

Great Ming 841

Chapter 841: Please Let Me Go With You

The students of the News Department moved quickly.

Unlike Thirty-Two Middle School—where students focused on fundamentals and spent most of their days seated in classrooms—the Advanced Vocational Technical School emphasized hands-on practice. Learning meant doing. From the moment they enrolled, students were constantly dispatched to real posts.

The nine girls of the News Department spent their days sprinting across Gao Family Village, hauling carts stacked with "miniature cameras," filming everything worth recording.

At first, their footage was disastrous.

Shaky frames.

Blurry shots.

Angles that made viewers dizzy after three breaths.

But day by day, through endless practice, their hands steadied. Their framing improved. Their sense of composition sharpened. What once looked like a drunk chicken flapping through the lens slowly began to resemble real news footage.

Next came editing and voice-over training.

They uploaded their footage to tablet computers, propped them up on makeshift stands, and huddled around the screens, carefully cutting clips, adding text, and recording narration.

The overwhelming power of the Immortal Treasure Mirrors left them awestruck.

Of course, learning wasn't easy.

Fortunately, Dao Xuan Tianzun himself was teaching this class.

With him watching, no one dared slack off even slightly. Every explanation was listened to with rapt attention, every instruction memorized down to the smallest detail.

After only a few days, the news segments produced by the girls were already polished enough to be seamlessly inserted into the Gao Family Village News Broadcast.

Seeing this progress, Li Daoxuan immediately made arrangements.

He assigned nine elite escort teams, one for each student, and sent them off—each carrying a "miniature camera"—to important regions under Gao Family Village's control.

Among them, the top student of the News Department—a former famed courtesan—volunteered for the most dangerous destination of all:

Datong Prefecture.

She wished to head north, to the borderlands, and capture firsthand footage from the battlefield.

This was no small undertaking.

The journey was perilous, and preparation had to be meticulous.

She arrived at the entrance of Gao Family Village's main barracks, smiling at the sentry.

Her smile—graceful, practiced, devastating—hit like a gentle spring breeze.

The guard's mind went blank.

"Oh, brave soldier," she said sweetly, her voice honeyed from years in the Puzhou brothel, where a single sentence could melt stone. "I'm looking for Logistics Captain Zhuge Wangchan, the one responsible for supplying our northern troops."

The guard was instantly flustered. "Ah—yes! Of course! No problem at all! I'll inform him right away!"

He turned and bolted inside.

Moments later, Zhuge Wangchan was practically dragged out by the collar.

"What's going on?!" Zhuge Wangchan barked, thinking some major incident had occurred.

Then he looked up—

—and saw a delicate beauty standing at the gate.

His expression froze.

"Ahem," he said awkwardly. "Young lady... what business do you have with me?"

The courtesan smiled gently. "Brother Zhuge, I heard you recently returned from Daizhou."

Zhuce Wangchan straightened his back slightly. "That's right. I delivered supplies there just a few days ago."

"And," she continued softly, "you'll soon be sending another batch of ammunition to Daizhou, won't you?"

Before Zhuge Wangchan could answer, the guard blurted out eagerly, "Yes! He's heading back very soon!"

"DAMN IT!"

Zhuge Wangchan kicked the guard aside.

"Are you insane?!" he roared. "Logistics movements are military secrets! You just blurt them out to anyone with a pretty face? Report to Chen Qianhu—one week of solitary confinement!"

The guard turned pale, realizing the enormity of his mistake, and fled in shame.

Zhuge Wangchan turned back to the courtesan, his face now stern. "Why are you asking about logistics movements? State your purpose."

She was startled by the strictness and immediately curtsied. "This sister was careless. Please forgive me, Brother Zhuge. Here—my credentials."

She produced a document with both hands.

A Press Card, stamped by the Gao Family Village Committee, bearing Dao Xuan Tianzun's personal signature.

Attached was a letter of introduction written by San Shier, stating clearly:

By order of Dao Xuan Tianzun, the bearer is to accompany the logistics team to Daizhou to conduct front-line news reporting.

Zhuge Wangchan examined the seal and signature carefully.

No one in Gao Family Village would dare forge Dao Xuan Tianzun's name.

Not even a mythical nine-tailed fox demon would survive such a crime.

His expression softened. "Next time, show this immediately. Don't start with sweet talk. That poor guard just earned himself a week in confinement."

She laughed awkwardly. "Old habits... I'll be more careful."

Somewhere inside the barracks, the guard—currently being scolded by Chen Qianhu—later learned the truth and sighed bitterly.

"In the end... I suffered alone."

Zhuge Wangchan said, "Tomorrow at noon, I'll lead the logistics team to Daizhou. Meet us at Gao Family Village East Train Station. We leave exactly at noon. We will not wait."

She bowed. "Rest assured, Brother Zhuge. I won't be late."

The next day, at noon—

She was early.

She arrived at the station with her special operations team, equipment prepared.

Zhuge Wangchan's transport unit was already assembled. Supplies filled a hundred cargo compartments, while logistics soldiers packed the front carriages.

With nowhere else to go, she and her team boarded the front cars.

She became—

A single streak of red amid a sea of green.

One woman.

Surrounded by burly soldiers.

Anywhere else, this would've been dangerous.

But this was Gao Family Village.

From its first day, Li Daoxuan had set the core principle of the militia:

"Character first. Combat ability second."

Any soldier who hadn't completed ideological training remained in recruit camp—no weapons, no deployment.

Even with Manchus pressing in and bandits rampant, Li Daoxuan refused to lower standards.

Better understaffed than morally rotten.

Thus, every soldier on the train was upright and disciplined.

The logistics soldiers stole glances at her, faces flushed, hearts pounding—yet none dared approach.

Without realizing it, she became a goddess in countless hearts.

Wherever she stood, soldiers unconsciously gave her space, forming an invisible protective circle.

Seeing this, she finally relaxed.

"Our Gao Family Village army..." she thought, "...is truly different."

Compared to these men, those bloated officials of the imperial court didn't even deserve to carry shoes.

Chapter 842: We're Fighting, Don't Be So Delicate

The massive train—laden with both passengers and cargo—roared across the Longmen Yellow River Bridge, arriving swiftly at Hejin County.

This was as far as the railway went.

The moment the train stopped, the logistics soldiers sprang into action. Crates were unloaded from the freight cars and transferred directly onto cargo ships waiting by the docks.

The county seat of Hejin lay snug against the Fen River.

This river had once been little more than a stubborn obstacle—shallow, clogged, and unnavigable. But several years ago, Li Daoxuan had personally taken up a small shovel and dug bit by bit, day after day, widening the channel and clearing the silt.

Slow, patient work.

Thanks to that effort, this beloved "Mother River" of Shanxi had once again become navigable.

As the logistics soldiers labored, Hua Kui directed her special operations team to set up a camera, carefully capturing the soldiers' movements—the sweat, the coordination, the endless repetition.

Once finished, she immediately rushed them toward Hejin County's market square.

There, standing tall and radiant, was a massive Divine Mirror.

After coordinating with the local Mirror Management Agency and securing usage rights, Hua Kui—under the administrator's astonished gaze—calmly powered up her tablet. She connected it via Bluetooth to her miniature camera, opened the app, and transferred the footage.

Her fingers danced.

Cut.

Trim.

Overlay text.

Adjust audio.

In a flurry of deft movements, the raw footage transformed into a polished short news segment.

This clip would soon be delivered to Dao Xuan Tianzun, who would distribute it across countless tablets using methods so unfathomable they bordered on divine.

The Mirror administrator stared, stunned. "So this is how the news broadcast is made? I've only ever watched it. I never imagined it was this complicated."

Once the upload was complete, Hua Kui wasted no time and hurried back to the docks.

By then, the logistics soldiers had finished loading all supplies onto the cargo ships. Hua Kui boarded alongside them, and the convoy headed north once more.

When they reached Pingyang Prefecture, the widened river channel reached its limit.

Beyond this point, ships could go no further.

Once again, the soldiers unloaded everything—this time onto horse-drawn carriages.

Hua Kui filmed silently, capturing every detail. She then used Pingyang Prefecture's Divine Mirror to process another news clip, recording her voiceover:

"As you can see, our logistics forces endure tremendous hardship to deliver supplies to the front lines. The journey spans vast distances—first by large train, then by cargo ship, and finally by horse-drawn carriage..."

"Those of us in the rear enjoy peace and stability, free from hunger and fear. This happiness is bought with the blood and sweat of our front-line soldiers and logistics troops alike. It is hard-won—and must be cherished."

The logistics team departed Pingyang Prefecture and continued north.

The farther they traveled, the more desolate the land became.

Ruined villages.

Cracked earth.

Fields abandoned to drought.

An uneasy feeling crept into Hua Kui's heart.

Suddenly, Zhuge Wangchan barked an order:

"Hoist the Five-Colored Dao Xuan Tianzun Banners!"

At once, three brilliant banners were raised—one at the front, one in the middle, and one at the rear of the convoy.

Hua Kui asked curiously, "Why raise the flags all of a sudden?"

Zhuge Wangchan chuckled. "They announce who we are—and scare off petty scoundrels. Miss, beyond Pingyang Prefecture, there are no Divine Mirrors available."

"What?" Hua Kui froze. "The northern prefectures don't have Divine Mirrors?"

He nodded. "North of Pingyang isn't under Gao Family Village's control anymore. It's imperial territory. No Mirrors—and no factories."

She murmured, "No wonder it feels so bleak... this isn't our land anymore."

Zhuge Wangchan's expression hardened. "From here on, safety isn't guaranteed. Bandits may appear at any time. Miss, you must stay close to the convoy. Do not wander."

Hua Kui gasped. "Bandits? With a hundred carts of supplies? All that military grain—what if they try to rob us?"

Almost on cue—

A savage howl erupted from the forest ahead.

A crowd of men dressed like mountain bandit kings burst from the trees, blocking the road.

"This mountain is mine!"

"These trees belong to me!"

"If you want to pass—leave your toll!"

"Oh no!" Hua Kui cried, ducking instantly behind her guards.

Li Daoxuan's special operations team assigned to her protection numbered only twenty men, and even they tensed at the sudden ambush.

Zhuge Wangchan, however, laughed.

"Miss," he said calmly, "you seem to have forgotten something. Logistics soldiers are still soldiers. Don't underestimate us."

He raised a tin megaphone and shouted toward the bandits:

"Don't you know how to read banners? You dare rob a convoy flying the Five-Colored Dao Xuan Tianzun Banners?"

"Five-colored what?" the bandits shouted back. They were clearly greenhorns—ignorant thugs who didn't recognize Gao Family Village's banners. "Hand over your valuables! Do it now and we'll spare your lives!"

Zhuge Wangchan laughed coldly. "You want to count? Fine. We'll count too."

The bandits roared. "Our turn! We'll count to three! If you don't surrender, we'll slaughter you all!"

"One!"

"Two!"

"Three!"

Bang!

The bandit leader jerked backward, blood spraying from his chest as he collapsed.

A logistics soldier lowered his firearm, smoke curling from the muzzle. His face was filled with contempt.

"Trash."

At once, the logistics soldiers drew their weapons. Using the freight carts as cover, they opened fire.

Bandits poured out from both sides of the road.

But the soldiers moved as if rehearsed—odd-numbered carts firing left, even-numbered carts firing right.

Gunfire thundered.

In an instant, the long convoy transformed into a massive, fire-breathing dragon, spewing death in both directions.

The bandits fell one after another, cut down mid-charge.

At first, Hua Kui was terrified.

But after watching for several dozen seconds—

Her eyes lit up.

Ignoring the arrows flying past, she dashed for her miniature camera, flipped it on, and began filming.

"Amazing! I just left the village and already caught a huge story!" she cried excitedly. "If this airs on the broadcast, the audience will go wild!"

Her guards turned pale.

"Miss! Don't run around in the middle of arrow fire!"

"Hide behind us!"

"Stop waving around like that—it's dangerous!"

"You're a disciple of Dao Xuan Tianzun! If you're injured, we won't survive the consequences!"

A disciple?

Hua Kui froze for a moment—then realized it was true.

The News Department was personally taught by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

That made her... his disciple.

Twenty shields instantly snapped into place, forming a tight protective circle around her.

From within, her soft voice still floated out:

"Soldier-brothers, please don't crowd so close... the shields are blocking my view. I can't see anything now. Could you step back just a little? This little sister thanks you sincerely."

The soldiers didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"We're fighting here!" someone shouted.

"Don't talk so gently!"

"Be a little fiercer, will you?!"

Chapter 843: We'll Need a Quote for That

The skirmish ended quickly and cleanly.

The foolish bandits were driven off with ease, not a single crate lost, not a single logistics soldier injured. The convoy reorganized itself and continued north as if nothing more than a roadside nuisance had occurred.

For Hua Kui, however, this was her first time witnessing a real battle from such close range.

She had been startled, of course—but excitement quickly overwhelmed fear. The combat effectiveness of the Gao Family Village logistics troops had shattered every preconceived notion she'd held.

So this is what "logistics soldiers are still soldiers" really means.

The only regret was that she lacked a Divine Mirror at hand. The footage she'd just recorded couldn't be processed immediately, and she had no idea when—or how—she'd be able to bring it back to the people.

As she frowned in thought, pondering this problem, she noticed a convoy approaching from the opposite direction.

The leader waved cheerfully at Zhuge Wangchan.

"Well, well! Isn't that Little Zhuge? Heading north again?"

Zhuge Wangchan laughed and returned the greeting.

"Tie Niaofei! You're already on your way back?"

Both men were in charge of transport, but their responsibilities were worlds apart. Zhuge Wangchan moved supplies strictly within the system, while Tie Niaofei handled both transportation and border trade—his work broader, messier, and far more complicated.

Zhuge Wangchan's eyes fell on Tie Niaofei's vehicle, its cargo concealed beneath thick tarpaulin.

"You're coming back from the north," he said in surprise. "Shouldn't your truck be empty? Why are you hauling goods?"

Tie Niaofei chuckled.

"This isn't cargo—it's storage cards for cameras. Dao Xuan Tianzun ordered me to bring them back to Pingyang Prefecture. He'll retrieve them personally and take them back to the heavens."

Zhuge Wangchan blinked. He had no idea what a storage card was.

Hua Kui, on the other hand, understood instantly.

Her eyes lit up. She stepped forward and performed a graceful bow.

"Brother Tie Niaofei, greetings. The footage you recorded at the border—of the Gao Family Village Militia defeating the Manchu army and rescuing Daizhou—was truly magnificent. This little sister admires you greatly."

Tie Niaofei's chest puffed out at once, his grin stretching ear to ear.

"Oh—oh—you flatter me! I was just doing what Dao Xuan Tianzun told me to do. Honestly, I didn't even know what I was filming. I just pressed whatever button he pointed at."

Hua Kui continued, "You mentioned the storage cards in your truck—are they newly recorded news materials?"

He nodded enthusiastically.

"That's right! These are the videos I managed to capture of Gao Chuwu liberating Yanmen Pass. Dao Xuan Tianzun instructed me to deliver them back to Pingyang Prefecture. He'll take over from there."

Hua Kui seized the opportunity.

"I also recorded a segment just now—footage of the Gao Family Village logistics team repelling bandits. But I must continue traveling north. Would Brother Tie Niaofei be willing to help take my footage back with you?"

Tie Niaofei laughed.

"Of course! No problem at all—"

Then he added casually,

"—but we'll need a quote for that."

"...Huh?" Hua Kui froze. "There's a charge?"

She looked genuinely confused.

"Aren't we all serving Dao Xuan Tianzun? We charge for this?"

Tie Niaofei nodded with practiced seriousness.

"We belong to different departments. I'm Border Trade; you're News. Separate departments, separate accounts. If you use our department's resources, there has to be a quote. Otherwise, how do we keep the books clean? No muddled accounting."

"Ah..."

Hua Kui hesitated, visibly processing this new form of logic.

Zhuge Wangchan burst out laughing.

"Exactly! Even sworn brothers settle accounts clearly—let alone different departments. Madam, just pay him. Record it as a News Department expense and apply for reimbursement from the Village Committee later."

Hua Kui bowed slightly.

"Listening to you gentlemen has broadened my horizons. Your little sister truly admires your wisdom."

Her words were sweet as honey.

Tie Niaofei and Zhuge Wangchan both smiled until their cheeks hurt.

After a short round of quoting and bargaining, Hua Kui paid the fee, removed the storage card from her miniature camera, and placed it into Tie Niaofei's truck.

Tie Niaofei waved goodbye and headed south with several storage cards in tow.

Once he reached Pingyang Prefecture, Dao Xuan Tianzun's colossal hand would descend from the heavens to retrieve them.

As for Hua Kui—

She inserted a fresh, blank storage card into her camera and continued her journey north.

Her destination:

Xi'an Prefecture.

Since news of the Manchus breaching the pass had broken, the audience for the evening news broadcast had exploded.

It had always been crowded—but now it was suffocating.

Anyone who arrived even a moment late would be pushed an entire street away from the Divine Mirror.

Naturally, it was always the poor who were squeezed out.

High officials and nobles, on the other hand, always found a way into VIP seating.

At this moment, Zhu Cunji, heir to the Prince of Qin, sat comfortably in his private box. Beside him were Imperial Censor Wu Shen, the Prefect of Xi'an, and several other officials.

In the past, Zhu Cunji would never have shared his VIP box with such stiff civil officials. But since the Manchus breached the pass, his outlook had changed drastically.

Now, he invited them in every day—on his own initiative.

As evening approached, Zhu Cunji rubbed his hands impatiently.

"Hurry up! Start the broadcast already! It's past time—what's taking so long?"

Wu Shen glanced sideways.

"Your Highness, what has you so anxious?"

Zhu Cunji snorted.

"Do you even need to ask? I'm worried about the border! This entire realm belongs to the Zhu family. If someone forced their way into your ancestral home and fought your old father every day, wouldn't you be anxious?"

Wu Shen paused.

His expression darkened slightly.

...He had a point.

If someone invaded his ancestral home in Xinghua, Jiangsu, and attacked his father while he himself was stranded in Shaanxi—how could he not panic?

At that moment, Wang Tang appeared.

As usual, he strode up to the Divine Mirror and performed his signature move—the Iron Mountain Lean, slamming his shoulder into the side switch.

The Divine Mirror flickered to life.

With a casual tap—

Lines of text flashed rapidly across the screen:

Connecting to server...

Reading latest file list...

The newest video file appeared at the bottom.

Wang Tang tapped it and stepped aside.

Gao Yiye appeared onscreen.

"Special News—"

It was always Special News.

Because the northern border was what everyone cared about most.

"Gao Chuwu, Great General of the Gao Family Village Militia, has dealt a crushing blow to the Manchu forces at Yanmen Pass and successfully reclaimed control of this vital gateway. Please direct your attention to the visuals—"

The image shifted.

The majestic Yanmen Pass filled the screen.

Zhu Cunji blurted out,

"Wow! So this is what Yanmen Pass looks like!"

The common folk murmured,

"So that's Yanmen Pass..."

Wu Shen snorted softly.

"The Prince's heir makes the same remarks as villagers who've never seen the world."

His "mutter" was not quiet enough.

Zhu Cunji heard every word.

He turned, face full of indignation.

"I've never left Xi'an in my entire life! The farthest I've ever gone is Lintong Hot Springs! I sincerely apologize for my lack of worldly experience—satisfied?"

Wu Shen fell silent.

"...."

Zhu Cunji huffed.

"And whose fault is that, if not you stuffy civil officials? If you didn't report me every time I tried to leave my fief—

"—this Prince would be drinking on the Qinhuai River tomorrow, mark my words!"

Chapter 844: Wu Shen Takes the Stage

Zhu Cunji had only just finished sniping at Wu Shen when the battle at Yanmen Pass officially began on screen.

The small artillery tubes thundered—

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Shells arced gracefully through the air and crashed down inside the pass, blasting the Manchu troops into panicked chaos. Their screams echoed as they scattered in all directions.

Next, the assault troops moved in.

Gao Chuwu was like a ferocious beast unleashed, hacking wildly atop the walls.

Unfortunately—

The camera was simply too far away.

The miniature camera lacked any zoom or focus function. It couldn't do cinematic tricks—no sudden close-ups, no heroic framing, no dramatic slow motion.

So Gao Chuwu's individual ferocity wasn't especially clear.

What the audience saw instead was the overall battlefield.

And that was more than enough.

When they saw the Manchus routed—heads tucked, fleeing in disarray—the crowd erupted into thunderous cheers. The entire city of Xi'an exploded with joy.

Zhu Cunji clapped excitedly.

"Well fought! Well fought! Hahaha—magnificent! That general Gao Chuwu is a true tiger! He deserves a reward! Who can summon him? I'll award him a hundred taels of silver!"

Wu Shen chimed in dryly,

"He serves under Master Li. Are you sure a hundred taels would impress him?"

Zhu Cunji froze solid.

...Master Li's man?

Then—never mind.

He already understood: Master Li was truly wealthy enough to rival nations. The Qin Prince's estate, compared to that man's fortune, wasn't even worth mentioning.

The realization was unsettling.

Yet Zhu Cunji felt not the slightest urge to question it.

Because he had noticed something unsettling:

Master Li's face bore a suspicious resemblance to the Dao Xuan Tianzun worshipped by all.

Ever since that realization, even when speaking to the mass-produced Model No. 3 Heavenly Venerable, Zhu Cunji had unconsciously lowered his voice.

Just then, the footage of Yanmen Pass ended.

The image switched back to Gao Yiye, who smiled gently.

"Several days ago, Dao Xuan Tianzun dispatched a new reporter to the frontier. She has returned with important footage. Please watch her report."

The image shifted again.

Hua Kui appeared on screen.

The crowd reacted instantly.

"Ohhh—what a beauty!"

To be fair, Gao Yiye was also a great beauty. But Gao Yiye was a Saintess. No one dared entertain even the slightest improper thought—lest Dao Xuan Tianzun take offense.

Hua Kui, however, was different.

She was a mortal woman.

The audience immediately dropped to their knees in admiration—figuratively speaking—and began enthusiastically worshipping her with their eyes.

"The Gao Family Village logistics team is transporting supplies to the front lines. As you can see, the goods are being loaded onto ships at the Hejin docks. These logistics soldiers truly work so hard..."

The image changed again.

Flames and gunfire filled the background.

Hua Kui now stood on the battlefield. The crack of muskets overlapped into a continuous roar. Her face was pressed close to the camera as she shouted,

"Hello everyone! I'm currently on the battlefield! This is Shanxi—on the official road north of Pingyang Prefecture! The logistics convoy has been attacked by band—by highway robbers! The logistics soldiers are engaging the enemy right now!"

The audience gasped.

"Whoa!"

Zhu Cunji leapt to his feet, furious.

"Is this a joke?! Is this a joke?! There are bandits even on the official road between Pingyang and Taiyuan?! Attacking logistics convoys—this is sabotage of the border war! This is outrageous! Absolutely intolerable!

"What is the Shanxi Governor doing?! Why are bandits allowed to roam freely?! Why is Shanxi crawling with criminals?! What is the governor eating all day?!"

"Impeach him! We must impeach him!"

This time, Wu Shen did not argue back.

Instead, he frowned.

"The Shanxi Governor is Lord Dai Jun'en—an old poet. He's an honest official, not corrupt. This situation..."

Zhu Cunji roared,

"Aren't you a Censor?! Write a memorial! Impeach him! Immediately!"

Wu Shen spread his hands.

"Careful there—I'm the Supervising Censor of Shaanxi, not Shanxi. Even if I impeach someone, it can only be a Shaanxi official."

Zhu Cunji scoffed.

"Don't play dumb with me. You Censors can impeach anyone in the empire. You don't even need evidence—you can submit hearsay memorials! As long as you've heard something, verified or not, you can impeach!"

Wu Shen laughed bitterly.

"But I can't just impeach people recklessly."

Zhu Cunji jabbed a finger at the Divine Mirror.

"Reckless?! Look at this! Look carefully! This footage comes from the Divine Mirror—how could it be false?! Bandits are blocking roads between Taiyuan and Pingyang, robbing frontline supplies! Is there no justice left? No law?!"

"You watched the broadcast a few days ago too, didn't you? Three bandits attacked the steel transport convoy—only the workers stopped them! Those three bandits were ones Dai Jun'en had previously pacified. Why didn't he execute them on the spot?!"

"Look at Hong Chengchou—he killed surrendered bandits outright! Problem solved!"

Wu Shen:

"..."

Zhu Cunji continued angrily,

"I don't care if Dai Jun'en is a clean official. He failed his duty—he can't escape that charge. Impeach him. Impeach him hard."

Wu Shen knew it already.

Even if he didn't submit an impeachment memorial, others certainly would.

This matter could not be avoided.

And frankly—

The bandit problem in Shanxi did need serious treatment.

Otherwise, with Manchus attacking from outside and bandits ravaging the interior—inside and outside coordinating—who could withstand it?

Wu Shen sighed deeply.

"The Divine Mirror truly is a demon-revealing mirror."

It exposed not only the ugliness of villains, but also the limits of good men.

Under this mirror, villains could not pretend to be virtuous—and mediocrities could not pretend to be capable. Poets could not masquerade as administrators, nor scholars as generals.

Dai Jun'en was indeed a good man.

But goodness alone did not mean he could handle the current situation.

Private virtue, ability, and circumstance—these were three separate things. They had to be distinguished.

Wu Shen finally picked up his brush.

He didn't directly impeach anyone.

Instead, he carefully analyzed the situation in Shanxi for the Chongzhen Emperor—emphasizing the importance of matching official capability to political reality.

At this moment, Shanxi did not need a kindly elder.

It needed a man of ability, of ruthlessness, of decisive authority—someone who dared to kill.

As for what followed—

That would be left to Heaven's will.

Wu Shen's memorial was delivered to the relay station. Couriers ran day and night, carrying it to the capital.

At the same time, many other officials were also drafting impeachment memorials against Dai Jun'en.

Some did so out of genuine concern for the Great Ming.

Others did so because removing a powerful figure would free up many positions—and perhaps one of them would be theirs.

This world has never lacked people eager to climb upward by stepping on others' backs.

In politics, a single misstep—even half a step—can mean doom.

Several days later, the imperial decree arrived.

Shanxi Governor Dai Jun'en, for ineffective bandit suppression, lax governance, and allowing criminals to run rampant—nearly endangering border security—was immediately dismissed from office.

Wu Shen was appointed the new Governor of Shanxi, effective immediately.

Chapter 845 Wu Shen Ascends to Office

The moment Wu Shen received the imperial appointment decree, he almost thought his eyes were deceiving him.

He rubbed them hard, then read it again.

It was real.

He had been appointed Governor of Shanxi.

From an Imperial Censor to a provincial governor—this leap was so large it felt unreal.

A wave of guilt immediately welled up in his chest.

The Emperor must have read his memorial. That memorial had led directly to Dai Jun'en's dismissal—and to his own promotion.

In other words, he had personally pushed Dai Jun'en off the cliff.

Lord Dai was already sixty-five this year. Being dismissed at such an age was no light blow. Whether that old man could withstand it... Wu Shen truly didn't know.

After the guilt came fear.

Deep, heavy fear.

Shanxi was no ordinary province. It was the very heartland of the Central Plains.

To the north, the Jianzhou tribes pressed relentlessly.

To the south, roving bandits ran wild.

Inside the province, local brigands infested every corner.

It was a place where chaos piled on chaos.

And he?

He was going there practically empty-handed. Barely any personal guards. Barely any trusted subordinates.

Could he really govern Shanxi better than Dai Jun'en?

...Probably not.

Turning the matter over and over in his mind, Wu Shen came to an honest conclusion:

His abilities alone were insufficient.

At that moment—

Snap.

It was as if a light ignited in his mind.

He remembered someone.

Steward Li.

No—more precisely, Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun was willing to help him, then governing Shanxi would no longer be an impossible task.

He made up his mind.

Begging a man was humiliating.

But begging a god?

That was called wisdom.

Wu Shen went straight to the Xi'an Fertilizer Merchant House and knocked.

The door creaked open.

Wang Tang stepped out, smiling calmly.

"Steward Li said you would come. He's been waiting for quite some time."

Wu Shen was instantly delighted.

If those words had been said, it meant there was already a solution waiting for him.

He quickly straightened his official robes, adjusted his hat respectfully, and entered the inner hall.

Li Daoxuan sat at a table.

Beside him hung a birdcage.

Inside, a black mynah tilted its head, staring at Wu Shen with unsettling intelligence.

Wu Shen bowed to Li Daoxuan, then turned his head and said solemnly to the bird:

"Make money."

The mynah immediately squawked,

"What's the point of making money? It won't get hard anyway!"

Wu Shen smiled knowingly.

"I'm not like Zhu Cunji. I know exactly which phrases trigger your instant comebacks. You won't be able to roast me."

The mynah froze.

After a moment, it seemed to sigh internally.

"...Alright. I've met my match."

Only then did Wu Shen sit opposite Li Daoxuan. He sighed softly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun—cough—Steward Li, I presume you already know I've been appointed Governor of Shanxi."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"Congratulations, Lord Wu. Now you can finally realize your political ambitions. Take a hundred thousand taels of silver to Shanxi, relieve the people, and your name will surely be remembered for generations."

Wu Shen gave a helpless, bitter smile.

"Steward Li, you jest again. No one understands my situation better than you. When you once manifested as Living Buddha Ji Gong, the words you taught me are still vivid in my heart. A hundred thousand taels sounds like much, but spread across the common people, it becomes pitifully little. Economics is a deep and complex matter, and my knowledge is shallow. I truly lack ability in this area. I humbly ask Steward Li for guidance."

Li Daoxuan replied calmly,

"I can help you. But first, I must hear your plan."

Wu Shen's spirit lifted.

This was a test.

A test no less serious than the imperial examinations of old.

He steadied himself and answered earnestly:

"Shanxi currently faces many hardships. I have four proposals: troops, generals, provisions, and personnel."

"First—troops," Wu Shen said.

"The garrison troops in Shanxi are weak and ineffective. I plan to follow the example of the Gao Family Village militia and vigorously organize local militias throughout Shanxi to compensate for the shortcomings of the regular forces. Funds will be used to repair northern border cities, while militias will be stationed along the Yellow River to prevent bandits from Henan crossing over."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Hmm. Feasible."

"Second—generals," Wu Shen continued.

"The former military officials in Shanxi murdered innocents to claim merit, embezzled military funds, accepted bribes, and trafficked weapons. They are utterly unusable. In my view, only three generals are

truly worth relying on: Xing Honglang of Hedong, Lao Nanfeng of Puzhou, and Wang Xiaohua of Pingyang. If these three are empowered, the bandit problem in Shanxi can be resolved."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Hmm. Very feasible."

"Third—provisions..." Wu Shen coughed awkwardly.

"Well... cough..."

Li Daoxuan already understood.

This was a problem no one in the Great Ming could solve.

Wu Shen's cough, and his embarrassed glance, were simply asking for help.

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"All the factories you've seen in Xi'an, and all the systems used in Gao Family Village—move them to Shanxi. Let industry flourish across the province. Would that not solve the problem of provisions?"

Wu Shen nodded deeply.

"I know well that this cannot be accomplished with my abilities alone."

Li Daoxuan replied casually,

"Very well. I'll fund the construction of factories."

Wu Shen was ecstatic.

"Finally—personnel," Wu Shen sighed deeply.

"Shanxi is dangerous and chaotic. Court officials are unwilling to accept posts there. Therefore, we must rely heavily on capable individuals from the common people. The court previously implemented a recommendation system for talented civilians. Chen Yuanbo of Wenshui County was recommended this way. Later, I learned he was cultivated by the Gao Family Village School. Only Gao Family Village produces such people... Even my good friend Shi Kefa has gone there to study."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"What, still asking me for people?"

Wu Shen immediately bowed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun—cough—Steward Li, please see this through to the end. Extend your benevolence once more. Lend me some of your talented people."

Li Daoxuan squinted at him.

"Aren't you afraid that if Shanxi's politics, economy, and military are all filled with my people, then if I chose to rebel, you'd be sidelined completely?"

Wu Shen laughed bitterly.

"You jest again. How could your people sideline me? I, too, am a devout follower of Dao Xuan Tianzun. Besides... rebellion is a matter of mortals. You are... cough... would you even concern yourself with such things? How could any earthly emperor compare to the celestial realms?"

Indeed.

The idea of a deity rebelling was beyond mortal imagination.

If someone told Emperor Chongzhen that the Grand Pure One had raised an army to overthrow him, he would first slap the messenger, then order their immediate execution.

As for the White Lotus Society's so-called Unborn Venerable Mother?

That deity didn't even exist—nothing more than a fabricated evil god invented by schemers.

How could that compare to a true immortal?

This was precisely Wu Shen's logic.

Li Daoxuan waved his hand.

"Very well. Governing a province involves endless affairs. I'll have Gao Family Village's chief strategist, San Shier, personally accompany you to Shanxi for a time. With him there, all Gao Family Village resources will be open to you."

Wu Shen was overjoyed.

"Chief Steward San himself is coming with me? This... this is truly wonderful!"

Chapter 846: Zhu Cunji's Proposal

Wu Shen set out for Taiyuan, Shanxi, to assume his new post. Conveniently, his route would take him straight past Gao Family Village.

Before the Heavenly Lord descended upon the world, traveling from Shaanxi to Shanxi usually meant taking the Tongguan Pass, crossing the Yellow River at Fenglingdu Ferry, then passing through Puzhou and Pingyang Prefecture before finally reaching Taiyuan.

But after the Heavenly Lord arrived, everything changed.

Now, one could simply board a train at Xi'an East Station, and with a thunderous chug-chug, arrive directly in Hejin County, Shanxi. This was the very same route used by Gao Family Village's logistics teams when transporting supplies to Datong Prefecture.

Wu Shen packed up his belongings, brought along a sizable entourage of household guards and servants, and arrived early at Xi'an East Station to wait for the train.

The train wouldn't arrive for another two incense-sticks' time, but Wu Shen preferred caution. Missing the train was not an option.

Even for high-ranking officials, the train waited for no one.

Just a few days earlier, an official had arrived late, flown into a rage at the station, and tried to use his official authority to force the train doors open.

What happened next...

The Heavenly Lord erupted in fury.

A giant hand descended from the heavens, grabbed the official, and tossed him straight into "The Hamster's Great Adventure." Then, as if that weren't enough, the Heavenly Lord summoned the entire city's population to the walls to watch.

The official flailed and screamed inside the contraption, tortured into utter misery, his disgrace broadcast publicly for all to see.

Humiliated beyond measure.

His political enemies—those who lived by the rule of "once a dog falls into the water, beat it harder"—immediately sensed blood.

Impeachment memorials flooded in.

Some officials were meticulous, digging up dirt with surgical precision to ensure every accusation landed squarely and stuck.

Others had no such scruples.

Some accused him of being fond of male beauty. Others claimed he forcibly took elderly women as concubines.

Emperor Chongzhen, Zhu Youjian, felt his scalp prickle as he read. He couldn't even bring himself to finish some of the reports, his mood plunging straight into the abyss.

Before long, the official was stripped of his position.

From that day on, no one dared to make a scene in public facilities just because of their status.

While waiting, Wu Shen flipped through a book titled Management Studies.

He frowned.

Many of the so-called "terms of the immortal realm" were baffling. He couldn't fully grasp them, but he stubbornly pushed on, half-guessing, half-inferencing.

After all, it was a Heavenly Book.

Mortals weren't meant to understand everything within it.

But even understanding a tiny fragment was enough to change a man's fate.

He was still immersed in thought when someone suddenly sat down beside him.

Wu Shen's heart skipped.

"Hmm? Someone sat next to me... and my guards didn't react?"

He turned his head—

It was Zhu Cunji, the Qin Prince's heir.

Wu Shen set the book down.

"Your Highness, you're not supposed to leave Xi'an. What are you doing at the train station?"

Zhu Cunji replied casually,

"I came specially to see you, Governor Wu Shen of Shanxi."

He deliberately emphasized Governor of Shanxi, his tone dripping with provocation, practically begging for a punch.

Wu Shen shot back,

"What? Does my appointment offend Your Highness? Wouldn't you be happier with me gone? You won't have to see my face anymore."

Zhu Cunji laughed.

"Of course I'm delighted!"

Then—abruptly—his expression changed. The mockery vanished, replaced by seriousness.

"Master Wu, you watched the news that day, didn't you?" he said.

"When Gao Family Village's militia went to reinforce Datong, their logistics teams were still in Shaanxi—riding trains, singing songs, delivering supplies swiftly and smoothly. But the moment they entered Shanxi, they had to switch to boats and horse carts. Slow, inefficient, and vulnerable to bandit attacks. Doesn't that bother you?"

Wu Shen paused, then nodded.

"Indeed. That is a real problem. I'll be dealing with that same irritating sequence myself when I take office—train, then boat, then carriage."

Zhu Cunji snorted.

"As you know, this Prince has been building the Xi'an—Yan'an Railway. You civil officials may sneer at me, but what I'm doing concerns the nation's survival. If the Mongols in the Hetao region invade northern Shaanxi again, my railway can roar into action—troops and supplies pouring into Yan'an without pause."

He leaned closer.

"Once you're Governor of Shanxi, shouldn't you follow my example? At the very least, build a railway leading to a border garrison."

Without warning, Wu Shen clasped his hands and bowed deeply.

"Your Highness," he said solemnly, "Wu Shen has been truly enlightened."

"WHOA!"

Zhu Cunji jumped backward several steps.

"Don't bow! You civil officials never even look at me properly, and now suddenly you pull this? That's terrifying!"

Zhu Cunji had spent his life as a spoiled noble—doing plenty of bad deeds, never a good one. He had never once experienced sincere gratitude.

Wu Shen's bow completely overwhelmed him.

Flustered, Zhu Cunji waved his hands and fled, muttering as he walked away,

"This isn't fun at all! I hate you! Don't ever come back to Xi'an—just seeing you annoys me!"

"Choo—choo!"

The mighty train thundered into the station.

Wu Shen glanced at Zhu Cunji's retreating figure, then gathered his household guards and boarded.

Not long after, the train carried him to Gao Family Village.

This was a major stop. The train would halt here for thirty minutes.

Wu Shen disembarked and walked toward Thirty-Two Middle School.

As he reached Shi Kefa's classroom, the bell rang for a ten-minute break. Shi Kefa stepped out, a mathematics textbook covered in dense annotations clutched in his hands—and nearly collided with Wu Shen.

"Brother Wu!" Shi Kefa exclaimed.

"I heard you've been promoted to Governor of Shanxi! That's wonderful news!"

Wu Shen smiled faintly.

"I'm heading there now to assume office. This may be my last chance to see you. Once we're separated by distance, meeting again won't be easy."

They had served together in Shaanxi for many years. Facing parting, both felt the sting of reluctance.

Wu Shen asked,

"Brother Shi, how are your studies progressing? Might I one day see you come to Shanxi to assist me?"

Shi Kefa's eyes lit up.

"I've already entered the second year of middle school. I plan to finish middle school here, then study some high school material. After that, I should finally be able to do something truly practical."

He grew animated.

"The Heavenly Book truly deserves its name! It explains the workings of the world with astonishing clarity. I now know why the sky is blue, how clouds form, why basin climates are warmer... I've learned about force and electricity..."

He continued excitedly,

"It even describes Westerners and their great ocean-going ships that travel thousands of miles! Seven continents, four oceans—the world is vast beyond imagining. Great Ming is not the center of the world; it is merely one part of a sphere."

His voice trembled with awe.

"All those things in Gao Family Village that once baffled me—I can finally understand them now."

Wu Shen was genuinely delighted.

"Then congratulations, Brother Shi. I look forward to the day you emerge to serve."

Chapter 847 His Nickname Is Wu Hundred-Thousand

For the first time in his life, Shi Kefa skipped class.

He skipped class specifically to see Wu Shen off at the train station.

When they arrived, they immediately spotted San Shier.

The supreme administrative official of the Gao Family Village Committee.

He had already packed his luggage and was ready to depart. Around him clustered a group of spirited young scholars, each one radiating sharp eyes, straight backs, and that unmistakable aura of "we read too many books and are proud of it."

Beyond the scholars stood a contingent of armed soldiers—clearly a special security unit assigned to escort them.

Wu Shen stepped forward and cupped his fists respectfully.

"Steward San," he said earnestly, "I've truly troubled you by dragging you into this."

San Shier waved it off with a smile.

"You flatter me. On the contrary, I'm delighted. After being cooped up in Gao Family Village for so many years, I've nearly forgotten what the outside world looks like. Being able to go out and see it again—this is what one might call refreshing the spirit and broadening the horizons!"

Wu Shen froze.

He stared at San Shier in silence.

...Why did this man talk like that?

Assuming it was just a one-off eccentricity, Wu Shen forced himself to ignore the unease and continued,

"Steward San, why are you only bringing these young people with you? Aren't you taking your family along?"

San Shier laughed heartily and shook his head.

"My wife embraced Daoist cultivation years ago, and my daughter is currently busy managing the fertilizer factory over in Shanxi. There are no dependents left at home now—ha! This is what one calls utterly unencumbered, free of worldly attachments!"

Wu Shen sucked in a sharp breath.

Something was definitely wrong.

Why does every sentence sound like an idiom summary?

An oppressive pressure began to settle over Wu Shen's heart.

San Shier clapped his hands.

"The train is about to depart. Let's not linger here chatting at the station. We'll board first—conversation can wait until we're underway. This is called laying the groundwork and carrying it through to completion!"

Wu Shen blinked.

"Isn't that idiom... a bit off here?"

San Shier tilted his head thoughtfully.

"Oh? Was it inappropriate? Then perhaps this is what they call empty words and flawed logic!"

Wu Shen grabbed his head.

"Ahhh! Please! No more strange idioms!"

San Shier looked genuinely puzzled.

"But don't they make one sound exceptionally scholarly?"

Wu Shen clenched his fist—about the size of an alms bowl.

"I know scholars as numerous as stars in the sky, and not one of them puts on airs like you!"

San Shier burst out laughing, completely shameless.

"Ah! That, my friend, is what they call deliberately mystifying others!"

Wu Shen spat out an angry, exhausted,

"Pfft!"

Shi Kefa panicked.

"Brother Wu? Brother Wu! What's wrong? Quick—someone fetch a doctor! Brother Wu has fainted!"

Wu Shen remained in a daze all the way to Hejin County.

Only when the train could go no farther and they were told to transfer to a boat did he finally recover a bit of clarity.

Looking back, he realized Shi Kefa hadn't followed them.

At the Gao Family Village station, when Shi Kefa waved farewell, Wu Shen had still been reeling, completely unable to savor the emotion behind the verse:

"Though Peach Blossom Pool runs a thousand feet deep,"
Though Peach Blossom Pool runs a thousand feet deep,

It cannot compare to Wang Lun's feelings when seeing me off."

A truly regrettable missed moment.

Stepping off the train, Wu Shen watched as the Gao Family Village Militia's special escort unit busily transferred cargo from the freight cars onto the waiting boat.

The goods were packed into massive baskets, tightly covered with tarps, making it impossible to see what lay inside.

But the way the soldiers strained as they lifted them made one thing obvious—

They were incredibly heavy.

Curiosity gnawed at Wu Shen. He sidled up to San Shier.

"Steward San... are these the supplies you're bringing to Taiyuan?"

San Shier nodded—then shook his head.

"No. Not mine. These are for you."

"For me?" Wu Shen was stunned.

San Shier smiled.

"They are personally bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun, placed in your hands to lay the foundation for Shanxi's reconstruction. This is called—"

He abruptly stopped himself.

The memory of Wu Shen fainting flashed through his mind.

Never mind. I'll restrain myself.

Wu Shen was utterly baffled.

"Bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun? What... exactly is it?"

San Shier's smile widened.

"One million taels of silver."

Wu Shen gasped.

"One... one million taels?!"

A gigantic exclamation mark seemed to explode above his head, stretching all the way into the heavens.

San Shier chuckled.

"The Heavenly Lord said: 'I'm giving you one million taels. Use it to rebuild Shanxi.'"

He continued calmly,

"'If you do well, I'll give you another ten million. If you fail... then you'll have to answer to Heaven yourself.'"

Wu Shen felt as if a mountain had dropped straight down onto his shoulders.

He looked up at the sky and sighed deeply.

"This... is what one calls immense pressure."

San Shier sucked in a sharp breath.

"Sir Wu, you—"

Wu Shen rolled his eyes.

"This is called substituting the plum for the peach."

San Shier sputtered.

"Pfft—!"

A guard rushed over in alarm.

"Steward San? Steward San! What's wrong? Someone call a doctor!"

By the time Wu Shen arrived in Taiyuan Prefecture, officials of every rank were already lined up, waiting respectfully to receive him.

Standing at the very front was Dai Jun'en, the former governor.

The moment Wu Shen saw the gentle old man, guilt and embarrassment flooded his heart. He hurried forward and bowed deeply.

"Sir Dai... this junior... this junior... alas, it was all because of this junior's memorial—"

Dai Jun'en smiled warmly.

"It's quite alright. Quite alright," he said calmly.

"From the very day I took office, I was already prepared to retire. This mess in Shanxi was never something an old poet like me could untangle. Being able to hand it over to a capable young official like Sir Wu—this old man is truly at ease."

He patted Wu Shen's shoulder.

"Shanxi is in your hands now."

Wu Shen nodded solemnly.

"This junior will certainly give everything he has."

Dai Jun'en laughed.

"Good, good. Then this old man can finally retire in peace. Ah... suddenly I feel the urge to write poetry."

At once, a household servant rushed forward, presenting the four treasures of the study.

Dai Jun'en grabbed the brush and scribbled a few lines, then burst into laughter and crumpled the paper.

"No, no, this won't do! I'm too old. I can't even write a proper poem anymore!"

Wu Shen spoke up,

"This junior has a poem he wishes to offer Sir Dai."

Dai Jun'en raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Wu Shen took the brush and wrote boldly:

My sash clings to distant emerald grass,

My books mirror the glow of the setting sun.

Though secluded woods are etched by Sima Qian,

A cherished name, too, may rest in halls of stone.

Dai Jun'en read it carefully, then burst into hearty laughter.

"'A cherished name in halls of stone?'" he repeated.

"Hahaha! How could an old man like me claim such a thing? Shanxi was a disaster under my rule! A cherished name? I wouldn't dare!"

With a sweep of his sleeve, he turned and departed grandly with his household servants.

The moment he left, the officials surged forward—bowing, greeting, flattering—every kind of cow-ghost and snake-spirit crawling out to show their faces.

A provincial governor was a true regional overlord.

Calling him a local emperor wasn't much of an exaggeration.

At the very back of the crowd stood two military officers. They tried repeatedly to push forward but never got the chance.

They were Brigade-General Hu Dawei and Brigade-General Liu Guangzuo, who had once accompanied Dai Jun'en to Hedong.

Hu Dawei leaned in and whispered,

"Old Liu... I heard this Wu Shen is insanely rich. He carries a hundred thousand taels wherever he goes and just throws money around. The bandits don't even fight anymore—they kneel and stretch out their hands like quails waiting to be fed."

He lowered his voice further.

"Everyone secretly calls him... Wu Hundred-Thousand."

Chapter 848 Wu One Million Arrives

Liu Guangzuo lowered his voice and muttered,

"The Emperor probably did give him a hundred thousand taels back then. But think about it—disaster relief, pacifying rebels, resettling refugees... that money must've been burned clean long ago. I bet he's flat broke by now. The nickname 'Wu Ten Thousand' doesn't really hold up anymore."

Hu Dawei snorted in disdain.

"Nonsense! If I had a hundred thousand taels, I couldn't spend it all even in a lifetime. Absolutely couldn't!"

"That's because it's you," Liu Guangzuo shot back. "Give me a hundred thousand taels, and I'd wipe it out in under two months."

As the two bickered in low voices, the civil officials ahead finally finished their formal greetings.

Hu Dawei straightened his robes. "Our turn. Let's go."

"Right."

The two of them stepped forward together and cupped their fists.

"Governor," Hu Dawei said, "this humble officer is Brigadier General Hu Dawei."

"Brigadier General Liu Guangzuo," Liu added quickly.

Wu Shen nodded politely.

"General Hu, General Liu. I'll be counting on both of you for suppressing bandits in the future."

It was nothing more than polite courtesy. In truth, Wu Shen already planned to hand bandit suppression over to Xing Honglang, Lao Nanfeng, and Bai Mao. These two... he had no intention of leaning on them too heavily.

Hu Dawei, completely unaware that he had just been politely shelved, pointed curiously at the long procession of carts and packhorses behind Wu Shen.

"Governor Wu," he asked, "what exactly did you bring with you this time?"

Wu Shen answered without hesitation, his voice clear and proud:

"Silver. One million taels."

The air froze.

"What?!" Hu Dawei blurted out.

"Bloody hell!" Liu Guangzuo nearly jumped out of his boots.

Nearby civil officials, who had been pretending not to listen while listening with their whole souls, all stiffened at once.

"A million taels?"

"Impossible. Absolutely impossible."

"He must be bluffing."

"How could there be that much money?"

Wu Shen didn't bother arguing. He strode over to one of the large carts and yanked away the oiled canvas covering a wicker basket.

Flash—!

Silver light burst forth.

The basket was packed to the brim with silver ingots, gleaming coldly under the sun.

"Whoa—!"

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd.

Wu Shen turned back, his voice carrying clearly across the gathering.

"I have brought with me one million taels of pure silver," he declared. "I intend to rebuild Shanxi, to make it prosperous and secure, to ensure the people live in peace and contentment. Gentlemen—if you are willing to work with me, then let us put this silver to good use and build properly. But if anyone intends to obstruct me..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

Instead—

Thud!

The soldiers escorting the silver took a single synchronized step forward.

Armor clanked. Boots struck the ground in perfect unison.

The sound landed like a hammer on every heart present.

Civil and military officials alike stiffened.

They all assumed these were Wu Shen's personal household guards.

In these times, that wasn't unusual. Powerful civil officials often maintained private forces—men like Hong Chengchou and Lu Xiangheng were prime examples.

It was just that...

Wu Shen's "household guards" were absurdly luxurious.

Every man wore armor. Every man carried an arquebus.

A private force worthy of someone who casually carried a million taels of silver.

Without another word, the officials bowed deeply in unison.

"From this day forward," they declared, "we shall follow Governor Wu's lead!"

That day, Wu Shen shed an old nickname.

No longer was he Wu Ten Thousand.

From that moment on, he became—

Wu One Million.

Yingzhou, Southeast of the City — Beilou Village

A detachment of Manchu cavalry advanced cautiously toward the village.

The Manchu general at the head of the formation wore a grim expression.

Recently, Manchu scouting parties had repeatedly blundered into Ming ambushes. Nearly a thousand soldiers had been lost, and hundreds of warhorses captured.

Huang Taiji was furious.

Raiding the Great Ming only to bleed like this—what kind of bargain was that?

He had already ordered all banner troops: be cautious. If a raid failed, retreat immediately. No dying just to snatch a little loot.

As for why the Ming army had suddenly become so dangerous...

That wasn't something battlefield scouts could uncover.

Spies would have to be sent. The truth would have to be dug out slowly.

This unit's orders were simple: proceed carefully, and retreat at the first sign of danger.

"That village ahead is Guanlou Village," a scout reported. "About 120 residents. No sign of Ming troops."

"Good," the general said sharply. "Raid fast, then withdraw immediately. No lingering."

Just as he finished speaking—

Inside Beilou Village

Lao Nanfeng, dressed head to toe like a villager, was delivering a spirited pep talk to the other 120 "villagers."

"This isn't your first performance," he said cheerfully. "Last time, you played Manchus in A Little Soldier from the Daling River Border Army. I trust your acting skills."

The "villagers" laughed.

"Relax, Brother Nanfeng. We can play warriors and cowards."

Lao Nanfeng threw his head back and laughed.

"I'm watching all of you. After this battle, whoever performs well gets promoted—to an important supporting character. With actual lines!"

The crowd exploded.

"Lines?!"

"With lines," Lao Nanfeng nodded solemnly, "comes the chance to rise. Supporting role or lead—it all depends on your acting."

The "villagers" bounced with excitement.

"Damn, I want to be a lead just once!"

"Even being a supporting character like Commander Chen would be amazing."

"Are you crazy? You want Commander Chen's role?"

"So what? He's famous now! I don't care how he got famous—as long as he is!"

As the chatter continued, a beautiful woman stepped out of a nearby house—the courtesan.

She asked hesitantly, "Brothers... does my outfit still look like a village girl's?"

Everyone shook their heads at once.

"Not even a little."

She fell silent.

"You can't play a village girl," Lao Nanfeng said flatly. "Just stay inside. Hide properly, set up the camera, and don't cause trouble. Whatever you do—don't run out and ruin the show."

She lowered her head awkwardly. "Sorry... I've caused trouble for everyone."

The "villagers" immediately protested.

"No trouble at all!"

"Having a lady around boosts morale!"

Lao Nanfeng laughed and scolded them,

"A bunch of soft-legged fools—your knees turn to jelly the moment you see a beauty!"

Just then—

A whistle pierced the air from outside the village.

Lao Nanfeng's eyes lit up.

"They're here," he grinned. "Manchu scouts. Gentlemen—take your places."

The "villagers" scattered instantly.

Some squatted under the eaves weaving bamboo strips.

Some dug soil behind their houses.

Some stood by the latrine, scooping manure.

Others climbed rooftops to patch tiles.

Little Beilou Village looked peaceful, harmless—

A place that couldn't possibly hide danger.

Chapter 849 Now This Is True Ruthlessness

The instant the Manchu cavalry scouts appeared outside Beilou Village, the once-quiet hamlet plunged into absolute chaos.

"Manchus!"

"The Manchus are here—run!"

Shrill screams tore through the air.

A villager repairing his roof slipped in panic and tumbled straight down, landing in a miserable heap. Another, who had been hoeing the fields, abandoned his work entirely, grabbed the tool, and sprinted home while shouting at the top of his lungs, "Wife! Run! Run now!"

A man weaving bamboo strips yelped in pain—he'd sliced his hand in his haste. He stuffed the bleeding finger into his mouth and bolted for home as if death itself were chasing him.

In the blink of an eye, Beilou Village dissolved into utter pandemonium.

The Manchu commander watched the scene unfold and finally let out a long breath.

"No threat here," he said with relief. "Charge! Kill all the men! Take the women and children back!"

"Woooo—!"

The cavalry surged forward.

Their charge only deepened the villagers' panic.

Some villagers clutched crude weapons, looking as though they might stand and fight. Others fled headlong in the opposite direction, clearly abandoning their fellows to buy themselves a few extra heartbeats of survival.

In that moment, every shade of human nature was laid bare—fear, cowardice, desperation, selfishness.

The Manchu cavalry had seen it all before.

They had watched this same scene play out in countless villages they had pillaged.

"Hahaha!"

"Cowardly Han dogs!"

"Kill! Kill them all!"

Afraid their prey might slip away, the cavalry spurred their horses harder, charging straight into the village.

The very instant they crossed the village boundary—

A "villager" who had been flailing about in feigned terror suddenly threw back his head and roared:

"Fire!"

From the shattered windows of the village's ramshackle houses, dozens of black musket barrels snapped into view.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

A choking cloud of smoke erupted.

Manchu cavalymen were thrown from their saddles in droves, bodies crashing to the ground.

"Damn it!" the Manchu commander roared. "An ambush!"

"It's them again!"

"The Ming Divine Machine Camp!"

"It has to be the Divine Machine Camp!"

"Retreat! Retreat now!"

Just as swiftly as they had arrived, the cavalry fled.

They scattered like frightened birds, racing back toward Yingzhou.

The "villagers" made no move to pursue. Instead, they calmly sent men to finish off any fallen Manchus who were still breathing, then casually led away the riderless warhorses.

Cheers erupted.

"Another Manchu unit wiped out!"

The courtesan poked her head out from a house, eyes shining with excitement.

"It's all recorded! Full combat footage—every bit of it!"

Lao Nanfeng nodded. "Good. Make sure the report includes this line: 'Battles like this are now occurring daily throughout the Xuan–Da Command region.'"

Her expression shifted. "Daily?"

Lao Nanfeng's face grew serious.

"Thirty thousand Manchu troops crossed the border, but they didn't move as one. They split into four routes, then broke apart even further. Small cavalry bands are raiding everywhere. We can't guard against all of them. We can't stop them all."

"Oh..." she murmured.

Lao Nanfeng gazed toward Yingzhou.

"I wish we could draw out their main force and smash Huang Taiji head-on—one decisive battle, Gao Family Village Militia versus the full Manchu army. But they won't give us that chance. They don't care if a few small units get wiped out. They just keep spreading, robbing, burning."

She sighed softly. "Then... what can be done?"

He shook his head.

"A problem we Han have wrestled with for over a thousand years. And still no perfect answer."

She fell silent.

She was only a courtesan. Matters of war and strategy lay far beyond her world.

"For now," Lao Nanfeng continued, "we defend where we can. Total eradication isn't possible yet. In the end, we'll have to see what methods Dao Xuan Tianzun uses next. Enough of this gloomy talk."

Suddenly, he turned and barked,

"You—Zheng Dazhuang! Damn fine acting! When we get back to Puzhou City, report to me. I'll give you a major role."

Zheng Dazhuang was ecstatic.

"Thank you, Brother Nanfeng!"

He pointed at another soldier.

"You too. Report to me in Puzhou."

The soldier beamed.

The rest grew anxious.

"Brother Nanfeng, was my acting not good enough?"

"I wielded that dung scoop with real emotion!"

"When I pretended to cut my hand, I actually cut myself on purpose! Brother Nanfeng, you saw that!"

Lao Nanfeng blinked.

"You actually cut yourself?"

"Yes!" the man said earnestly. "Look—still bleeding."

Lao Nanfeng sucked in a breath.

"Damn it! Your acting is trash, but your dedication is impressive. Fine. You're in too."

The soldier nearly exploded with joy.

Lao Nanfeng suddenly turned to the courtesan.

"By the way, which department did you say you were from?"

"The News Department."

He muttered, "If news gets its own department, then acting should too. Hah! When I get back, I'll establish a Performance Department and have Miss Cai Lin teach everyone how to act!"

She looked at him, half-exasperated, half-amused.

"General... you were just slaughtering Manchus moments ago. I watched you personally stab one to death. And now you're thinking about departments and acting?"

Lao Nanfeng laughed heartily.

"Fighting? What's there to think about? I was born on a border fortress. I've been killing northern barbarians since I was a child. My body knows what to do. While my hands are killing, my mind's thinking about pretty women dancing."

He began humming lazily as he walked.

"♪ Can't ever fly away... from this world of flowers... ♪"

He strolled past a Manchu corpse without even looking—

Then suddenly chuckled.

"You bastard. Playing dead?"

The Manchu sprang up, blade slashing toward Lao Nanfeng's leg.

"♪ Turns out I'm a drunken butterfly... ♪"

Still singing, Lao Nanfeng sidestepped. His hand shot out, crushing the Manchu's wrist with a sharp crack. He forced the broken arm inward, making the man watch as his own blade plunged into his stomach and twisted.

"♪ Spring flowers in the mirror, autumn moon in the water— ♪"

He stopped abruptly.

"Damn it! Wrong lyrics!"

He kicked the corpse savagely.

"You cursed Manchu—made me mess up my song!"

The courtesan's face went deathly pale.

Only then did she truly understand.

Chang Wei beating Lai Fu was nothing.

Chen Qianhu wasn't frightening at all.

This man—

this general of Gao Family Village—

this was true ruthlessness.

Chapter 850 I Don't Want This Car Anymore

Battles along the northern frontier raged without pause, not for a single day.

By holding Yanmen Pass, Gao Chuwu had successfully protected the common folk within the walls. But beyond the pass, the vast northern lands had fallen into a churning sea of guerrilla warfare and counter-raids.

The entire Xuan–Da Command region was ablaze with skirmishes.

The arrival of the Gao Family Village Militia decisively tipped the balance. Ming officers and soldiers—who had initially cowered behind the walls of Xuanfu and Datong—gradually found their courage after receiving report after report of victory. They finally ventured out, beginning to actively hunt down Manchu reconnaissance cavalry in the open field.

As a result, small-scale clashes erupted even more frequently—and far more fiercely.

The battlefield became impossibly complex.

If a true immortal were to hover in the heavens and map troop movements with arrows, they would see the entire Xuan–Da region covered in crisscrossing red, blue, and multicolored lines—so dense and tangled that it would make anyone with trypophobia feel dizzy.

Whenever the Manchus encountered the Gao Family Village Militia, they were beaten every single time.

But when they faced the regular Ming army, the results were often reversed.

Thus, the reports that reached Huang Taiji read:

"Victories and defeats on both sides."

"Though we suffered losses, the Ming army was also heavily weakened."

Huang Taiji frowned.

"The Great Ming is still formidable," he muttered. "It's not yet time to seize the Central Plains."

He waved his hand.

"Enough. We've plundered plenty. Order a withdrawal. Return to the Northeast."

Thus, in the seventh year of Chongzhen, the Manchu invasion of Xuanfu and Datong finally came to an end.

Back in Gao Family Village!

Bai Gongzi's Experimental Car No. 3 slowly rolled out of the Gao Family Village Military Factory.

Senior Chief Technical Engineer Gao Yiyi was practically vibrating with excitement as he gestured enthusiastically at the new vehicle.

"Bai Gongzi, look! This is Experimental Car No. 3, built exactly according to your requirements. To prevent the front from getting smashed again, I reinforced it with an iron plate—and I even added two ramming horns!"

Bai Gongzi stared at it.

The front of the car was... indescribably ugly.

Gao Yiyi's questionable aesthetic sense had led him to bolt a massive, shield-like iron plate onto the front, with two sharp, cone-shaped protrusions jutting out menacingly.

Bai Gongzi looked both amused and pained.

"You're calling these ramming horns?"

"Aren't they?" Gao Yiyi asked sincerely.

Bai Gongzi pointed.

"Aren't these just two iron cones stuck on the front?"

Gao Yiyi said solemnly, "True killing machines value simplicity and practicality."

Bai Gongzi countered, "With something this big, if it crashes into an enemy, they'd be flattened anyway. Do these horns really matter?"

Gao Yiyi shot back instantly, "Isn't there a huge difference between piercing damage and blunt force trauma?"

Bai Gongzi: "..."

For a long moment, he was utterly speechless.

After a painfully long silence, he finally said tiredly,

"If you're that obsessed with piercing damage, wouldn't it be better to just mount two firearms here instead?"

A metaphorical lightbulb exploded above Gao Yiyi's head.

"Oh! You're right! Firearms are far better than cones! Bai Gongzi, you truly are a genius!"

Bai Gongzi tilted his head back and stared at the sky.

"Wouldn't anyone figure that out, genius or not?"

Gao Yiyi was already on a roll.

"If we install firearms, the driver can't operate them while driving. We'd need a dedicated gunner... so we should add a co-driver's seat."

Bai Gongzi nodded thoughtfully.

"With only one co-driver, two guns would still be hard to manage. One should be enough. Reloading on a moving vehicle is troublesome, though. We'd need some kind of rotating bullet-feed mechanism..."

He paused.

"That's a mechanical problem. Wang Zheng is good at that. I'll go ask him."

Inspiration struck like lightning.

Bai Gongzi clapped his hands.

"I need to go redraw the blueprints!"

Gao Yiyi gasped.

"Ah?! Then... you don't want Experimental Car No. 3 anymore?"

Bai Gongzi laughed heartily.

"Nope! It's useless to me now. You can have it and play with it."

Gao Yiyi nearly jumped.

"How can you just abandon it like that? This was built with village treasury funds! Artisans worked day and night on it—at great expense!"

But Bai Gongzi didn't even look back. He ran off and vanished in the blink of an eye.

Gao Yiyi stood there, torn between laughter and despair.

This kid really is as fickle as the wind and rain.

He turned back to stare at Experimental Car No. 3.

Now what?

After a moment's thought, he decided to report the matter to Manager Tan Liwen.

Chief Manager San Shier had already taken a large group of technical personnel to Shanxi. Gao Family Village was now overseen by its second-in-command—Tan Liwen.

When Gao Yiyi found him, Tan Liwen was frowning deeply.

"Damn it," he muttered. "Qingcaogou needs a steam pump, but it's been overcast for two days straight. The solar cars can't run. Using horses or ox carts is a nightmare... what should we do?"

Gao Yiyi seized the opportunity and explained everything.

Tan Liwen's eyes lit up.

"Experimental Car No. 3? It's with you right now?"

"Yes!"

"It can haul a steam pump, right?"

"Of course," Gao Yiyi replied confidently. "It uses a steam engine, just like a train. Smaller, yes—but the power output is enormous."

Tan Liwen laughed in delight.

"Excellent! Strip off all that useless armor. Lighten it up. Attach a trailer, load the steam pump, and send it to Qingcaogou."

Gao Yiyi blinked.

"A... trailer?"

Tan Liwen gestured animatedly.

"Yes! Like those shallow baskets we use for washing vegetables. Make an oversized iron one, hook it to the back, and boom—cargo transport!"

Gao Yiyi hesitated.

"If we mess around with Experimental Car No. 3 like this, won't Bai Gongzi be furious enough to kill us?"

Tan Liwen snorted.

"He said he didn't want it! It was built with treasury funds in the first place. If he's abandoned it, then the treasury reclaims it. Using it to transport goods— isn't that perfectly reasonable?"

Gao Yiyi thought carefully.

"...That actually makes sense."

And so, before long, Experimental Car No. 3—stripped of armor and fitted with a massive cargo bed—set off for Qingcaogou.

To everyone's surprise, it performed exceptionally well.

It didn't rely on sunlight and could run day or night. As long as there was coal, it kept moving. It perfectly compensated for the limitations of the Heavenly Lord's solar cars.

Tan Liwen was ecstatic.

With a decisive stroke of his brush, he approved the following decree:

"The village treasury will fund the mass production of Experimental Car No. 3.

All such vehicles shall be fitted with cargo beds and used for transportation.

They shall henceforth be named: Cargo Trucks."