

When he entered, he saw An Jile busy at work.

She carefully made the beds.

She neatly arranged the daily necessities Gao Yiye had given them.

She treated every grain of food as treasure—pouring flour into jars, hiding them in corners, stacking them like wealth.

When she saw Zhebu, she hurried over.

"My son," she asked anxiously, "were you bullied today? Did you endure it?"

Zhebu shook his head. "No one bullied me. I attended class. We learned the Three Character Classic and Arabic numerals."

An Jile looked utterly lost.

Zhebu asked, "What about you, Mother?"

She shook her head slowly. "No one did anything to me either."

They stared at each other.

Both were deeply surprised.

At that moment, loud voices erupted outside. Footsteps, laughter, shouting—it sounded like a crowd moving together.

Zhebu listened carefully. "Mother, they're saying it's time for the Gaojia News broadcast. Everyone's going to watch."

An Jile frowned. "What is that?"

"I don't know either," Zhebu replied. "Let's go see."

An Jile quickly hid the last jar of flour, then followed him out. Before leaving, she locked the door carefully, afraid someone might steal their precious food.

Mother and son joined the crowd.

Soon, they arrived outside the main fort's outer wall.

A massive crowd had gathered.

Everyone was pointing at a huge black mirror.

The mirror was dark, silent, showing nothing at all.

Zhebu stared at it blankly.

Just then, a familiar voice sounded beside him.

"Hey! Mongolian friend!"

Zhebu turned his head.

It was the teenager from school.

"Handsome enough to bubble!" Zhebu blurted out.

The teenager laughed. "That's me, Liu Maopao. You still haven't told me your name."

Zhebu had no choice. "My name is Zhebu. It means 'arrow' in Mongolian."

"Oh!" Liu Maopao laughed. "Then you're Little Arrow!"

He leaned closer conspiratorially. "See? I told you. If you don't understand something, ask me. I saw you looking confused—this is your first time seeing this, right?"

Zhebu nodded eagerly. "Yes, Brother Bubble. What is this black mirror? And what is the Gaojia News broadcast?"

Liu Maopao straightened, full of pride.

"This is a Divine Mirror. A celestial artifact. It can show events from a thousand li away, even scenes from the past and the future."

Zhebu jumped. "What?!"

Liu Maopao continued smoothly. "Every evening, Dao Xuan Tianzhun uses this mirror to show us what's happening across the land. We don't even need to leave the village to know everything."

Zhebu was stunned.

Is such a thing really possible?

Just as doubt filled his heart—

The black mirror lit up.

On the screen appeared Gao Yiye.

The same woman who had sat beside Dao Xuan Tianzhun earlier that day.

She looked dignified, elegant, and distant.

"First," she said calmly, "a special news report."

The moment those words rang out, the crowd erupted.

Liu Maopao whispered excitedly, "Little Arrow! Recently the Manchu attacked Xuanfu and Datong. News about them gets special broadcasts."

On screen, Gao Yiye continued, "Yesterday, the Manchu attacked Daizhou City. As the city neared collapse, the Gao Family Village Militia arrived in time and repelled the enemy."

"Below is real-time battlefield footage from our frontline reporters."

The scene shifted.

The Manchu army and Gao Family Village forces faced each other across the battlefield.

Zhebu's eyes widened.

It turned out Tie Niaofei had transported a massive "miniature" camera onto a hill before the battle. Its wide-angle lens captured the entire battlefield.

Then—

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Artillery fire erupted.

Black smoke bloomed among the Manchu ranks.

Bodies flew.

Formations shattered.

Zhebu's breathing stopped.

Then the arquebusiers advanced.

Gunfire crackled like thunder.

The Manchu fell like wheat under a sickle.

Their army collapsed, fleeing in humiliation.

Zhebu stood frozen.

For the first time in his life...

He saw power like this.

And his world quietly cracked.

Chapter 825: Chang Wei Is Beating Lai Fu

Zhebu stood frozen in place, eyes locked onto the Immortal Treasure Mirror.

On the screen, the Manchus were being beaten into utter disarray—no, not just defeated, but humiliated, flattened, smashed until even their dignity scattered across the battlefield like dust.

Zhebu's mind went completely blank.

Because in his understanding of the world, the Manchus were invincible.

At this point in time, the Manchus possessed the power to grind the Northern Yuan into the dirt. One tribe after another had fallen before them. Countless Northern Yuan nobles had knelt, surrendering their banners, either swearing brotherhood with the Manchus or crawling into servitude as their lackeys.

Among all Mongols, the Manchus were monsters.

Terrifying, unstoppable monsters.

Far stronger than the Han.

But now—

That monster was being beaten.

Not a fierce battle.

Not a narrow victory.

It was a one-sided beating.

A beating so brutal that the Manchus didn't even have the chance to struggle.

Zhebu did not doubt the authenticity of the Immortal Treasure Mirror.

He couldn't.

Because he had personally witnessed these Han firearms before.

The Wushen tribe had been forced to its knees by them. That was why he and his mother had been sent here as hostages in the first place.

He had known the firearms were strong.

But he had never imagined they were this strong.

Watching the Later Jin Eight Banners crumble like dead leaves under artillery fire, Zhebu finally understood—

The Han firearm soldiers were terrifying beyond imagination.

At that moment, something ancient stirred in his blood.

The Mongols' innate worship of strength.

It screamed in his ears.

Strong!

Too strong!

These Han people are unbelievable!

They're absolutely invincible!

Standing beside him, Liu Maopao quietly observed Zhebu's expression.

The widened eyes.

The stiff posture.

The completely shattered worldview.

He immediately understood.

And in his heart, he laughed triumphantly.

Ha! Scared now, aren't you?

Mongols respect strength above all else. Once they see this, they'll behave.

Looks like my guidance wasn't wasted.

Perfect execution of the student council's task.

Big merit secured!

Yes.

Liu Maopao was not just any teenager.

He was a man with ambition.

In the future, he wanted to enter the Gao Family Village Committee and become a public official.

This ambition had been drilled into him by his father, Liu You.

Liu You's Shuixian Heluo noodle shop had already made him one of the wealthiest men in Gao Family Village. But money alone was not enough.

Liu You wanted status.

He often told his son:

"Money is useless. No matter how rich you are, merchants are still at the bottom—below scholars, farmers, and artisans."

"That won't do."

"Our Liu family can't just be rich. We must be people of standing."

Thus, Liu Maopao studied diligently, volunteered for the student council, and cultivated political sensitivity from a young age.

And now—

The extremely important task of handling the Mongolian hostage boy had landed in his hands.

If he did this well, it would be a massive boost to his future career.

Zhebu stared at the mirror for a long, long time before finally finding his voice.

Liu Maopao seized the timing perfectly and spoke gently.

"Little Arrow Brother, what do you think of Gao Family Village's combat strength?"

Zhebu replied honestly, his voice hollow:

"Even if not the greatest under heaven... it is certainly unparalleled in the world."

Liu Maopao smiled.

"Your father and the others probably don't know yet that the Manchus have been defeated."

"Why don't you write a letter home and tell him?"

Zhebu was startled.

"Huh? I'm a hostage... I can still write home?"

"Aren't you afraid I'll leak secrets?"

Liu Maopao laughed.

"Leak what secrets? Look around you."

"So many people are watching this Immortal Treasure Mirror."

"This information will spread everywhere within minutes."

"At this point, who cares if you notify the Wushen tribe?"

Zhebu nodded slowly.

"That makes sense... but I don't know many characters."

"I don't know Mongolian writing, and I know even less Han characters."

Liu Maopao waved his hand.

"I'll write it for you."

"Han characters are fine. Your father can always find someone to read it."

Zhebu hesitated again.

"But... how will the letter reach the Wushen tribe?"

"There's no regular messenger for that route."

Liu Maopao scratched his head.

"Well... give it to Chen Qianhu."

"The next time he goes to the grasslands, he can bring it along."

The moment Zhebu heard that name, his face turned pale.

"Chen... Chen Qianhu?"

"I... I'm afraid of him."

Liu Maopao swallowed.

"How about this?"

"You write it."

"I'll go with you to see Chen Qianhu."

"You don't need to speak. I'll handle it."

"I'm not afraid of Chen Qianhu..."

"...okay, I'm a little afraid."

In truth, he was very afraid.

But for the sake of his future political path, he had to grit his teeth.

Zhebu dictated.

Liu Maopao wrote.

"Dear Father,

Last night I saw a bright, bright star among the treetops...

I miss you very much.

The people of Gao Family Village treat Mother and me quite well...

Today, the village broadcast news that Gao Family Village defeated the Later Jin.

It was terrifying.

Their cannons and firearms fired together, and the Eight Banner soldiers fell like paper effigies...

The Han people are too formidable.

We can never defeat such formidable Han people..."

The final sentence—

Was quietly added by Liu Maopao.

Zhebu didn't recognize enough characters to notice.

After finishing, Zhebu pressed his fingerprint, sealed the letter with wax.

Liu Maopao clapped his hands.

"Alright! Let's go see Chen Qianhu."

The moment Zhebu heard Chen Qianhu was in the village, he bolted back to tell his mother.

An Jile immediately retreated into the main keep, terrified.

Now—

The burden fell entirely on Liu Maopao.

He led the trembling Zhebu toward the barracks.

Instructor He had already gone to Xuanfu and Datong.

The highest-ranking officer remaining—

Was Chen Qianhu.

For children in Gao Family Village, this place was terrifying.

Of course, except for those lunatics who dared to shoot Chen Qianhu with bamboo water guns.

Those were warriors.

Liu Maopao was not a warrior.

He was a future clerk.

His heart hammered violently, but he forced himself to maintain composure.

At the gate, he stated their purpose.

They were led inside.

With every step down the corridor, his heartbeat grew louder.

Zhebu looked like a startled hamster.

The guard knocked.

"Bang bang bang!"

"Chen Qianhu, Liu Maopao, son of Shopkeeper Liu, seeks an audience. He has a letter to be delivered to the Wushen tribe."

Chen Qianhu's voice came from inside.

"Oh. Their noodles are delicious. I like them."

"Let him in."

The tone was gentle.

Liu Maopao nearly collapsed in relief.

He doesn't sound angry... good...

He pushed the door open.

And immediately saw—

Chen Qianhu beating someone.

It turned out a recruit named Lai Fu had been drinking while on sentry duty.

Violation of military law.

Chen Qianhu was personally carrying out the punishment.

To save face, it was done indoors.

"Whack!"

The whip cracked.

"AAAH—!"

Lai Fu screamed.

Liu Maopao and Zhebu screamed even louder.

"AAAAH—!!!"

Later, Liu Maopao would tell everyone:

"I walked in and saw Chang Wei—no, Chen Qianhu—beating Lai Fu."

And thus—

A brand-new chapter was added to Chen Qianhu's legendary reputation.

Chapter 826: I Don't Want to Bomb the Great Wall!

Yanmen Pass, famous for its treacherous terrain, was hailed as the "First Pass Under Heaven," with the saying: Among the Nine Strategic Passes of the realm, Yanmen stands first.

During the early Ming Dynasty, in 1374—the seventh year of Hongwu—Marquis Ji'an, Lu Xiang, oversaw the construction of a new pass ten li northeast of the old one, making the position even more formidable than before.

Yet despite its grandeur, this magnificent fortress had never truly fulfilled its role.

When the Manchu invaders arrived, the defending troops fled without a fight, allowing the Manchus to march straight into Daizhou and nearly seize it outright.

After the Gao Family Village Militia finished stationing troops in Daizhou, their very first objective was to retake Yanmen Pass.

Gao Chuwu rode at the head of the vanguard. He was dressed in plain cloth robes and mounted on a powerful, fine horse. It wasn't that he didn't own armor—he did—but he dared not wear it. His massive frame and astonishing weight already pushed the limits of any warhorse. If he added his absurdly heavy armor on top of that, no horse alive could endure it. So whenever he was marching rather than fighting, Gao Chuwu wore civilian clothing, while his outrageously thick armor was carried separately on another horse.

The Puppet Tianzhun, its neck now perfectly repaired, sat perched on Gao Chuwu's shoulder. Its two tiny wooden legs swung back and forth cheerfully in midair.

Gao Chuwu flashed a foolish grin.

"Dao Xuan Tianzhun, is my mission just to take Yanmen Pass and then hold it?"

The Puppet Tianzhun nodded.

"Yanmen Pass is a critical stronghold of the Great Wall. Only by reclaiming it can we truly safeguard the Central Plains."

Gao Chuwu's eyes lit up.

"Wow, the Great Wall!"

A group of his personal guards—many of whom had never ventured this far north—instantly looked thrilled.

"The Great Wall? We get to see the Great Wall?!"

Like falling dominoes, their excitement rippled outward. All two thousand soldiers behind them erupted into cheers.

"The Great Wall! We're going to see the Great Wall!"

These militia soldiers regularly watched Gaojia News broadcasts and absorbed all sorts of patriotic cultural programming. Under Li Daoxuan's deliberate cultivation of national awareness, they had already begun a conscious awakening. Now, just hearing the words "Great Wall" filled them with a powerful sense of awe—this is a priceless legacy of our Chinese civilization.

This was, without question, a positive development, and Li Daoxuan was quietly pleased.

However...

The artillery platoon leader accompanying Gao Chuwu suddenly went pale. He clutched his head and wailed,

"Oh no! I can't bring myself to fire the cannons at Yanmen Pass! If we damage the Great Wall, even being hacked to death a thousand times wouldn't atone for that sin!"

The moment he said it, the entire artillery platoon panicked.

"Heavens! We didn't even think of that until the platoon leader spoke up. If we start firing, the Great Wall will definitely be damaged! We'll be sinners for all eternity!"

As the artillery platoon spiraled into panic, the flintlock riflemen began to grow restless as well.

"Oh no—if my bullet hits the Great Wall, it'll punch a hole in it! I don't want to damage the Great Wall!"

"This is a treasure our ancestors left for future generations!"

"It's one of the symbols of our Chinese nation. How could it be destroyed by my own hand?!"

The morale of the entire army wavered.

Gao Chuwu turned around and shouted,

"All of you, fix bayonets! I'll use my great axe! We'll charge in with cold steel!"

The soldiers immediately brightened.

"Oh—oh, right! That's an option!"

"My Ghost-God Fist finally has a use!"

Hearing all this, Li Daoxuan couldn't help but smile wryly. He spoke up,

"Quiet. All of you, listen to me."

The army fell silent at once.

Li Daoxuan continued,

"Although the Great Wall is a priceless treasure, once you're on the battlefield, you cannot be distracted by such thoughts. If the Great Wall is damaged, it can be repaired. Throughout history, it has been repaired by generation after generation. Do not throw away your lives so cheaply over this."

The soldiers roared in unison, acknowledging his words.

At that moment, the army rounded a mountain bend, and the Great Wall appeared in the distance—the majestic wall winding across the peaks of Yanmen Mountain like an enormous dragon.

Li Daoxuan immediately synchronized his senses with the reconnaissance hot air balloon.

From high above, he looked down and saw that Yanmen Pass was indeed occupied by Manchu troops. There weren't many—only five or six hundred. He couldn't help but sigh inwardly. This place should have been a key stronghold for our Chinese nation to guard against northern barbarians. Instead, because its defenders fled, it has become a fort used by those very barbarians to defend against us. How utterly absurd.

"Chuwu," he said, "one and a half li to your front-right. A squad of Manchu scouts is moving through the woods."

"Understood!"

Gao Chuwu turned and issued an order. A squad of Gao Family Village scouts quietly slipped into the forest.

Each scout wore a Tianzhun emblem embroidered on their chest, allowing for real-time, seamless information sharing.

They fanned out through the woods, yet their communication remained as smooth as if they were walking side by side.

Before long, several rifle shots rang out, followed by a few short screams. That Manchu scout squad entered eternal slumber right there in the forest.

The Gao Family Village Militia advanced into the woods afterward.

With the enemy scouts wiped out, the Manchu garrison at Yanmen Pass was effectively blinded.

Two hours later, the Gao Family Village Militia was fully concealed in the forest south of Yanmen Pass, quietly observing the imposing stronghold in the distance.

Gao Chuwu asked curiously,

"The last stretch toward the pass doesn't have a single tree. We can't sneak any closer. Why doesn't anything grow there?"

The Puppet Tianzhun chuckled.

"That's only natural. Defenders would have cut down any trees near the pass to keep a clear field of view. It's man-made."

Gao Chuwu nodded.

"So that's how it is! Feels like I learned something... but also like I'll never use it."

The Puppet Tianzhun laughed.

"You certainly won't. But perhaps your son, Gao Zhengjing, will. When he grows up, he'll surely be a clever general—no longer a simpleton."

Gao Chuwu grinned widely.

"That's right! I'll learn it for my son and teach him when he's older."

A bead of sweat seemed to appear on the Puppet Heavenly Lord's wooden head.

"You really shouldn't teach him. Wait until Gao Family Village establishes a military academy. Otherwise, you'll only make things worse."

Just then, the artillery platoon leader hunched over and approached, crouching beside Gao Chuwu. He stared at Yanmen Pass in the distance and whispered,

"Heavenly Lord... are we really going to bombard it? If we open fire, this section of the Great Wall will definitely be shattered. I don't want to become a historical criminal."

The Puppet Tianzhun voice was resolute.

"Bombard it. We can repair it afterward."

The artillery platoon leader clenched his teeth.

"Alright!"

He retreated to the artillery position, where a cluster of small mortars—each no thicker than an arm—had already been set up.

The artillerymen adjusted the mortars to a forty-five-degree angle, aiming them directly at Yanmen Pass.

One by one, their faces took on strange expressions.

"Ancestors, please don't blame us. We don't want to bomb it, but... to reduce casualties among our comrades, we have no choice."

"Load the gunpowder!"

"Load the small grenades!"

With practiced motions, the artillerymen poured black powder into the bases of the mortars, then inserted the small grenades—wooden casing first, Wooden Tube Delayed Fuze end down—into the barrels.

"Ready!"

"Fire!"

Chapter 827: Gao Chuwu, the Human Beast

The Manchu soldiers stationed at Yanmen Pass were living in indulgent comfort.

Ever since they entered the pass, they had burned, looted, and slaughtered their way across the land. From Chun County alone, the spoils filled more than three hundred carts, and these very supplies were now being escorted north through Yanmen Pass.

Whenever such convoys passed through, the garrison troops naturally helped themselves. They skimmed generously from the plunder, as though it were only proper.

This particular group of Manchu soldiers was no different. They draped bolts of fabric looted from Han households over their animal-hide armor, stuck bloodstained silver hairpins—snatched from Han women—into their long braids, and squatted around stolen iron pots, cooking grain taken from the people...

They were in exceedingly high spirits.

Although they had heard that the frontline troops suffered a major defeat while attacking Daizhou, they didn't take it seriously at all. Han people might occasionally win a battle or two, but that didn't change the fundamental truth: the Han could never defeat the Manchu.

As they ate their fill and drank heartily, they loudly complained that the frontline soldiers were nothing but useless fools who didn't know how to fight.

Just then, a loud boom echoed from the distant forest.

"Huh?"

The reveling Manchu soldiers all turned their heads toward the sound.

The very next instant—

Boom!

A second explosion tore through the air. Flames burst across the city wall, smoke billowed upward, and fragments of debris flew everywhere. A section of the defenders on the ramparts collapsed on the spot.

"Enemy attack!"

"Enemy attack!"

"Cannons!"

"No—cannons are louder than this!"

Boom! Boom! Boom!

From the woods, explosions rang out one after another.

Shells arced through the sky in succession.

Explosions blossomed atop the city walls like deadly flowers.

Human flowers.

Yanmen Pass was instantly thrown into chaos. More than five hundred Manchu soldiers inside were seized by confusion and panic.

"The enemy is shelling us from the forest!"

"Damn it! Where are the scouts?! They let the enemy get this close and start shelling us without reporting anything!"

"Engage the enemy!"

"How?! We can't even see them!"

"Shit, take cover! Hide!"

"What kind of demonic shells are these? Why do they explode again after landing?!"

The Manchu defenders were utterly bewildered, taking hits while having no idea what was happening.

Being just one step behind in technology was enough to instill an inexplicable terror. They didn't understand what they were facing, and because they didn't understand it, they feared it. And once fear took hold, the enemy's weapons became even more unfathomable.

That was precisely the situation the Manchu found themselves in.

All the Manchu soldiers scrambled to hide, abandoning even the city walls.

At that moment, figures flickered through the treeline as the Gao Family Village infantry began their advance.

With the artillery suppressing the walls, the infantry's approach was much smoother. They jogged forward rapidly, closing in on the pass.

When the assault first began, the artillery was still pounding Yanmen Pass indiscriminately, keeping the Manchu defenders pinned down, completely unaware that infantry was advancing outside.

But once the infantry reached a certain distance, the artillery had to halt to avoid friendly fire.

The Manchu soldiers inside noticed that the bombardment had weakened. Gaining some courage, they crept out of hiding and cautiously peeked over the city wall—only to see the Gao Family Village infantry less than fifty meters away.

"Enemy attack!"

"The Han army is here!"

Someone screamed, and another scrambled up the watchtower, preparing to strike the alarm bell.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Several muskets fired at once. The man who had climbed the watchtower was hit by multiple shots and fell straight down.

Although he never managed to ring the bell, the sound of gunfire outside the walls had effectively rung it for him. The defenders inside finally realized what was happening.

"Defend the wall!"

"Archers!"

Along the crenellated battlements, Manchu soldiers immediately popped up, drawing bows and nocking arrows.

Manchu men had hunted and fished since childhood and were extremely confident in their archery. With the enemy within fifty meters, they figured that even if they didn't hit every shot, at least seventy out of a hundred arrows would find their targets.

However, just as they raised their bows, they saw the charging Han soldiers suddenly swing their arms while still running, sending a swarm of small black spheres arcing toward the city wall.

The crenellations could block arrows and musket fire, but they offered no protection against objects flying in a high arc.

Moreover, hand-thrown grenades were far more accurate than the small grenades launched from mortar barrels. During training competitions, many Gao Family Village soldiers had already proven they could toss grenades cleanly into target rings from dozens of meters away.

A rain of black spheres sailed over the wall, followed by an earsplitting series of explosions.

A continuous chain of blasts.

The Manchu archers hiding behind the crenellations were instantly blasted apart, completely routed by the explosions.

Only a few scattered arrows flew back, striking the militia's cotton armor and being easily absorbed.

"They can't hurt us, but we can hurt them!"

That realization alone was a massive boost to morale.

The Gao Family Village Militia surged forward, spirits soaring, covering the final fifty meters in a rush.

In the blink of an eye, they reached the base of the city wall.

The defenders should have been dropping rolling logs and boulders from above, but the Manchu forces were in utter chaos, with no one left to organize such defenses. The militia easily secured their footing beneath the wall.

Someone pulled out a grappling hook and hurled it upward. It caught firmly on a crenellation.

Then Gao Chuwu grabbed the rope with both hands and began climbing at full speed.

This was one of the Gao Family Village Militia's special training drills.

Their training regimen was now extremely comprehensive—cross-country running, climbing, and all kinds of brutal physical exercises.

And someone like Gao Chuwu, who scored full marks in physical ability and zero in academics, naturally excelled at every single one of these drills.

In just moments, he reached the top.

As he was about to crest the wall, a Manchu warrior suddenly leapt out from behind the crenellations, thrusting a spear toward Gao Chuwu, who was still clinging to the rope. Gao Chuwu locked the rope with his legs, held on with his left hand, and with his right drew a musket.

Point-blank shot.

Bang.

The Manchu soldier trying to stab him was blasted backward.

"Muskets really are handy,"

Gao Chuwu muttered thickly. He tossed the musket back down to the base of the wall for a comrade to retrieve, then pulled himself up further until both feet landed on the battlements.

More Manchu soldiers rushed him immediately. With no time to draw another weapon, Gao Chuwu sidestepped a spear thrust, lunged forward, grabbed a Manchu warrior by the neck, and snapped it with a crisp crack.

Only then did he gain a brief moment to draw a large saber from his back.

It was a thick-backed broadsword—a loving gift from Xing Honglang.

Purchased at the Xi'an market for three taels of silver.

The hilt was even wrapped in red cloth. Stylish to the extreme.

Gao Chuwu swung the saber wildly. Within several meters, no one could approach him.

A few Manchu soldiers coordinated, leveling their spears and trying to overwhelm him with numbers, thrusting from several meters away. Gao Chuwu simply half-squatted, grabbed a Manchu corpse from the ground, and hurled it at them.

The corpse flew like a grotesque projectile. Faced with such a ferocious and utterly unreasonable weapon, the spearmen had no idea how to respond. They collapsed like bowling pins struck head-on.

Seeing the sheer savagery of this Han commander, the remaining Manchu warriors felt a chill crawl down their spines.

"Damn it..."

"This is absolutely a human beast."

Chapter 828: I Demand Your Family's Utmost Sacrifice

In an instant, Gao Chuwu secured a foothold atop the city wall.

Behind him, militia soldiers steadily climbed the ropes, one after another, swarming up onto the ramparts.

A Manchu warrior roared, "Cut the ropes!"

Someone swung his blade down with all his strength at the rope loop fastened to a protruding stone. A sharp clang rang out—but the loop remained intact.

The Manchu soldier stared at his blade in stunned disbelief, utterly confused.

That was no ordinary rope. It was a steel cable—no, many thin steel wires twisted together into a thick cord. How could a crude iron blade possibly sever it?

The soldiers of Gao Family Village continued climbing the steel cables without pause, carving out their position atop the city walls.

Bayonets were fixed to flintlock rifles.

They fought in close quarters, seizing any opening to fire a shot.

Years later, when the Japanese invaded China, they often complained that Chinese soldiers would suddenly fire during bayonet charges, calling it "unchivalrous."

What a joke. What right did invaders have to speak of chivalry?

They were striking exactly where it hurt most.

The militia soldiers had already loaded bullets into their rifles.

With bayonets gleaming, they looked ready for a traditional bayonet duel with the Manchu. The Manchu warriors, in turn, earnestly raised their spears, fully expecting a fair exchange... but halfway through a bayonet thrust, a militia soldier calmly pulled the trigger.

"Bang!"

Another fool fell.

The Manchu defenders simply could not withstand such a "three-dimensional" assault.

In only a few moments, the Manchu forces suffered a crushing defeat, and Yanmen Pass changed hands.

Of the five hundred Manchu soldiers defending the pass, only two hundred managed to flee through the north gate. The remaining three hundred died at Yanmen Pass.

The Gao Family Village Militia did not pursue them. Flintlock riflemen were poorly suited for a chase, and clearing the battlefield was the priority.

Before long, a militia soldier discovered a Manchu still clinging to life among the corpses.

"Report, there's an injured—mmph!"

Another soldier immediately clapped a hand over his mouth and whispered, "Injured? What injured? There are no injured here, only dead men." As he spoke, he drove his bayonet into the wounded Manchu's chest with a dull, sickening thud.

The first soldier froze, staring at him. "You..."

The man who had struck whispered back, "If this fellow goes back alive, he'll end up in a Labor Reform Camp. Do you really want people like him living in Gao Family Village? Didn't you watch that movie about the border soldier at the Daling River? Did you watch it for nothing?"

Understanding dawned on the first soldier. "Right, right, right!"

Much later, the battlefield had been completely cleared.

A subordinate reported to Gao Chuwu, "Report. The battlefield has been cleared. Not a single prisoner was taken. All enemies are dead."

Gao Chuwu said, "Oh? These fellows are really fragile. They just die from a single hit?"

Perched on his shoulder, Dao Xuan Tianzhun let out a quiet chuckle. "Do you think I don't know? You finished off all the wounded."

The subordinate's face flushed red at once. "Well... ahem... please mete out punishment, Dao Xuan Tianzhun."

"I won't punish you," Dao Xuan Tianzhun said calmly. "Killing is killing. There's nothing to punish."

His tone then grew heavier. "To kill or not to kill—both are paths, both may be chosen. Different choices merely lead to different futures. But remember this: throughout history, there has never been a case where slaughter alone led to the complete submission or extinction of another people. Never. The world is vast. How many carry Manchu blood? Can you truly kill them all with a blade? Ran Min's slaughter of the Five Barbarians achieved only a temporary effect. In the end, it failed to eradicate the barbarian threat to the Central Plains."

Dao Xuan Tianzhun sighed softly. "In the end, the most effective means of conquering foreign peoples... is culture."

The soldiers listened with respect, though they did not fully understand. Perhaps this generation never would. But when the next generation of Gao Family Village—children like Liu Maopao—grew up, they surely would.

Northeast of Daizhou, south of Datong Prefecture.

Huangcaoping Village.

Despite its name, Huangcaoping—Yellow Grassland—was no plain at all. It was mountainous terrain, with dark, dense forests and rugged paths that were difficult to traverse.

Lao Nanfeng, leading his former Guyuan border troops along with a large number of new recruits from Puzhou—three thousand men in total—was stationed on a slope in Huangcaoping.

Below the slope stretched the vast plains under Datong Prefecture. At the edge of the plain lay a small settlement known as Wangjiayao Village.

Lao Nanfeng glanced down from the hilltop, then pointed at the largest gentry manor in Wangjiayao Village and chuckled. "Let's go. We're going to loot that family."

The old Guyuan veterans beside him sucked in sharp breaths. "Brother Nanfeng, you can't do that! What were all those years in Labor Reform for? Isn't the Flower World Star Agency good enough for us now? We don't want to go back to the Labor Reform Camp!"

Lao Nanfeng burst out laughing. "What are you thinking? I run the super-profitable Flower World Star Agency. Would I really care about the little wealth of some minor gentry household? The 'looting' I'm talking about isn't what you think."

Everyone looked at him in confusion. "Huh?"

Lao Nanfeng cackled. "We're setting a trap for the Manchu."

Half an hour later...

Lao Nanfeng arrived outside the gates of the largest household in Wangjiayao Village with a large contingent of his men. The family, surnamed Wang, was a local gentry clan of modest means.

Recently, the Manchu had been pillaging without restraint around Xuanfu and Datong, throwing the Wang family into constant terror. They did not know when the Manchu might reach Wangjiayao Village, and fear gnawed at them day and night.

As a result, they had gathered all the common folk of Wangjiayao Village into their fortified manor, distributed weapons, and organized themselves to withstand a siege, as though playing a grim game of tower defense.

It was in this state that Lao Nanfeng arrived.

He stood before the fortress gate with his hands on his hips, completely ignoring the village militia aiming bows from atop the walls. He shouted loudly, "Who's in charge of this fortress? Come out and speak!"

Soon, the head of the Wang family appeared, peering nervously over the wall at Lao Nanfeng. "General, who might you be?"

Lao Nanfeng snorted. "I'm a general from the border army. My surname is Nan."

The Wang family head immediately forced a flattering smile. "Greetings, General Nan."

Lao Nanfeng said, "The Manchu are about to arrive. Do you know that?" He pointed toward the northwest. "In that direction, there are two thousand Manchu cavalry raiders pillaging everywhere. In about half an hour, they'll reach Wangjiayao Village."

The news nearly scared the Wang family head out of his wits. "Half an hour? General, save me!"

Lao Nanfeng snorted coldly. "I couldn't care less about saving you. What I need now is for your entire family to dedicate your lives to the imperial court—to serve as bait for us."

The Wang family head's face drained of all color. "What?!"

Lao Nanfeng continued, "When the Manchu arrive, you resist with all your might. Don't run, even if it means death. Hold this fortress firmly. I'll lead my troops to encircle them from the outside and strike them from front and rear. Do you understand?"

The look on the Wang family head's face was utterly priceless, as though it said: Sacrifice my family? Have you lost your mind?

Yet the words that came out of his mouth were entirely different. "I will respectfully follow General Nan's orders."

Chapter 829: Do You Want to Be a Star?

Seeing that the head of the Wang family had agreed, Lao Nanfeng turned and left without another word.

He swiftly led his men back to the southern slope of Huangcaoping Hill, settling among scattered rocks and dense trees.

One subordinate who had accompanied him could not help voicing his confusion. "Brother Nanfeng," he said, "I don't quite understand the arrangement you just made."

Lao Nanfeng asked calmly, "What is there not to understand?"

The subordinate explained, "That local gentry would never obediently 'sacrifice himself for the country.' There's no way he'd really hold the fortress. If we hadn't told him the Manchus would arrive in half an hour, he might have foolishly stayed inside and defended it until their cavalry arrived, leaving him no chance to escape and forcing him to fight to the death. But you told him the Manchus were coming—so he'll definitely flee beforehand and won't defend the fortress at all. Then how are we supposed to ambush the Manchus from behind when they attack?"

Lao Nanfeng replied, "Exactly. I know."

The subordinate fell silent.

Lao Nanfeng chuckled softly. "Imperial troops have always had a terrible reputation, and our militia has no standing here in Datong Prefecture. If we raised the militia banner, he wouldn't trust us and wouldn't cooperate. So I told him to 'sacrifice himself for the country,' knowing full well he would run. I'm just waiting for him to flee into the mountains."

The subordinate blurted out, "Huh? Then we're not ambushing the Manchus from behind anymore?"

Lao Nanfeng scoffed. "Ambushing Manchu cavalry on open plains? That would be madness. It's far better to lure them into the Huangcaoping mountains and ambush them there. That local gentry will make perfect bait."

The subordinate's eyes widened. "Oh!"

Only then did understanding dawn on him.

Sure enough, the head of the Wang family had no intention whatsoever of meekly "sacrificing himself for the country" inside the fortress. The moment Lao Nanfeng disappeared from sight, he immediately mobilized his entire household.

"The Manchus will be here in half an hour!" he shouted. "Quick! Pack up all the valuables and treasures! We're fleeing—fleeing! We're heading to Huangcaoping Hill to the south!"

Men, women, and children of the Wang family, along with the surrounding villagers who had taken shelter in the manor, all sprang into frantic motion.

Gold, silver, and other valuables had already been packed and were slung over shoulders. Calligraphy, paintings, and antiques of any worth were hastily rolled up and loaded onto handcarts. Provisions for hiding in the mountains had to be prepared as well, filling even more carts.

Moving an entire extended family was no simple task. The preparations alone took a great deal of time.

By the time the Wang family's procession of large and small carts finally set off toward Huangcaoping Hill, Manchu scouts had already appeared on the plains to the northwest.

From afar, the scouts saw numerous handcarts rolling out of the large estate, heading for the southern mountains. They panicked at once.

"The Han are trying to escape!"

They immediately spurred their horses forward.

The Wang family was not entirely defenseless. Their household guards and village militiamen seized bows and arrows and loosed a volley toward the Manchu scouts.

Seeing that the enemy was numerous and well-prepared, and that a handful of scouts could not possibly stop them, the scouts quickly wheeled their horses around and galloped back.

They were clearly going to call for reinforcements.

The Wang family grew even more frantic.

"Run!" they shouted. "The Manchu scouts have seen us! Their main force will be here any moment!"

"Faster! Everyone, faster!"

The Wang family desperately scrambled toward Huangcaoping Hill. But burdened with the elderly, children, and handcarts, their speed was painfully slow. No matter how frantically they hurried, they barely managed to make it a mile or two into the foothills.

On the plains to the northwest, the thunder of hooves rolled across the land. A large body of cavalry surged forward, with infantry trailing behind in the distance.

"The Han are fleeing into the mountains!"

"Catch them!"

"All that wealth belongs to us!"

Howling, the Manchu cavalry charged in pursuit.

This raid had no strategic objective—it was plunder, pure and simple. Faced with such fat sheep, they had no intention of letting them escape.

With guttural cries, they surged onward.

Meanwhile, scattered across Huangcaoping Hill, the riflemen of the Gao Family Village Militia were already in position.

Skirmisher trenches had been dug everywhere, the soldiers concealed within, their heads covered by sod.

Rifles were loaded, their muzzles protruding silently from beneath the earth.

Not a single person was visible on the entire hillside, yet it was thick with killing intent.

The Wang family and their carts rushed along the mountain path beside these trenches. Some passed extremely close, but the Gao Family Village soldiers remained perfectly still, as though they did not exist.

The panicked Wang family noticed nothing at all.

"Pursue them!"

"Catch them, and their wealth is ours!"

Roaring, the Manchu cavalry burst onto the hillside.

The Wang family had already entered the mountains by two li, and the cavalry could not overtake them in a single charge. With no choice, they followed the winding mountain path upward. The road twisted and turned, and where there was no clear path, scattered rocks blocked the way.

The cavalry could not charge through the rocks and were forced to climb along the narrow, spiraling path, turning again and again as they ascended.

Before long, they were halfway up the slope.

Ahead, the Wang family wailed in terror. Some of the slower elderly, weak, women, and children were already crying in despair, realizing that escape was impossible and that capture by the Manchus was only a matter of time.

At that moment, Lao Nanfeng let out a low chuckle. He suddenly sprang from his hidden trench, raised his rifle, and fired.

"Bang!"

It was a casual shot—and it missed entirely.

But that single shot was merely the opening note.

From every trench on the hillside, rifles erupted at once.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The gunfire echoed across Huangcaoping Hill almost instantly.

The Manchu cavalry saw only flashes of light and bursts of white smoke erupting all around them, followed by sharp pain in their chests, screams, and bodies pitching backward from their saddles.

In an instant, they suffered heavy casualties.

The Wang family was utterly dumbfounded.

They had never imagined that people would suddenly emerge from the seemingly empty ground beside them, rifles in hand, firing indiscriminately at the Manchus behind them.

The Manchu ranks collapsed into chaos, horses rearing and men tumbling to the ground.

An elderly member of the Wang family, too exhausted to continue, had collapsed onto a patch of grass beside the path, gasping for breath as he waited for death. He never imagined that, less than half a zhang away, men would suddenly rise up and begin shooting the Manchus.

The shock nearly scared him to death—but once he grasped what was happening, joy flooded him. Clapping his hands over his ears, he shouted at the top of his lungs, "Kill them! Kill every last one of those damn Manchus!"

"We... we ran straight into an imperial ambush?"

The Wang family went from confusion to utter shock.

Only the head of the Wang family stood there, his face burning with embarrassment. Watching Lao Nanfeng slide down the hillside toward him, he suddenly dropped to his knees with a heavy thud.

"General Nan..." he stammered. "... this humble commoner... I..."

Lao Nanfeng patted him on the shoulder.

"Excellent," he said. "Absolutely excellent. Luring the enemy deep, feigning defeat, fleeing in panic—you played the role perfectly. You're a natural, a top-tier actor. Do you want to become famous? I'll make you a star."

The head of the Wang family stared at him, utterly dumbfounded. "I wasn't acting! I really was running for my life!"

Lao Nanfeng burst out laughing. "Nonsense. Of course I knew you were genuinely fleeing. I was just teasing you."

Chapter 830: Scrambling for Glory

Before long, the Manchu soldiers who had struggled up the hillside were completely routed.

The infantry following behind hesitated, uncertain whether to press forward and fight a decisive battle against the so-called "Ming Divine Firearms Battalion." But at that moment, fierce shouts erupted from their flank—Lao Nanfeng had never intended to stake everything on a single plan.

Most of the ambushers arranged on the hillside were newly trained musketeers. However, Lao Nanfeng's most trusted men—the old Guyuan veterans—were concealed along the flanks. These men fought with ferocity and ruthless efficiency, and every one of them delighted in competing for merit.

Although, after joining Gao Family Village, they had been repeatedly taught that "spoils of war belong to the collective" and that "military merit is a collective honor," the habits ingrained during decades of service as imperial soldiers had not faded. Charging at the forefront of battle, earning titles like "first to break the enemy line" or "first to seize the field," was etched into their very bones. They understood that even if merit was counted collectively, those who performed exceptionally would still catch the eye of the Tianzhun and of Lao Nanfeng.

To gain the Tianzhun favor meant being noticed by the divine, which could bring various special rewards—sometimes even a single rare and unusual snack, valuable enough to make one rich. To gain Lao Nanfeng's favor meant not only promotion within the army, but advancement within the Flower

World Star Agency as well, perhaps even a substantial supporting role in a film. One need only look at Chen Qianhu to see how impressive such prospects could be.

With a thunderous roar, the Guyuan veterans burst out from their flanking ambush.

Their style of combat was utterly unlike that of the Gao Family Village musketeers. The village militia fought cautiously with firearms, placing defense first and valuing survival above glory. The Guyuan veterans thought the opposite: what was mere survival compared to earning distinction? Playing it safe with muskets meant no one could tell who killed whom—how, then, could they compete for merit? Only by charging forward could they truly catch the Tianzhun attention.

A group of them surged toward the Manchus, muskets in hand.

As they ran, they fired.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

White smoke billowed. After firing a single shot, they did not bother to reload. Instead, they slung their muskets onto their backs and, with a swift motion, drew their sabres.

"Charge!"

"Charge while you're young—wealth will follow in your wake!"

"Every scar is honor, every victory a step toward rank and glory!"

"Charge!"

The Manchus whirled around, eyes wide with shock. "Damn it—Han border troops!"

There was no doubt about it. Only the Han border army could fight like this. Everyone else they had faced had been soft and spineless.

With a resounding crash, the two sides collided.

The instant they met, the Manchus sensed something was terribly wrong. What had these border soldiers been eating? Every one of them was powerfully built, brimming with vigor—nothing like the pale, half-starved troops they were accustomed to facing. And their equipment—damn it all—it was far superior.

Steel rang sharply as blades met. A Manchu sabre chipped on impact.

The Manchu soldier froze, staring in disbelief.

The Guyuan veteran laughed loudly and brought his blade down in a single stroke, cleaving the Manchu's head clean off and sending it flying.

The iron smelted by Gao Family Village was of such quality that it could be used to cast muskets; blades forged from it were naturally formidable. A chipped blade was already a fortunate outcome—some of the more brittle Manchu weapons snapped outright the moment they collided with the village steel.

Already shaken and reduced by musket fire, the Manchus now found themselves outmatched in weapons, equipment, and physical strength alike. Against the Guyuan veterans, they stood no chance.

The clash turned swiftly into a massacre.

In a short time, nearly half of the Manchu soldiers lay dead upon the grassy slopes.

The remainder broke and fled in chaos, retreating northwest.

Some of the glory-hungry Guyuan veterans gave chase, but Lao Nanfeng struck the retreat gongs. One never pursued a desperate enemy too far; overextension invited disaster.

The militia regrouped.

Lao Nanfeng then stood before the still-dazed people of Wangjiayao Village. "You are Squire Wang, correct?"

The Wang family patriarch hurried forward and bowed deeply.

"I don't care for scrambling over merit," Lao Nanfeng said.

Squire Wang blinked. "Huh?"

Lao Nanfeng laughed heartily. "I'm a modest man by nature, with no fondness for claiming the spotlight. So when the imperial court asks later, just tell them that you, together with your household retainers and village militia, killed these Manchus. Understood?"

Squire Wang sucked in a sharp breath. "What?" Never in his life had he encountered imperial soldiers who refused to take credit.

He had no way of knowing that Lao Nanfeng had no need of imperial rewards or recognition. The Heavenly Lord's favor was more than enough. Reports of merit were made to the leadership of Gao Family Village, not to the court. From the imperial perspective, it was always safer to avoid attention than to invite it.

Lao Nanfeng went on, "Gather everyone from the surrounding villages and tell them to flee south, deep into the mountains."

Squire Wang asked hesitantly, "Didn't you just help us drive off the Manchus?"

Lao Nanfeng shook his head. "That was only a small detachment. Four major Manchu armies are converging on Yingzhou."

Squire Wang was struck dumb. Only then did he realize that Wangjiayao Village lay a mere dozen miles from Yingzhou, separated by nothing but flat plains. Manchu cavalry could reach them in no time at all. This was indeed a distance that demanded immediate flight.

Without further hesitation, Squire Wang dispatched messengers to summon the surrounding villages and urge everyone to flee south into the mountains.

Even as fierce fighting continued throughout Datong Prefecture...

In southern Shanxi, within Yuanqu County, in a place known as Zhima Ditch—

There lay a peculiar mountain settlement nestled deep within a ravine. The village was vast, with countless wooden houses stacked layer upon layer, more than twice the size of an ordinary village, almost large enough to be called a small town.

This place housed three "pacified" rebel leaders: He Zonghan, Liu Haoran, and Gao Jiayi. All three had once been notorious bandits in Shanxi. A few years earlier, when rebels from Shaanxi crossed the river into Shanxi, the trio seized the chaos to rise up as well. Taking advantage of the turmoil caused by the massive Shaanxi rebel forces, they looted, burned, and committed every manner of atrocity.

Later, the Shaanxi rebel army split in two—one part returning to Shaanxi, the other crossing into Henan. Suddenly isolated and unable to continue their rampage, the three found themselves trapped.

Left with no other choice, they petitioned the authorities to surrender.

At the time, Dai Jun'en had just arrived in Shanxi to assume office as governor. Dai Jun'en was a kind-hearted man, lacking the ruthlessness to order the slaughter of surrendered rebels, as Hong Chengchou had once done with He Renlong. He accepted their surrender and arranged for the three, along with their former subordinates, to clear land, farm, and settle in Zhima Ditch.

At this moment, He Zonghan was sipping a thin bowl of gruel, his brows knitted in frustration. "Damn it all," he muttered. "Eating this watery slop every day—what joy is there in that? Life was far better when we could plunder and burn at will."

Liu Haoran sighed deeply. "Big Brother speaks the truth. Alas."

Gao Jiaji spoke up, his eyes glinting. "Elder Brothers, I miss those days too. I say we rise up again."

He Zonghan frowned. "Rise up now? Is that even possible? Chuǎng Wang and his forces have already gone to Henan. We're isolated here in Shanxi."

Gao Jiaji chuckled softly. "Heh. My two elder brothers—your third brother went out for a stroll yesterday and picked up some news. I heard the Manchus are attacking Xuanfu and Datong Prefecture, stirring up chaos in the north. All the imperial troops in Shanxi have been drawn north. Xing Honglang's forces in Hedong Circuit used to number three thousand and kept us firmly in check, but now only five hundred remain. This is the perfect chance for us to plunder Hedong Circuit."