

Great Ming 831

Chapter 831: Allocate Some Coal for Me

After a brief discussion, He Zonghan, Liu Haoran, and Gao Jiaji made a decisive choice and raised their banners once more.

The people of Zhima Ditch were all former subordinates of the three. In the past, they had followed them in plunder and slaughter, living boldly and indulgently. After being forced to farm for an entire year, resentment had long since taken root in their hearts.

Now, upon hearing that Manchu incursions had drawn away imperial forces and left Shanxi weakened, and that their leaders intended to rise again, these old ruffians responded with eager enthusiasm.

In the blink of an eye, the three men had once more gathered an army of five thousand.

He Zonghan addressed them loudly. "The Hedong Circuit is incredibly wealthy! There are newly built saltworks, textile mills, cement factories, coal mines, and steel plants. The workers there are all rich—money in every household. Yet they hoard it and refuse to share with us. Why should they feast while we starve? We'll go to the Hedong Circuit, plunder those heartless rich folk, kill them all, and make a great fortune. Then we'll cross the Yellow River and join our elder brother, the Chuang Wang!"

"Agreed!"

The five thousand men slipped out of Zhima Ditch under cover of secrecy, following mountain trails southwest toward the Hedong Circuit.

East of Hedong City, just over twenty li away, a colossal factory stood upon a barren stretch of land.

Its full name was the Shanxi Yuncheng Iron and Steel General Factory, commonly referred to as the Yun Gang Factory.

The factory had been built far from the city. The reason was simple: Li Daoxuan, having learned from the lessons of later generations about relocating state-owned factories to the outskirts, had decided from

the very beginning to place large industrial sites like this steel plant well away from urban centers. This was to avoid future population growth crowding the city and forcing another relocation.

At dawn, the factory was already awake.

Large groups of workers were exercising on the main drill ground, keeping their bodies strong. A smaller number crowded into the canteen, holding bowls of porridge and nibbling salted vegetables as they eased into the day.

Among them, two figures stood out. One was named Qi Cheng, the other Chen Ergou. Both were skilled technicians—men who wore Blue Hats.

Yet their Blue Hats were slightly different. Each bore a circle, and within it the character "probation," marking their status.

They were Labor Reform prisoners from Huanglong Mountain. Due to a shortage of skilled manpower across the region, and because both possessed valuable technical expertise, they had been granted special clemency, allowed to atone through service.

The two sat at the edge of the drill ground, chewing steamed buns and salted vegetables while watching other workers run laps.

Steelworkers were truly different from ordinary laborers. Their bodies were solid and powerful, muscles bulging beneath bronzed skin. Sweat glistened under the morning sun, reflecting a healthy, vibrant sheen.

Qi Cheng watched with envy. "I really do envy them. If not for this 'probation' mark on my hat, I could live just as openly and confidently."

Chen Ergou chuckled. "Don't worry. We've been making up for our crimes for quite some time now. We've earned plenty of merit, and our sentences have been reduced significantly. At most, another year."

Qi Cheng's spirits lifted. "That's right. In a year, we can finally remove this mark. Hahaha—then we'll be proper citizens of Gao Family Village, earning the same wages as the other Blue Hats. Life will suddenly look much brighter."

The more they spoke, the lighter their hearts became.

Just then, a worker in a Yellow Hat came running over, calling from afar. "Engineer Qi! Engineer Chen! A strange, massive vehicle has arrived from Gao Family Village. We can't quite make sense of it—could you come take a look at the factory gate?"

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou stood up at once. "Coming, coming!"

They hurried to the main gate of the Yun Gang Factory, where many Yellow Hats had already gathered, forming a circle and craning their necks in curiosity.

Pushing through the crowd, they saw what everyone was staring at: a massive iron vehicle of peculiar design. It somewhat resembled a train, yet it did not run on rails. Instead, it stood proudly upon the cement road.

"What on earth is that?" Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou could not help but exclaim.

"This is the newest automobile developed by Young Master Bai!" the driver announced proudly. "No need for tracks—it can go anywhere there's a road. I'm the first driver, and I drove it all the way from Gao Family Village to here. Quite the distance, wouldn't you say? Hahahaha! It's just that... it uses a lot of coal."

As he finished speaking, he cried out dramatically, "Does the Yun Gang Factory have any coal? Hurry and give me some! I've burned it all up—the vehicle can't move anymore!"

The surrounding workers burst into laughter. "This is a steel plant—of course we have coal! Hahaha! But it can't be given out freely. A leader has to approve the allocation."

"Where are your leaders?" the driver wailed.

"They're away on business," the Yellow Hats replied with grins. "Right now, the highest-ranking people in the factory are Engineer Qi and Engineer Chen."

The crowd parted neatly, presenting the two Blue Hats.

The driver glanced at the probationary marks on their hats and immediately realized they were Labor Reform prisoners. He couldn't help thinking, So this massive steel factory is being run by two convicts? That's absurd.

Outwardly, however, he smiled warmly. "Esteemed Blue Hat brothers, could you approve a small amount of coal for me? This is Young Master Bai's Experimental Car No. 2—a top-tier technological product of Gao Family Village. In the future, it will handle all road transport for the village. If you allocate some coal, the Village Committee will certainly approve."

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou were still marveling at the iron vehicle. Hearing this, they naturally raised no objection.

Qi Cheng asked for paper and brush, wrote an authorization approving a certain number of jin of coal for Young Master Bai's experimental vehicle, signed his name, and pressed his handprint beneath it.

Workers immediately fetched two large baskets of coal and cheerfully helped load them into the vehicle's coal bin.

The scene was bustling with activity.

Suddenly—

From the northeast corner of the Yun Gang Factory came a hollow kong-kong-kong sound—the striking of sticks against hollow bamboo.

An alarm.

A guard in the northeast shouted at the top of his lungs, "Bandits are attacking! Bandits are attacking! Close the factory gates—quickly, close the gates!"

At the cry, the entire Yun Gang Factory plunged into instant chaos.

Shouts and screams echoed everywhere.

The massive iron gates to the east and north slammed shut at once, producing two heavy, resounding crashes.

Workers scattered in panic throughout the factory grounds. Their families poured out from the residential area as well, running about like headless flies.

"What's happening?"

"Where are the bandits?"

"Where did they come from?"

Chapter 832: You Were Still in Diapers

The entire steel transport factory descended into chaos. Workers ran in all directions, shouting and scrambling in panic.

Those who managed to keep a clear head immediately rushed toward the taller buildings. From higher ground, they reasoned, they would at least be able to see what was happening.

Qi Cheng, Chen Ergou, and the test vehicle driver all locked onto the tall tower standing at the center of the factory. The three of them hurried up, followed closely by a large crowd of ordinary workers wearing Yellow Hats.

Once they reached the top, their field of vision expanded dramatically. Looking out over the barren plains to the northeast of the steel transport factory, they immediately spotted the bandit army.

Five thousand men.

A dense, rolling mass advancing steadily from afar.

And their direction left no room for doubt.

Their target was the steel transport factory.

The Yellow Hats were instantly terrified. Many of them let out shrill screams.

After the initial panic, everyone's eyes instinctively turned to Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou.

"Engineer Qi! Engineer Chen! What do we do?"

"What can we do?"

"Should we open the west gate and run?"

"Hedong City is only twenty li west of here. Xing Honglang has five hundred militia stationed there. If we make it into the city, we'll be safe!"

"We can run fast, but the women and children won't. The bandits will catch them!"

"But—"

A dozen voices overlapped at once, the noise turning into a dizzying mess.

Suddenly, Qi Cheng let out a thunderous roar.

"SHUT UP! All of you—damn it, shut up!"

The shout crushed the noise instantly. The Yellow Hats stared at him with wide, startled eyes.

Qi Cheng shouted, "What the hell are you all afraid of? Don't forget who Ergou and I are! Look at the 'Test' character on my hat! We used to be bandits ourselves! What's there to fear? Are they scarier than us? They've got two eyes, one mouth, two ears, and two legs—same as us, don't they?!"

That outburst jolted everyone.

"Huh?"

"That's... that's true!"

For reasons no one could quite explain, the single character Test on Qi Cheng's hat suddenly gave people a strange sense of reassurance.

Qi Cheng quickly pulled out a megaphone—standard equipment for Blue Hats, absolutely essential when directing Yellow Hats at work.

Standing atop the tall tower, he raised the megaphone and shouted down, "Everyone, don't panic! Don't panic! We train regularly, and plenty of you have militia training. What are you all freaking out for? Now listen carefully—every damn man here, gather immediately at the security office entrance!"

His voice stabilized the workers at once. The chaos of headless scrambling faded rapidly.

Qi Cheng turned to Chen Ergou. "Ergou, hurry to the security office. Open the warehouse and distribute the militia weapons the higher-ups issued us. Go, go, go!"

Chen Ergou nodded, turned, and rushed down the tower toward the security office.

Qi Cheng then looked at the driver of Experimental Car No. 2. "Brother, I need you to drive to Hedong immediately and call for reinforcements from Xing Honglang."

The driver's spirits lifted instantly. "Ah? Yes, yes, yes! I can do that right now!"

He rushed down as well, jumped into Experimental Car No. 2—which had just been refueled with coal—and, with the Yellow Hats opening the west gate, sped straight toward Hedong City.

Meanwhile, the bandit army in the northeast continued to close the distance.

Fortunately, the factory sat amid open plains with excellent visibility. Sentries had already spotted the bandits two or three li away. Even so, it would still take time for them to reach the factory perimeter.

That precious window was seized immediately.

The security office warehouse was thrown open. Chen Ergou dragged out a massive wicker basket from the back, kicked it over, and smoothbore muskets spilled across the ground with a clatter.

The truth was that every Gao Family Village factory security office stored old, decommissioned smoothbore firearms—bird-guns and Three-Eyed Arquebuses. Aside from artillery, their armaments were essentially on par with the Ming dynasty's elite Divine Machine Battalion.

In fact, every steel transport factory worker was technically "militia." All of them had undergone basic military training—drills, target practice, grenade throwing, and more.

So they knew how to use bird-guns and Three-Eyed Arquebuses.

The only question was how well.

Workers crouched, grabbed muskets from the ground, scooped up two handfuls of bullets from another basket, and sprinted toward the northeast.

One basket of muskets vanished quickly. Chen Ergou dragged out a second.

He looked for a third.

There wasn't one.

The security office only had a hundred smoothbore firearms.

Left with no choice, Chen Ergou pulled out a basket of bows and arrows, followed by another filled with cold weapons—sabers, spears, halberds...

Even then, there still weren't enough weapons to go around.

In the end, workers and family members who hadn't been issued anything had to improvise. Some ran through the workshops and emerged gripping steel pipes.

Others found heavy iron chains.

One man hauled out an iron bar—an axle rod meant for a steam engine. He swung it once, then winced.

Too damn heavy.

If the steel transport factory lacked anything, it definitely wasn't improvised weapons.

Everyone who found something usable ran toward the northeast perimeter.

By then, Qi Cheng had already reached the northeastern corner of the wall.

The factory's perimeter wall was nothing like a city wall. It wasn't thick or wide enough for people to stand on—just a standard factory enclosure, only a few dozen centimeters thick.

There was no way to defend from atop it.

A handful of workers squeezed into the watchtower at the northeast corner, but it was tiny. After five or six people climbed up, it was already hard to even turn around.

With no other option, everyone climbed onto the rooftops of the factory buildings closest to the wall and took up defensive positions.

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou climbed onto the rooftop nearest the perimeter.

The workers around them were still visibly nervous, but Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou had seen it all.

They had fought all kinds of battles.

And nearly every one of them had ended the same way.

Defeat.

They had lost to bandits, lost to government troops, and even lost to the Gao Family Village Militia. In the early years of their rebellion, they had barely won a single fight.

As a result, Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou were experts at swallowing humiliation.

Watching the five thousand bandit soldiers draw closer and closer outside the factory, Qi Cheng lifted his tin megaphone and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Who are you bandits, daring to trespass on my steel transport factory? Don't you know who protects this place?!"

He Zonghan, Liu Haoran, and Gao Jiaji burst out laughing.

They couldn't understand how a single man on the other side could have such a loud, booming voice—so loud that it carried clearly across the distance.

None of the three of them could shout like that.

Left with no choice, He Zonghan gathered dozens of his subordinates and had them shout together, "Whose factory is this up ahead? The grandfathers have arrived today! Hand over all your valuables obediently! If you dare say a single 'no,' we'll storm this miserable factory and slaughter every man, woman, and child inside!"

Qi Cheng immediately fired back, megaphone raised.

"Damn it! When I was saying things like that, you were still in diapers!"

Chapter 833: One Hand for Production, One Hand for the Gun

Chen Ergou suddenly snatched the megaphone from Qi Cheng's hands and shouted toward the outside, his voice raw and fierce.

"This factory doesn't belong to some greedy landlord—it belongs to the common folk! It belongs to us! I was once a vagrant rebel myself, but I turned back, washed my hands clean, and started over! I urge you to throw down your weapons and do the same!"

His impassioned plea earned him nothing but laughter.

He Zonghan, Liu Haoran, and Gao Jiaji burst into loud, mocking guffaws.

He Zonghan waved his hand sharply. Dozens of bandits immediately shouted in unison, "Enough of your damn nonsense! Hand over the goods, and we'll spare your lives!"

Chen Ergou shouted back without hesitation, "Every scrap of wealth here was hammered out by our own sweat and hands! There's nothing for bandits like you! Turn back while you still can—otherwise, the worker-elders here will teach you how to behave!"

The three bandit chiefs exchanged uneasy glances.

This factory was... strange.

Faced with five thousand armed bandits, most landlords would be trembling, speaking in honeyed tones even while surrendering their wealth.

But the people inside this factory?

They didn't seem afraid of death at all.

Were they all madmen?

Just as the three were puzzling over this, Qi Cheng suddenly turned to the surrounding workers and shouted, "Everyone, follow me! Let's sing! One, two, three—We are the glorious militia, the reserve force of the people's army!"

As soon as he began, the workers closest to him instinctively followed.

"One hand for production, one hand for the gun—!"

At first, the singing was weak and uneven. Fear still clutched many throats, their voices trembling and breaking.

But the song kept going.

And as it did, more and more Yellow Hats joined in. Courage spread like fire through dry grass.

"Defending peace, building our homes! Through tireless labor, we strive to be Labor Models, tempering our skills until we become hardened steel!"

"When the Motherland calls, we will answer without hesitation—charging to the front lines!"

"We are the glorious militia, the reserve force of the people's army!"

"One hand for production, one hand for the gun!"

The sound swelled into a thunderous roar, rolling across the steel transport factory, surging skyward as if to tear open the heavens themselves.

Outside the walls, He Zonghan, Liu Haoran, and Gao Jiaji were completely dumbfounded.

Behind them, the five thousand rogue soldiers were equally stunned.

"Do they think they can scare us just by shouting louder?" Liu Haoran snarled. "Sing! Brothers, sing! It's not like we don't know how!"

At the command, the bandits awkwardly cleared their throats and began.

"Ah loh ya ya dah..."

"My dear, my beloved..."

"Oh dearest, my brother walks through the door..."

"Glass blooms bright, inside and out—"

"On the mountain stands a lonely chicken, shilanga flies beneath the temple eaves—"

From the very first note, it was a disaster.

Each man sang a different tune. Different rhythms, different moods, different lyrics. Love songs collided with drinking chants, mountain ballads tangled with funeral dirges.

It wasn't a chorus.

It was a battlefield of sound.

The three bandit chiefs immediately realized their mistake. It would have been better if they'd never sung at all.

The moment their men opened their mouths, morale visibly sagged.

"Damn it," He Zonghan cursed, "their song's got force. Ours just drains strength."

Liu Haoran ground his teeth. "Their songs are made for mass chanting. Ours aren't!"

Gao Jiaji roared, veins bulging, "To hell with singing! Charge! Rush in and slaughter them all!"

The three of them shouted together, "Charge! Kill them all!"

But their orders were half-drowned by the workers' surging song. Only those nearby heard clearly; those farther back stood blinking in confusion.

As a result, only part of the bandit force surged forward. The rest hesitated, staring blankly.

Only when they saw their comrades rushing ahead did those behind finally react.

"Oh—was that an order to attack?"

"Charge! Charge!"

The moment the bandits began advancing, fear surged back into the workers' hearts.

These were not trained militia soldiers who drilled daily and laughed in the face of danger.

They were men who had chosen factory work precisely to avoid warfare—men who feared bloodshed and wanted quiet lives.

On any battlefield, momentum and morale decide everything.

Even strong men can crumble if fear takes hold, routed by weaker foes who simply dare to move first.

Now, the workers were facing that exact test.

Though years of forging steel had hardened their bodies—though a single punch from one of them could send five scrawny men flying—they were not used to charging forward into death.

As the rogue soldiers advanced, many workers faltered, voices dying mid-song.

At this critical moment—

A blue hat suddenly rose above the factory wall.

The bold character Test shone clearly upon it.

"Engineer Chen!"

It was Chen Ergou!

The factory wall wasn't built for climbing. To get up there, Chen Ergou had stacked a table, then a stool on top of it, hauling himself up with considerable effort.

He planted his smoothbore musket on the wall.

There was no need to aim.

The enemy outside was a dense, writhing mass.

He pulled the trigger.

"Bang!"

A sharp, resounding crack echoed across the field.

White smoke billowed upward.

The fastest-charging bandit jerked backward and collapsed onto the ground.

Chen Ergou roared, "What are you afraid of, you idiots?! They're nothing but a pack of trash bandits! Are we really scared of them? Bring out every weapon from the security depot! Open fire!"

From the cramped watchtower, where five or six workers were packed together, three muskets poked out.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The watchtower vanished in a cloud of white smoke as two more bandits fell at the front.

From a rooftop—

"Bang!"

From somewhere near a treetop—

"Bang!"

The hundred smoothbore muskets finally began firing, scattered and irregular.

The workers' training was crude, their coordination poor. The chaos of battle only made things worse. Shots rang out here and there, wildly out of sync.

Reloading took them painfully long—two, even three times longer than trained militia.

And yet—

Even these clumsy, sporadic shots formed a terrifying deterrent.

The bandits outside recoiled in alarm.

"Firearms!"

"These people have firearms!"

For these ragtag rogue soldiers, guns were deadly threats. Unease rippled through their ranks.

But after that initial wave of shots, a long silence followed.

The workers were still reloading.

Seeing no immediate follow-up fire, the bandits' courage surged back.

They shouted and pressed forward once more.

"Bows and arrows!"

The workers drew their bows and loosed them in frantic volleys—swish, swish—arrows arcing wildly over the wall.

There was no skill to speak of, just blind spraying.

But against such a dense mass of enemies, even random shots found flesh.

The bandits quickly responded, drawing their own bows and firing back.

Then—

Thud.

An arrow slammed into Chen Ergou's head as he peeked over the wall.

It struck squarely against the bold Test character on his blue hat.

"Ah—!"

Chen Ergou cried out in pain and toppled backward, tumbling off his makeshift perch.

Chapter 834: Metaphysical Theories

The nearby Yellow Hat worker saw Chen Ergou topple backward with an arrow planted squarely on his head, and his heart nearly leapt out of his throat. Pale-faced, he rushed forward in a panic, already bracing himself for the worst.

Yet before he could even kneel down, Chen Ergou groaned, rubbed his waist, and slowly sat up, blinking in confusion as he looked around him, his expression vacant and bewildered.

"Huh?" he muttered. "I'm... not dead?"

He reached up and took off the Blue Hat from his head. The arrow was still there, lodged firmly in the hat, wobbling slightly with each movement. The arrowhead had failed to pierce through.

For a moment, everyone stared.

Then realization dawned.

The hat was absurdly sturdy.

In an era that knew nothing of modern chemical engineering, Gao Family Village naturally could not produce the sort of safety helmets later generations would take for granted. But concern for worker safety had always been taken seriously, and Song Yingxing had applied the most advanced techniques available to them.

This hat was born from the Jiangnan method once used for the famed Rattan Armor Soldiers.

Double layers of tightly woven rattan formed the core, which was then wrapped in an outer layer of leather. Its defensive strength was effectively equivalent to a small leather shield. Against ordinary arrows, it was more than sufficient.

Chen Ergou stared at his hat, then cursed angrily. "They shot the 'test' character clean off my hat. Scared me half to death!"

Qi Cheng burst into laughter, slapping his thigh. "That's a good sign! It means your sentence reduction is almost finished. You're about to become a regular worker."

Chen Ergou's eyes lit up. His fear vanished in an instant, replaced by joy. "You're right! Auspicious, truly auspicious! Hahahaha!"

He clambered back onto the makeshift table and stool, stuck his head over the wall again, and shouted bravely, "What am I afraid of? I refuse to believe I'll get hit again!"

The words had barely left his mouth.

Thwack!

Another arrow slammed into his hat.

Chen Ergou let out a pitiful cry and tumbled backward once more, crashing off the stool in an undignified heap.

Qi Cheng let out a long sigh. "You have 'Er', meaning two, in your name. Of course you'd get hit twice."

Chen Ergou lay on the ground and wailed, "Brother Qi, what kind of metaphysical theory is that?"

By now, the fighting had fully escalated.

Once both sides were within bow range, injuries became unavoidable. Cries of pain rang out from time to time as arrows found flesh. Though none were fatal, the sight was enough to make hearts ache.

The workers' family members could no longer bear to hide. Seeing their husbands and sons wounded, they rushed into the workshops in a panic, rummaging frantically through piles of materials. Before long, they dragged out stacks of large, thick sheets of paperboard.

Of course, these were not ordinary paperboard at all.

They were gifts descended from the heavens, bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself. Standard A4 paper, printed with dense, colorful diagrams and text explaining steelmaking, iron refining, and the construction of all manner of small mechanisms, covering every conceivable subject.

The truly important documents were locked away in the factory manager's office, but less critical materials were scattered throughout the workshops. Some discarded sheets had even been tossed into trash piles, waiting to be collected, pulped, and recycled into new paper.

To the people of this era, these sheets looked astonishingly thick and sturdy, more like boards than paper.

They pulled the sheets from the trash, cut them into sizes large enough to cover a person's torso, folded them in half, and carved a hole along the fold.

Then they ran back to the front lines.

With a practiced urgency born of desperation, they slipped the folded paperboard over their men's heads. With arms through the sides and heads poking out from the holes, the paperboard instantly became crude yet effective Two-Plate Armor.

A4 paper armor.

When the bandits' bamboo-tipped arrows struck these improvised shields, they landed with dull, muffled thuds. The arrowheads barely penetrated the paperboard, stopping long before they could reach the cotton work clothes beneath.

The workers simply yanked the arrows out of their paper armor and fired them straight back.

"The bandits are climbing the walls!"

Qi Cheng shouted hoarsely, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Don't let them get over! Roll down logs! Throw stones!"

"We don't have logs!"

"No big stones either!"

"Then throw whatever you can find! Anything!"

Several family members came running with a basket full of iron balls, each one neither too large nor too small.

The worker on the wall froze for a heartbeat, then understood. These were the smaller cannonballs used by Dao Xuan Tianzun's two arms. Producing such iron projectiles was one of the steel transportation factory's tasks, and two large baskets of them had been stacked in a workshop.

For throwing at people, they were perfect.

A worker grabbed one and hurled it downward with all his strength.

Thud!

A bandit's head burst open, blood spraying as he collapsed without a sound.

The worker stared, stunned, then laughed wildly. "This works! Everyone, throw these!"

The defenders erupted into action. Iron projectiles flew from the walls in a relentless rain.

Seeing this, the workers' families brought everything they could get their hands on. Wrenches, screwdrivers, pry bars, chisels, claw hammers, all manner of strange tools came flying down.

The morale atop the walls surged like a rising tide.

Below, the bandits scrambling up the walls suffered miserably.

What kind of outrageously wealthy factory was this?

Iron chunks were being thrown away like worthless pebbles.

"Do you even know," a bandit shouted in disbelief, "that a single iron hammer is worth a tael of silver? You're throwing taels of silver at our heads! Are you mad? Don't you care about your wealth?"

Only now did the bandits truly understand what lavish extravagance meant. In just a short exchange, the things hurled at them were already worth thousands of taels of silver.

One bandit couldn't help but ask He Zonghan, "Brother, why don't we just grab the iron outside the walls and run? That alone is worth a fortune. Why risk our lives charging in?"

He Zonghan's eyes burned with greed. "If what they're throwing away is already worth thousands, what do you think is inside? Break in and we'll easily grab over a hundred thousand taels. Charge!"

The bandits roared and surged forward once more.

Outside the walls, iron tools and corpses piled up together, gradually raising the ground level. Ironically, this made it easier to climb.

Stepping on fallen bodies, one bandit leaped with all his strength, grabbed the wall, and hauled himself over. At last, a man broke through into the factory.

He landed inside, drew his saber in a flourish, and laughed loudly. "I'm in! You cowards are finished!"

The laughter died in his throat.

A worker charged at him, holding an iron pot in his left hand and a knife in his right.

The steel transportation factory even produced iron pots.

Gripping it, the worker felt a surprising sense of security. Solid, heavy, dependable.

The bandit slashed with his saber. The worker raised the pot to block.

Clang!

The harsh metallic crash rang out, setting both their ears ringing.

The worker slashed backhanded, but the bandit twisted aside, avoiding the blade with practiced ease. It was obvious that in terms of martial skill, the bandit held the advantage.

The worker realized this instantly. His knife was useless. He let it fall, grabbed the iron pot with both hands, and shoved it forward with all his might.

Martial legends often speak of breaking complex sword techniques with simple methods. Against a heavy shield or a solid door shoved straight at you, footwork and finesse have nowhere to go.

This was exactly that.

No matter how refined the bandit's techniques were, facing a massive iron pot driven straight into him left no room for cleverness. It became a raw contest of strength.

He braced himself and slammed his shoulder into the bottom of the pot.

Thud!

Their forces collided through cold iron.

In that instant, the bandit learned what "the might of us workers" truly meant.

He was hurled backward, flying several paces before crashing onto his backside and skidding helplessly across the ground.

Chapter 835: Combat Power Increases by 32%

Along the factory walls, the battle had completely devolved into brutal hand-to-hand combat.

It was only then that the bandits discovered a horrifying truth.

Every single worker here was terrifyingly strong.

Their martial skills were crude. Their movements lacked finesse. At the beginning, many had hesitated, even trembled at the thought of real combat.

But once fists began flying, the bandits finally understood what those bulging forearms and thick shoulders truly meant.

These were men forged by labor.

Men who hauled steel, hammered iron, pushed carts, and worked twelve-hour shifts without complaint.

They were the kind of people who looked ordinary—until you angered them.

And once angered?

Their punches landed like iron hammers.

Their kicks felt like swinging beams.

"What the hell are these monsters?!"

"Are these people even human?!"

A bandit screamed inwardly, What demon-infested factory did we charge into?!

Still, there was no retreat.

"We've already breached the walls!" someone yelled desperately. "There's no turning back now! Whoever's more ruthless wins!"

Just then—

A thunderous roar erupted from the cement road to the west.

Hundreds of young men came charging forward, wielding hoes, picks, shovels, and iron rods.

At their head, someone shouted at the top of his lungs:

"Steel Mill brothers, hold on! Yuncheng Cement Factory No. 1 Militia is here to reinforce you!"

It turned out that the driver of Experimental Car No. 2, after racing toward Hedong City, had passed the Yuncheng Cement Factory No. 1.

He hadn't even stopped—just leaned out the window and shouted a few words to the gate guards:

"The Steel Mill is under bandit attack!"

Then he sped off toward Hedong.

That was all it took.

Bandits attacking a brother factory?

Unacceptable.

Within minutes, two to three hundred cement workers had mobilized. They grabbed flintlock muskets, rock-breaking tools, cement paddles, and anything heavy enough to kill.

As soon as they arrived, the Steel Mill opened its west gate.

The Cement Factory militia surged in like a flood, pressing hard toward the northeast.

The bandits' barely won advantage collapsed instantly.

He Zonghan went berserk.

"Kill! Kill them all!" he roared. "Fight to the death! Slaughter every last one of these bastards!"

The battle raged on.

Ten minutes later—

Another roar thundered down the official road.

"Steel Mill! Cement Factory brothers, hold on! Textile Factory Militia is here to reinforce you!"

"Textile Factory?"

"...The Textile Factory?!"

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou turned their heads—

—and their scalps went numb.

An army of women was charging toward them.

A lot of women.

Strong women.

Each one wielding cleavers, clubs, rolling pins, iron bars, and kitchen knives.

Qi Cheng broke into a cold sweat. "The Textile Factory... really didn't need to come..."

At the front was a thick-waisted, broad-shouldered woman with hands like iron paddles and feet like millstones.

She brandished a massive cleaver and roared, "I've been butchering fish in the Textile Factory cafeteria for three years! My blade is colder than my heart! Where are the bandits?! This old woman will chop them down one by one!"

Qi Cheng was speechless.

"Charge!" the cafeteria matron bellowed.

The women echoed her cry and surged forward like an unstoppable tide.

The effect was immediate.

Up until now, many of the male militia had been cautious—some even timid.

The moment the women arrived, everything changed.

"Damn it—no way we can lose to women!"

"If we retreat now, how will we ever show our faces again?!"

A powerful buff activated instantly:

[Being Looked Down On by Women Is Worse Than Death]

Combat Power +32%

Bachelors received an additional buff:

[If I Fight Well, Textile Factory Workers Might Notice Me]

Combat Power +32%

Bufs stacked.

The results were horrifying.

Bandits screamed.

Bandits wailed.

Bandits were smashed, hacked, shoved, and beaten into the dirt.

Watching the situation spiral out of control, the three bandit leaders finally lost their composure.

"Why does this damn factory have endless reinforcements?!"

"Why are all the surrounding factories helping them?!"

"This makes no sense!"

"Enough! Let's go—we join the fight!"

The three leaders gathered their fiercest followers and charged forward together.

But just as they reached the wall—

Another roar echoed across the plains.

"Steel Mill! Cement Factory! Textile Factory brothers and sisters, hold on! Fertilizer Factory No. 1 Militia is here!"

"We're here too! Salt Production Factory No. 1 Militia!"

"Pig Farm No. 2 Militia reporting in!"

"...!"

The three bandit leaders froze.

The remaining bandits froze.

What kind of cursed hornet's nest had they kicked?!

This was bad.

Very bad.

The three leaders turned and ran—abandoning their men without a second thought.

At that exact moment—

A shrill whistle pierced the battlefield.

Experimental Car No. 2 was back.

It had delivered the message to Hedong—

—and returned immediately.

This time, Xing Honglang herself was inside.

She had seized the vehicle and rushed ahead alone, unwilling to wait for her five hundred city guards who were still running full tilt miles behind.

Xing Honglang roared, "Run over those three bastards!"

The driver went pale. "N-no! This is a valuable experimental vehicle!"

Xing Honglang snapped, "I don't care what it is! Don't let them escape! Ram them!"

The driver swallowed hard.

Arguing with Xing Honglang already took courage. Disobeying her?

Unthinkable.

He gritted his teeth and slammed the throttle.

The massive automobile thundered across the road. When the cement road ended, it didn't slow—Shanxi hadn't seen rain in over half a year. The earth was dry and hard as stone.

The iron behemoth charged forward, wheels kicking up clouds of sand and gravel.

The bandits stood frozen in terror as it tore through their ranks.

Xing Honglang stood tall, saber in hand, roaring:

"Die, you scoundrels!"

The car caught up to the fleeing leaders—

BANG!

It slammed into them from behind.

The sheer force sent all three flying through the air—

Almost thirty thousand feet high.

When they landed, they were nothing more than twisted, shattered corpses.

The car sped on before finally screeching to a halt.

The driver jumped out, took one look at the crumpled front—

—and wailed.

"The front's caved in! The windshield's shattered! Bai Gongzi will kill me—AHHH!"

Far away in Gao Family Village, Bai Gongzi sneezed.

"...I have a bad feeling," he muttered. "Is someone abusing my invention again?"

The five thousand bandits—now barely four thousand—had lost their leaders.

They knew it was over.

Weapons clattered to the ground.

Hands went up.

Xing Honglang jumped from the car, saber gleaming, and strode toward them.

The bandits trembled, some nearly wetting themselves.

After a long silence, her deep voice rang out:

"Drag them all back. Starve them for two days. Then throw them into the labor reform camp."

She turned to Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou.

"You two have rendered great service. I'll write to the Gao Family Village Committee immediately and request a special pardon for both of you."

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou froze.

Then they looked at each other—

—and erupted in cheers.

Chapter 836: What Exactly Is Going On Here?

Shanxi Governor Dai Jun'en was in his yamen at Taiyuan Prefecture, buried in documents, when a subordinate suddenly burst through the door, face pale and voice trembling.

"Governor! Something terrible has happened!"

Dai Jun'en frowned. "What is it now?"

The subordinate gasped, "The three bandit leaders you pacified last year—He Zonghan, Liu Haoran, and Gao Jiayi—they've rebelled again! They first swept through Yuanqu County, looting several villages, and now they're marching straight toward Hedong Circuit!"

Dai Jun'en jolted upright.

"Good heavens!"

He shot to his feet and barked orders without hesitation. "Quick! Summon Assistant Generals Hu Dawei and Liu Guangzuo. Have them mobilize their troops immediately!"

The subordinate turned and ran.

Dai Jun'en didn't even bother with formalities. He dropped everything, rushed to prepare supplies, arrange orders, and coordinate the response. By the time he emerged, Hu Dawei and Liu Guangzuo had already gathered their household guards and garrison troops.

Two thousand men in total.

Without delay, the column set out at full speed toward Hedong Circuit.

Under normal circumstances, this would have been more than enough. But these were not normal circumstances.

The Manchus were pressing hard on Xuanfu and Datong, forcing Shanxi's main forces to remain stationed in Taiyuan. Hedong Circuit lay a full seven hundred li away.

Seven hundred li.

Even Dai Jun'en knew the truth the moment he calculated it.

No matter how fast we march... we won't make it in time.

Worse still, Xing Honglang's main forces were also tied down, dispatched to Xuanfu and Datong. At this moment, the total strength defending Hedong Circuit amounted to no more than five hundred men.

Five hundred.

That might barely hold a city—barely.

Defending the surrounding villages?

Impossible.

Cold sweat soaked Dai Jun'en's back. If those three bandit chiefs were allowed to rampage unchecked, Hedong Circuit would be bathed in blood. Countless commoners would suffer.

There was nothing he could do except urge speed.

"Faster!" he pressed.

Hu Dawei and Liu Guangzuo, equally grim, relayed the command mercilessly.

The two thousand soldiers marched until their legs felt like lead, teeth clenched, lungs burning.

Seven hundred li.

Even on official roads, they marched for days without rest, until exhaustion hollowed their faces.

At last, a scout galloped back from the front.

"Governor! Hedong City is just ahead!"

Dai Jun'en's heart jumped. "Is the city still under General Xing's control? Has it been breached by the bandit army?"

"No," the scout replied. "It's still in General Xing's hands."

"Hah—!"

Dai Jun'en exhaled heavily, nearly sagging with relief. Hu Dawei and Liu Guangzuo also let out long breaths.

As long as the city stood, everything was still salvageable.

Their worst fear had been that the bandits had already taken Hedong City and entrenched themselves. Five thousand bandits defending walls would be an absolute nightmare. Two thousand government troops attacking them? Even if they won, they'd be laughed out of the empire.

But just as Dai Jun'en was steadying himself, the scout's expression turned... strange.

"Governor," he said hesitantly, "Hedong City feels... off."

"Off?" Dai Jun'en frowned. "Explain."

"I only saw it from afar," the scout said carefully, "but... it looks like there's some kind of celebration happening on the walls. There are banners everywhere. People are singing. It looks more like a commendation ceremony than a battlefield..."

Dai Jun'en blinked.

Hu Dawei blinked.

Liu Guangzuo blinked.

The three men exchanged looks filled with pure confusion, then silently urged their horses forward.

Not long after, they arrived beneath Hedong City.

The sight before them froze them in place.

The city walls stood intact. Official banners fluttered proudly. The gates were wide open, and civilians moved in and out freely, chatting and laughing. Along their entire march, they hadn't seen a single battlefield, corpse, or sign of large-scale fighting.

Dai Jun'en muttered, "What's going on? Did those five thousand bandits... not even attack?"

He hurried to the city gate.

There, hanging prominently overhead, was a massive banner:

"Heartfelt Celebration of the People's Great Victory."

Dai Jun'en was dumbfounded.

Hu Dawei was bewildered.

Liu Guangzuo was completely at a loss.

Below the banner, a huge crowd had gathered, craning their necks toward the city walls.

The three officials forced their way into the crowd just in time—

Boom!

A ceremonial cannon fired.

Colorful paper rained down like snow. Two men emerged through the confetti, draped in bright brocade sashes, walking toward a raised platform atop the wall, their faces flushed with pride.

Then Xing Honglang appeared.

She stepped forward, stood beside the two men, and declared in a thunderous voice:

"Today, we publicly commend two heroes! One is named Qi Cheng. The other is Chen Ergou!"

Applause erupted like thunder.

Xing Honglang continued, "Qi Cheng was once a subordinate of Wang Zuogua of Yichuan. Chen Ergou once followed Liu Liu. Both men lost their way in the past. But it is never too late to turn back!"

"Through labor and study, they rebuilt themselves. In the recent defense of the Yuncheng Iron and Steel General Factory, these two bravely stood forth, led the workers, repelled the bandit army, and protected the people's property!"

Another wave of applause exploded.

People shouted as they clapped:

"Well done, Engineer Qi!"

"Well done, Engineer Chen!"

Only now did Dai Jun'en, Hu Dawei, and Liu Guangzuo begin to understand.

"...Good heavens," Hu Dawei muttered.

"These two blocked the bandit army?"

Xing Honglang then brought out two blue hats.

One bore the character "Trial."

The other had that same character—pierced clean through by an arrow.

She placed them on a stone ledge, raised a heavy hammer, and—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Before everyone's eyes, she smashed both hats to pieces.

Then she produced two new hats.

Pure blue. Spotless. No markings.

She handed them to Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou.

"The Village Committee has approved the early termination of your labor reform," she announced.

"From today onward, you are free citizens."

A pause.

"Not only that—you are directly promoted to Senior Technicians, with all corresponding benefits."

Qi Cheng's eyes instantly filled with tears. His hands shook as he accepted the hat.

This—this was the dream he had never dared voice.

Slowly, reverently, he placed it on his head. "I... I will... work hard. I swear it."

Chen Ergou said nothing.

He simply clutched the hat and rubbed his face against it, again and again.

The crowd watched in silence.

Xing Honglang went on, "Next, we will commend other meritorious individuals. Please welcome Zhang Cuihua, a female worker from the textile factory cafeteria."

Thunderous applause.

A thick-set woman strode onto the stage.

Below, the women shouted enthusiastically:

"Sister Zhang!"

"Sister Cuihua!"

"Next time don't skimp on the ladle!"

Xing Honglang handed her a certificate and a bonus. "Say a few words."

The woman took the tin megaphone, cleared her throat, and said earnestly:

"Uh... I've been slaughtering fish in the textile factory cafeteria for three years. My knife... is colder than my heart."

The crowd burst into laughter.

Dai Jun'en, Hu Dawei, and Liu Guangzuo stared at the scene in utter disbelief.

"...What exactly," they muttered together,

"...is going on in this place?"

Chapter 837: Answer Me with a Clear Conscience

Dai Jun'en stood there in a daze, watching the so-called Commendation Ceremony unfold.

One after another, "outstanding militiamen" stepped forward to receive certificates of merit and silver bonuses. Faces flushed red with excitement, backs straight as spears, they accepted their rewards amid cheers.

Then—just when Dai Jun'en thought it must surely be over—

Music started.

To his utter disbelief, a song-and-dance performance began on the city wall.

"Artistic representatives" from various factories took turns stepping onto the stage. Some sang, some danced, some did both at once. None of them were particularly skilled; a few were even embarrassingly off-beat. Yet the workers below watched with boundless enthusiasm, clapping, laughing, whistling, and shouting encouragement so loudly that the air itself seemed to tremble.

Only after the performance ended did Dai Jun'en and the two brigadier generals finally find an opening.

They parted the crowd with difficulty and pushed their way toward Xing Honglang, who had just stepped off the stage and was taking a short rest.

"General Xing," Dai Jun'en asked, struggling to keep his composure, "what exactly... is going on here?"

Xing Honglang turned and cupped her fist politely. "Ah, Governor! You've arrived at just the right time. We're celebrating our victory over the rebel forces."

"...Victory?" Dai Jun'en echoed weakly.

Xing Honglang then began explaining, from start to finish—how the three bandit chiefs had attacked the steelworks, how the workers had organized themselves, how reinforcements poured in from surrounding factories, and how the bandit leaders had ultimately been wiped out.

The explanation took a long time.

When she finally finished, Dai Jun'en, Hu Dawei, and Liu Guangzuo stood there, stunned into silence.

"This is absurd!" Dai Jun'en finally exclaimed. "Five thousand rebel soldiers... defeated entirely by the militia of Hedong Circuit? The regular army wasn't even deployed? This—this defies all reason!"

Xing Honglang calmly produced three wooden boxes and placed them before him.

Inside each box lay a severed head.

"These are the heads of the three bandit chiefs," she said evenly. "Governor, I'll entrust them to you."

Dai Jun'en accepted the boxes with both hands, his expression awkward and solemn. "I... will report this great merit to the court on General Xing's behalf."

Xing Honglang immediately shook her head.

"No," she said firmly. "This merit does not belong to me. It belongs to the militia. If this achievement were attributed to me, I would not be able to eat or sleep with a clear conscience. Governor, please report it directly as the achievement of the local villagers."

Dai Jun'en studied her for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

"...Very well. We'll do it that way."

He paused, then added, "Oh, right. General Xing—you sent most of your troops to the Xuan-Da Command. Do you know how things are going there?"

Xing Honglang grinned.

"Quite well," she replied casually. "Manchu scouts near Daizhou have already been cleared out. Our forces are now holding Yanmen Pass, preventing Manchu raiding parties from entering to loot. At the same time, we've split into two columns and pushed out beyond the pass, advancing toward Yingzhou."

Dai Jun'en felt his head spin.

I'm sitting in Taiyuan, he thought bitterly, yet somehow I know less about the battlefield than someone stationed here in Hedong Circuit. Just where does she get her intelligence from?

Xing Honglang continued, "In any case, thank you for coming to Hedong's aid, Governor. But the northern front remains the priority. You should return to Taiyuan at once and take charge."

Her words were perfectly reasonable.

Dai Jun'en cupped his fist in salute, quickly gathered Hu Dawei and Liu Guangzuo, and turned his army northward once more, marching back to Taiyuan.

Datong Prefecture, southwest region.

Xinma Camp Village.

North of the village stood an ancient earthen fort—Xinma Fort.

It was a border fort of the Datong garrison, built in the early years of the Great Ming, back when Zhu Yuanzhang founded the dynasty. Like the old fortress at Wangjia Fork in northern Shaanxi, it existed for one purpose only: to block foreign tribes.

On paper, Xinma Fort housed one hundred and ten border soldiers, commanded by a centurion.

However—

As everyone knew.

The real number was sixty.

At this very moment, those sixty men were trembling inside the fort, fear written plainly on every face.

Not long ago, Manchu scouts had appeared nearby. After whistling a few times from a distance, they had ridden away.

But the soldiers all knew—

"Leaving" meant "reporting."

And reporting meant that the main Manchu force would soon arrive.

A small earthen fort.

Sixty men.

Against a Manchu army.

It was like a mantis trying to stop a chariot.

Certain death.

"Run," the centurion finally said hoarsely. "We abandon the fort. Better to run than die here."

One soldier hesitated. "Sir... if we run, we'll be deserters. We'll be beheaded afterward."

The centurion gritted his teeth. "We'll go find the rebels and join them."

Silence fell.

No one wanted to hear those words.

But what choice did they have?

Stay—and die for sure.

Run—and maybe live.

In the end, all sixty obeyed.

They gathered what valuables they could, brought their wives and children—over a hundred people in total—abandoned Xinma Fort, and fled south.

As deserters, they naturally avoided main roads, cutting through forests, ravines, and mountain paths no ordinary traveler would use.

Ahead lay a narrow mountain ravine known as Kouqianyu Gully.

They had barely entered the gully when a sharp shout rang out.

In an instant, heads popped up from behind rocks and trees on both sides. Dozens upon dozens of men appeared, flintlock rifles leveled and aimed straight at them.

The border soldiers froze.

Outnumbered, burdened with families, surrounded by gun barrels—they didn't even think of resisting. Weapons clattered to the ground. Hands went up.

They surrendered.

The centurion swallowed hard and looked around. These people didn't wear Manchu clothing, nor did they have the Manchus' strange shaved hairstyles.

He shouted, "Which government unit is stationed here? Please send someone to speak!"

A man stepped forward.

He had a full, rugged beard that made him look imposing and fierce—Wang Er of Baishui County, now permanently bearded, a disguise more effective than any mask.

"Don't ask who I am," Wang Er barked. "Tell me who you are first. From your clothes, you're border soldiers from Datong. Instead of guarding against the Manchus, you're sneaking south. Hmph. Deserters."

The centurion's face flushed with shame. "We... we..."

"No need to explain!" Wang Er snapped. "Facing the enemy, you don't dare fight. Government soldiers—useless cowards, every last one!"

That did it.

The centurion suddenly exploded.

"Easy for you to say!" he roared. "You're not the one standing in my boots! Fight? Fight with what? I've got sixty men! No supplies, no food, starving half to death! What am I supposed to fight the Manchus with—my teeth?"

Wang Er was startled.

Surrounded by rifles, yet this man still dared to shout back.

He's got some backbone, Wang Er thought.

"Why only sixty men?" Wang Er shot back. "You embezzled the pay of forty soldiers, didn't you?"

The centurion nearly burst a blood vessel.

"Me?! Embezzle?!" he screamed. "Wouldn't more soldiers protect my own life better?! Why would I steal from them? It's the bastards above me who embezzle!"

He pointed north, voice cracking.

"Every time men died, I requested reinforcements! They never sent any! Fewer soldiers meant fewer expenses, so they cut our funds again and again! Every copper coin went into the pockets of those dogs above me—not one coin ever reached my hands!"

His voice grew hoarse.

"Every battle, I lose brothers. Now there are only sixty. Sixty! You want me to defend Xinma Fort against the Manchu army with sixty men? What—block them with my head?"

He stared straight at Wang Er, eyes bloodshot.

"I'm asking you—hand on your heart—answer me honestly. If you were in my position... would you run or not?"

Wang Er fell silent.

A long silence.

Then Wang Er spoke slowly, "What if I appeared here right now with two thousand soldiers? And asked you to stand with me and block the Manchus. Would you dare?"

The centurion snorted.

"Damn right I would!" he shouted. "With two thousand men, why wouldn't I dare? Do I look like some spineless coward to you?"

Chapter 838: Building Defenses

The centurion's mood had entered a strange state of forced bravery.

Whether he actually felt courageous no longer mattered. He had to act courageous.

After all, several hundred muskets were pointed straight at him.

He knew very well that if he so much as stuttered, let alone showed hesitation, he would instantly be perforated into a human sieve. So he made his decision on the spot—

Fine. I'll play the hero.

Defending Xinma Fort was his assigned duty to begin with. And now, with over two thousand reinforcements at his back, it wasn't as hopeless as he'd first imagined.

Yes, the Manchu army numbered thirty thousand.

But they wouldn't all come charging at some tiny backwater fort like Xinma.

At most, this would be a small raiding detachment.

With that thought, courage—borrowed, stitched together, and slightly fraudulent—slowly crept back into the centurion's chest.

No more running.

Time to go back.

Just then—

From both sides of Kouqian Gorge, large numbers of soldiers suddenly emerged from concealment, their ranks spreading wide like a tide released from behind the mountains.

The sight was overwhelming.

Their uniforms were spotless.

Their armor gleamed.

Their equipment was identical down to the smallest detail.

Every step was orderly. Every formation precise.

They were elite troops—there was no mistaking it.

Even the border army of Datong Prefecture didn't possess gear this impressive.

The centurion's eyes nearly popped out of his head. Unable to restrain himself, he edged closer to Wang Er and whispered carefully, "Esteemed... General... may I ask your honorable name?"

Wang Er flicked him a sideways glance, then looked away, clearly uninterested.

He had always disliked official soldiers.

Bai Mao stepped out from beside him instead and replied in a low voice, "Where we're from, we can't tell you. You understand."

The centurion studied Bai Mao and immediately sensed that familiar aura—someone who had navigated the system before. This man was definitely an officer from the imperial military.

He leaned closer and whispered, "I get it. You left your garrison without authorization to fight the Manchus, didn't you?"

Bai Mao chuckled. "Sharp eyes."

The centurion cursed softly. "Damn it. The higher-ups put too many shackles on us soldiers. Don't go here, don't go there—always afraid we'll rebel."

Bai Mao nodded. "Soldiers still have to follow rules. If the army stopped obeying them, the country would fall into chaos. It's just that the rules made by those above are a bit... rigid. And the people who make them aren't always good ones. That's why we're tied hand and foot."

The centurion nodded furiously. "Yes, yes! Exactly! You say it far better than I ever could."

Arrangements were quickly made.

The soldiers' families were hidden away in a secluded corner of Kouqian Gorge, while the centurion himself led sixty of his men to follow behind Bai Mao's force.

On the surface, Bai Mao was the commander.

But everyone knew the truth.

The real one giving orders was Wang Er.

Wang Er said nothing. He simply led the army forward in silence.

Watching his back, the centurion whispered to Bai Mao, "Your chief... he's really hard to get along with."

Bai Mao instantly raised a fist. "Watch your mouth. My elder brother's righteousness is as vast as the sky, and he's respected by all. Speak ill of him again and I'll hit you."

The centurion flinched, shut up immediately, then hurriedly changed the topic.

"Your army is terrifyingly strong. So many men, all fully equipped—and everyone's carrying a musket! What kind of newly rich army is this? I'm just curious—where did you get the money?"

Bai Mao narrowed his eyes. "You're the first border centurion I've met with this many questions. The last one I knew was cold and ruthless—his smile alone made people feel like he was about to kill them."

"Ah—choo!"

Far away, in the Gao Family Business District, Chen Qianhu—who had just bought an arm-length white radish—let out a thunderous sneeze.

It was so violent it nearly dislocated his jaw.

He immediately began rubbing his chin, his face twisting through a rapid succession of expressions:

I'll hack you to death.

I'll eat you alive.

I'll slaughter your entire family and feed them to the dogs.

The vegetable hawker, watching Chen Qianhu knead his own face with terrifying intensity, nearly fainted on the spot.

"Don't take my money!" the hawker screamed. "All the vegetables are yours!"

Chen Qianhu froze. "???"

The hawker turned and ran for his life.

Chen Qianhu panicked. Why was he running? He hadn't even paid yet! The Gao Family Village's Three Disciplines and Eight Points of Attention clearly stated that not even a needle or thread could be taken from the common people. Taking free vegetables was a serious military violation!

"Don't run! Come back!" Chen Qianhu shouted.

The hawker ran even faster. "Don't you dare—come closer!"

"Don't run!" Chen Qianhu chased after him.

Thus began a ridiculous scene.

One chased. One fled.

They sprinted through the busiest section of the Gao Family Business District.

To onlookers, it looked like Chen Qianhu was rubbing his chin with one hand while gripping an arm-length white radish in the other—like a blade—furiously pursuing a helpless hawker.

The crowd gasped in horror.

"Oh no!"

"Commander Chen Qianhu is chasing a hawker with a white radish!"

"The legendary Radish Blade Technique?!"

The hawker ran through two streets but was no match for a soldier who trained daily. Chen Qianhu caught up in a few strides, reached out, and grabbed his arm.

The hawker, terrified out of his mind, spun around. "I was wrong! I was wrong! I'll do anything—just don't kill me!"

Chen Qianhu sighed. "Why are you wailing like a ghost? I'm not buying this radish. I'm just returning it to you, alright?"

He shoved the white radish back into the hawker's arms.

Already weak-kneed from running, the hawker staggered and collapsed to the ground.

To the horrified spectators, it looked like Chen Qianhu had just stabbed the hawker in the chest with the radish. The hawker clutched the "blade" and fell dramatically.

Chen Qianhu clapped his hands, turned around, and walked away, shaking his head. "Strange. What was that all about?"

Seeing the entire street staring at him in silence, he frowned. "What are you all looking at me for?"

The crowd whispered in terror, "Don't make eye contact—he'll kill you! Run!"

Everyone scattered like startled birds.

Meanwhile—

Wang Er, Bai Mao, the centurion, and over two thousand soldiers arrived at Xinma Fort.

The small earthen fort stood quietly, its crumbling walls seeming to whisper stories of the Ming Dynasty's early Hongwu glory.

Not every border fort had been built carelessly. Each one occupied a location of strategic importance.

Xinma Fort was no exception.

It guarded a vast stretch of villages southwest of Yingzhou. If it held, dozens of villages behind it would be spared. If it fell, countless common people would be slaughtered.

Wang Er glanced at the pitiful fort and shook his head. "Too small. It's useless. It can't accommodate two thousand men."

Bai Mao immediately barked, "Engineer Battalion!"

A soldier stepped forward and saluted. "Engineer Battalion present!"

"Construct defensive positions immediately."

"Understood!"

The engineers got to work at once, tools flashing.

Ordinary soldiers joined in as well.

They dug relentlessly around Xinma Fort.

Foxholes.

Trenches.

One after another.

In no time, the defensive perimeter expanded outward, transforming the surrounding area into a full Gao Family Village-style defensive position.

Two thousand musketeers leapt into their trenches and foxholes, quickly taking up their assigned positions.

Xinma Fort—

Was no longer standing alone.

Chapter 839: Let Me Follow You

Wang Er's gaze flicked toward the centurion.

"Our people are hidden in the trenches," he said calmly. "You and your men return to the fort. Hold it."

The centurion froze.

"Ah? Y—yes... understood!" he stammered.

He quickly led his sixty men back into Xinma Fort, scrambling up onto the ramparts. From the elevated vantage point, he finally saw the full picture.

Trenches crisscrossed the land like the veins of some colossal beast. Foxholes dotted the ground in layers upon layers. It was an enormous killing field—silent, orderly, merciless.

Two thousand men lay concealed within those earthen arteries.

Yet not a single shout could be heard.

Even when soldiers spoke, they deliberately lowered their voices. No unnecessary movement. No idle chatter.

Silence so disciplined it felt heavy.

The centurion stood there, stunned, and finally let out a long breath.

"Who... who are these people, really?"

The ambush lasted more than half a day.

As dusk settled in, the Manchus still hadn't appeared. Instead, something else arrived first—

Hunger.

Inside Xinma Fort, the centurion and his sixty men felt their stomachs twist painfully. They had no provisions at all. Every last scrap of food had been handed to their wives and daughters earlier and hidden away in Kouqian Gorge.

They were already resigned to spending the night starving when footsteps sounded behind them.

Bai Mao climbed up onto the ramparts.

Without ceremony, he tossed a packet toward the centurion. "Share it with your brothers," he said. "You can't fight on an empty stomach."

The centurion caught it instinctively.

He tore it open—

Noodles.

Dried meat.

For a moment, he just stared.

Then his vision blurred.

Tears welled up without warning.

Not even the imperial court had ever treated them this well.

That night, the garrison of Xinma Fort ate the most satisfying meal of their lives. Warmth spread through their bodies, food filling bellies that had long grown accustomed to hunger.

They slept deeply.

Peacefully.

At dawn—

A sharp cry tore through the quiet.

"Manchus! The Manchus are here!"

The enemy was a Manchu reconnaissance cavalry unit, no more than five or six hundred strong. After pushing through the pass, they had scattered to pillage—small detachments like this were everywhere now.

At their head was the same scout from yesterday.

He rode forward, whistling, leering up at Xinma Fort with an expression full of mockery.

As if to say: Han people, we've come to take this fort.

"Sound the alarm! Light the beacon tower!" the centurion roared.

A soldier rushed up and hurled a torch into the beacon. Thick black smoke surged skyward.

By all logic, this signal should have summoned the border armies of Datong Prefecture.

But everyone present—

The centurion.

Wang Er.

Bai Mao.

Even the approaching Manchus—

All knew the truth.

No one was coming.

Not a single soldier.

"Charge!" the Manchu cavalry captain shouted, sweeping his arm forward. "Take this fort! The dozens of villages behind it will be ours!"

The cavalry surged ahead with a furious roar.

Though horses weren't suited for assaulting fortifications, Manchu cavalry were not like Mongols. When the distance closed, they dismounted without hesitation.

Hundreds of riders galloped to within bow range, then dismounted in perfect unison.

They ran.

Straight toward Xinma Fort.

At that instant—

A head suddenly popped out of the ground ahead.

A thick, bristly beard framed the face.

It was Wang Er of Baishui.

He swung his arm forward.

"Fire!"

Heads burst from the earth everywhere.

From foxholes.

From trenches.

From positions invisible moments ago.

Flintlock rifles rose in unison, all aimed at the Manchu soldiers who had just dismounted.

Then—

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The volley detonated like thunder.

On the ramparts, the centurion had just drawn his bow, sighting a target.

That Manchu warrior instantly turned into a blood-soaked sieve.

The arrow never left the string.

The centurion shifted his aim to another—

That one collapsed too.

He stood there, bow half-raised, utterly useless.

The sixty border soldiers stared, dumbfounded.

After a single crushing barrage, the Manchu formation dissolved into chaos.

Wang Er leapt out of the trench. "Charge! Take their warhorses!"

Bai Mao followed, roaring, "Capture the horses! Add bricks and tiles to our village's cavalry!"

"Charge!"

"Doo-doo-doo-doo!"

The charge bugle blared.

Soldiers surged out of the trenches in a tidal wave. Every musket carried a bayonet, and every gun still held one remaining round.

Some fired as they advanced.

The Manchu reconnaissance cavalry were completely stunned.

The front ranks were slaughtered. The rear ranks broke.

They scrambled back to their horses, vaulted into saddles, and fled. Riders were shot from behind, tumbling to the ground. Others, wounded but alive, clung desperately to their mounts, vanishing into the distance.

They had come swiftly.

They fled just as swiftly.

Like mist.

Like rain.

Like wind.

When the sixty border soldiers finally snapped out of their daze, the battlefield had already been swept clean.

The strange musketeer unit was returning—

Leading more than two hundred captured warhorses.

"Hahahaha! Over two hundred horses!"

"This is a huge achievement!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun will surely reward our entire unit!"

"Extra meal tonight! Extra meal! Hahahaha!"

The centurion stood there in silence for a long time.

Then he strode up to Wang Er and dropped into a deep bow.

Wang Er frowned slightly. "What's this?"

The centurion said firmly, "Brother, I no longer wish to serve in the border army. I want to follow you."

Wang Er narrowed his eyes. "What if I'm just another imperial unit? Say that again and I'll report you to the Ministry of War and have your head chopped off."

The centurion shook his head. "My eyes aren't blind. You're not imperial soldiers. And you, sir—your spirit, your boldness—these weren't forged in any official army. You must be... a greenwood elder brother."

Wang Er said slowly, "I'll tell you my name. If you still dare to follow me afterward, I'll take you in."

The centurion's heart lurched—but he clasped his fists again. "I await your name."

Wang Er grinned broadly.

"Wang Er of Baishui."

The name that shook the realm.

The man who sparked rebellion in the seventh year of Tianqi.

The number one rebel under Heaven.

The centurion sucked in a sharp breath, his body stiffening.

But only for a moment.

Then he straightened and declared loudly, "Brother Wang Er! Take me and my brothers with you! Through mountains of blades and seas of fire, we won't flinch! Serving under you is a hundred—no, ten thousand times better than serving the imperial court!"

Wang Er let out a long sigh.

"Fine. Once this is over, I'll take you in."

Meanwhile, back at Gao Family Village—

A badly damaged automobile crawled into the village.

Its front was crumpled.

Its windshield shattered.

Experimental Car No. 2 had returned.

The driver looked like a man walking toward his own execution. He had turned a precious high-tech treasure into scrap, and the thought of explaining it made his legs weak.

The car limped to a stop at the gates of Thirty-Two Middle School.

From a classroom window, Young Master Bai spotted it.

"Haha! My car's back!" he exclaimed. "I'll go ask how the long test run went."

He dashed to the school gate.

Just as he arrived—

Clatter.

A large piece fell off the car.

Young Master Bai stared in horror.

"W—what... what happened?"

"Oh no..."

"My car!!!"

Chapter 840: Gao Family Village News Department

The Gao Family Village Advanced Vocational Technical School had recently added a brand-new discipline.

Its name was... peculiar.

The News Department.

What was even more peculiar was this—

The instructor was none other than Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

Enrollment requirements for this department were nothing short of maddening.

First: Presentable appearance.

Special note: "Those who resemble Chen Qianhu are strictly prohibited."

Second: Literate and well-read.

Special note: "Illiterates such as Gao Chuwu are strictly prohibited."

Third: Proper demeanor and articulate speech.

Special note: "Blustering loudmouths like Flat Rabbit are strictly prohibited."

Fourth: Brave yet meticulous, able to endure hardship, and willing to appear in public.

Special note: "Refined young ladies who shy away from strangers and prefer hiding behind others—such as the Third Young Mistress—are strictly prohibited."

The bar was set so high it was practically floating in the clouds.

In an era where illiteracy was the norm, finding someone who met all these requirements was like fishing for phoenix feathers in a henhouse.

Unsurprisingly, very few people applied.

In the end, only nine students enrolled in the first class.

And remarkably—

All nine were women.

Six of them were former courtesans who had reformed their lives.

This naturally required an explanation of Li Daoxuan's policies.

Within the territories under his control, the courtesan trade had effectively become a strictly forbidden industry.

Whenever the Gao Family Village Militia gained de facto control over a region, they would acquire all local brothels and convert them into inns or restaurants. The courtesans' contracts of indenture were publicly burned, restoring their freedom. They were then assigned proper work and assisted in returning to ordinary life.

Some joined the Stars Performing Arts Agency.

Some entered the Textile Factory.

Others became clerks, secretaries, or administrators.

Of course—

Not everyone lived happily ever after.

Some were dissatisfied with their new lives.

And so, they came here.

Their goal was simple:

To become news anchors like Gao Yiye.

At this moment, Production Model No. 3 stood atop the school's rooftop. There, a strange machine—two meters in diameter—had been installed.

Li Daoxuan pointed at it. "Everyone, take a look. This is called a Miniature Camera."

"Miniature?"

The nine female students stared at the massive contraption, faces full of doubt.

Two meters wide... and you call this miniature?

That felt like a stretch.

However, this was Gao Family Village.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun said something was miniature, then it was miniature.

If it didn't seem miniature, then the problem must be their understanding of the word.

Therefore—

Yes.

This was miniature.

Absolutely miniature.

One of the girls asked curiously, "Dao Xuan Tianzun, what does it do?"

Li Daoxuan smiled. "It records everything happening around it."

The nine students exchanged glances, puzzled.

Li Daoxuan reached out and pressed a button. A red indicator light turned on.

"See this light?" he said. "When it's on, the camera is recording. Everything it's pointed at right now will be captured."

At the moment, the camera was aimed at a beautiful courtesan from Puzhou—one who performed but never sold her body. She was strikingly lovely, her waist slender like a willow branch.

Hearing she was being recorded, she grew curious. "Oh? Then can I see what it recorded?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Of course."

As he spoke, a giant golden hand descended from the sky, holding a tablet computer. The tablet had long been linked to the Miniature Camera.

Li Daoxuan shifted his consciousness back to his Production Model avatar inside the box. He lit up the tablet, whose icons were neatly arranged in a single row for ease of use.

With practiced ease, he opened the camera app, pulled up the footage, and played it.

Instantly, the courtesan's smiling face appeared on the screen—radiant, captivating, like a flower in full bloom.

The courtesan gasped. "Oh! It really recorded me! What a miraculous Divine Mirror!"

Li Daoxuan then opened a video-editing program and performed a few simple drag-and-drop operations.

Text appeared over the video.

"See?" he said, laughing. "That's a basic news segment finished. When broadcasting, an anchor simply records narration over the footage, allowing people far away to learn what's happening here."

Realization dawned on the students.

"So the scenes we saw," one exclaimed, "of the Militia fighting the Manchus—those were all recorded like this?"

"Exactly." Li Daoxuan sighed. "But filming battles requires reporters brave enough to go to the front lines. That's why I hoped to recruit some boys for the News Department... yet only girls applied."

The girls exchanged awkward looks.

They really didn't want to go to war.

Just then, the Puzhou courtesan grinned. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, I have an idea. It might attract many young men."

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow. "Let's hear it."

Imitating his actions, she turned on the camera and stood before it. Smiling sweetly, she said:

"The Gao Family Village News Studies Program is now recruiting! We have nine wonderful young women, but not a single young man... Oh dear. Are there truly no brave young men willing to protect these ladies?"

She stopped the recording, walked over to the tablet, copied the footage, and edited it with surprising speed—adding text and trimming smoothly.

Li Daoxuan whistled. "Impressive. You learn fast."

She smiled lightly. "I studied the classical arts from childhood. I pick things up quickly and have a photographic memory."

Li Daoxuan gave her a thumbs-up. "Outstanding."

She smiled again. "If we air this on tonight's news, surely many young men will come."

Li Daoxuan burst into laughter. "Absolutely. They'll come in droves."

Then his expression turned serious.

"But their intentions would be impure. They'd come for the nine beautiful young women—not for journalism. On the battlefield, such men would wet their pants and fail to capture anything useful."

He looked at her knowingly. "You wouldn't want classmates who crumble at the sight of danger, would you?"

The courtesan nodded slowly. "I understand."

Li Daoxuan shook his head gently. "No, you didn't make a mistake. You have excellent potential for news work. With your memory and learning ability, you'll go far."

He smiled warmly.

"Study well. Learn more. Become a capable woman. In my domain—women have this opportunity too."