

## Great Ming 851

### Chapter 851: The Automobile Factory

As evening fell, the Gao Family Village News Broadcast went live once more.

With the border conflict finally settled, there was no longer any need for emergency war bulletins. The focus of the broadcast smoothly shifted back to its usual themes: production, construction, and technological development.

On the screen, Gao Yiye appeared, smiling brightly at the audience.

"This edition's Tianzun Scientific Invention and Innovation Award," she announced, "goes to Manager Tan Liwen."

The moment his name was spoken, the entire village fell into stunned silence.

People in Xi'an or Puzhou might not know who Tan Liwen was—but in Gao Family Village, everyone did. Like San Shier, he was an administrator through and through.

Since when did administrators invent things?

As if anticipating the confusion, Gao Yiye immediately continued.

"Manager Tan Liwen proposed adding a cargo bed to Young Master Bai's steam car, allowing the experimental vehicle to finally be applied in real-world production."

The screen shifted.

A steam-powered vehicle appeared, rumbling steadily along a mountain road. Where armor had once been mounted, there was now a spacious cargo bed. Sitting inside it was a massive steam pump, swaying slightly with the movement of the vehicle.

Gao Yiye's voice rang out clearly.

"The Tianzun encourages scientists to research core technologies, and also encourages frontline workers to use practical experience to give inventions truly useful functions."

Only then did everyone understand.

Technological products had two sides:

core technology, and practical application.

As the Tianzun himself often said:

"Both hands must grasp, and both hands must be strong."

And with that, the broadcast came to an end.

At the Gao Family Village Armory, a brand-new department was being established.

Under the leadership of Gao Yiyi, preparations were underway for the mass production of the so-called "cargo vehicles."

But the moment work truly began, everyone realized something:

This was nothing like making weapons.

It was far, far more complicated.

The number of components was staggering. The tools required were numerous. The production sequence alone was dizzyingly complex—nothing like forging guns, iron pots, or sabers.

Back when they were only making experimental vehicles for Young Master Bai, the senior blacksmiths could treat it as "side work," contributing a few hammer strikes whenever they had spare time.

But mass production was a completely different beast.

"We need a factory," Gao Yiyi declared, sweeping his arm dramatically as if embracing the world itself. "A gigantic factory. At least half the size of a valley."

Tan Liwen inhaled sharply.

"That big?"

"Yes," Gao Yiyi said seriously. "The Tianzun has always emphasized standardization. If we're going to mass-produce cargo vehicles, all key components must be built to uniform standards. That means each major component needs its own independent workshop."

Tan Liwen rubbed his temples.

"Where am I supposed to find land that big? The area around Gao Family Village has long been fully occupied."

And that was the truth.

Gao Family Village had once been a tiny mountain hamlet with only forty-two original residents. Its farmland was minuscule. After waves of newcomers arrived, the village expanded outward until there was simply no land left.

Beyond that... it was nothing but mountain slopes.

Building a massive factory on a slope was obviously impossible. Such a facility required flat land.

"Heyang County has large flat areas," Gao Yiyi suggested. "What if we build the automobile factory there?"

Tan Liwen shook his head.

"Heyang is still just a small county town. Vehicle manufacturing is complex, and it requires enormous quantities of materials. Ideally, the factory should be located at a major transportation hub. That way, even if the Heavenly Lord no longer assists us in the future, we can still source materials ourselves."

He paused.

"That leaves only Puzhou and Xi'an."

Between the two, the answer was obvious.

Tan Liwen made his decision.

"We'll acquire a large tract of land on the outskirts of Xi'an and build a massive automobile factory there."

Several days later, in Xi'an.

Wang Tang, chief director of Gao Family Village's Xi'an operations, straightened his long gown to make himself presentable. He glanced toward the corner of the room, where a mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzun statue sat quietly.

"Tianzun," he asked respectfully, "would you like to accompany me?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"I won't be going. My mynah bird is almost out of food. I need to arrange some more for it."

"Then I shall proceed alone," Wang Tang said.

He exited and headed straight for the Prince of Qin's Residence.

Establishing a massive automobile factory in Xi'an was impossible without dealing with the Prince's Residence. Wang Tang's visit was to negotiate the acquisition of land.

Li Daoxuan knew that if he went personally, the matter would be resolved instantly. Zhu Cunji now treated him like an ancestral deity—he'd probably kneel and cling to his leg on sight.

That kind of intervention wasn't ideal.

Wang Tang needed experience.

So Li Daoxuan casually carried his birdcage and strolled through Xi'an's bustling streets and winding alleys.

On the western side of the city, construction was underway on a "Dao Xuan Heavenly Lord Cave."

It had once been the grand estate of a wealthy family. Prince Zhu Cunji had purchased it, ordered all the pavilions and halls torn down, and repurposed the entire property into a sacred site.

Naturally, Zhu Cunji wasn't supervising personally. He had left the matter to his consort, while he focused on railway construction and developing the various "tourist attractions" that sprang up along the tracks.

Li Daoxuan made his way cheerfully to Xi'an North Station, birdcage in hand, and boarded the "Cunji" train.

The carriage was packed.

Judging by the crowd, Zhu Cunji's train tickets were selling quite well.

Several young scholars sat in the same carriage.

They were clearly from well-off families—jade pendants hung from their waists, and a few even carried swords.

As soon as the train began moving, they started posturing.

"Gentlemen," one said grandly, "this is my first time riding a train! It's completely different from a horse carriage. I wish to compose a poem about it, but alas—my talent fails me!"

The others laughed.

"Brother Li, you write it!"

"No, no, Brother Gu should!"

The scholar called Brother Gu smiled awkwardly.

"You're all putting me in a difficult position. My strength lies in statecraft and practical governance, not poetry. I truly cannot produce one."

They laughed even harder.

"You're the most learned among us! If even you can't, who possibly could?"

Brother Gu shook his head with a faint smile and returned to his seat.

While the others continued chatting noisily, he quietly picked up his brush and began writing.

This was well within Li Daoxuan's field of vision.

Without moving from his seat, Li Daoxuan activated his focus ability and immediately saw what the scholar was writing.

It wasn't poetry at all.

He was carefully recording local customs, water conservancy projects, and civilian livelihoods throughout Shaanxi—documenting every strange and novel innovation originating from Gao Family Village.

Even the massive train he was riding was carefully noted down.

Chapter 852: I Am Gu Yanwu

Li Daoxuan watched the scholar diligently recording everything he saw, and his interest was quietly piqued.

So he continued observing.

With swift, practiced strokes, the scholar sketched and described the grand train on his paper. After a moment of contemplation, he let out a long sigh and added a special note at the bottom:

"This contraption is far too miraculous. Those who have not witnessed it personally will surely doubt its existence. Disseminate with caution."

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but chuckle.

Not long after, the train slowed and arrived at Sanhuan County, thirty li from Xi'an.

This was no longer the final stop. Zhu Cunji's construction teams had been highly efficient; the West Yan Railway had already been extended all the way to Luochuan County, covering nearly half the distance to Yan'an.

Sanhuan County had become merely an intermediate station.

But Li Daoxuan needed to get off here.

His reason for boarding the train today was simple and very personal:

Sanhuan steamed meat and Sanhuan liáohuā sugar.

The Gourmand Heavenly Lord had very few hobbies. Shut in at home most days, aside from playing with the little people, his passions were limited to research and food.

He stopped paying attention to the scholar surnamed Gu, picked up his birdcage, and stepped off the train.

The moment he exited Sanhuan Train Station, a bustling commercial street came into view, its signboard boldly proclaiming:

"Sanhuan Delicacy Street."

This was clearly Zhu Cunji's handiwork.

He had shamelessly copied Li Daoxuan's Xi'an East Gate project, erecting rows of simple stalls and gathering vendors to sell Sanhuan County's local specialties.

The street was positioned directly at the station exit—an absolutely ruthless choice of location. Any traveler stepping off the train would be helplessly ensnared by aroma and temptation.

Li Daoxuan carried his birdcage over, found a seat, ordered several snacks, and began eating with great satisfaction.

Just as he was halfway through enjoying himself, the group of scholars from earlier appeared once more.

It turned out they had also come to Sanhuan County for a spring outing.

They immediately set up camp among the stalls, laughing loudly and eating heartily, making a remarkable contribution to Sanhuan County's GDP.

Li Daoxuan was just about to stop paying attention when he heard the scholar surnamed Gu speak up.

"Gentlemen," Gu said, "have you not noticed that the Prince of Qin's railway and this Sanhuan Delicacy Street are... rather remarkable?"

The others blinked.

"Brother Gu, what insight do you have?"

Gu explained patiently, "The train is fast and convenient—it brings us from Xi'an to Sanhuan County in under an hour. Naturally, more and more people will be willing to come here for spring outings. Then, upon arrival, there's this food street offering local specialties. When these two things are combined—"

He gestured around them.

"—observe. Sanhuan County, once poor and obscure, now appears as lively as even the prosperous counties of Jiangnan."

The other scholars stared blankly.

"Huh? Is that so?"

Seeing their confusion, Gu could only sigh inwardly.

Hopeless. Their vision is shallow; they know only how to eat, drink, and amuse themselves. There is no common ground for discussion.

Li Daoxuan, however, found this deeply amusing.

This scholar named Gu had real insight.

Having already eaten his fill, Li Daoxuan decided to quietly follow along and see what else might unfold.

After finishing their snacks, the scholars prepared to continue sightseeing.

One of them asked a stall owner, "Is there anything interesting to see in Sanhuan County?"

The vendor immediately brightened.

"Esteemed gentlemen! Sanhuan County is the hometown of a great historical figure—Li Jing! You've heard of him, haven't you? A few days ago, people from the Prince of Qin's Residence came and identified Li Jing's former residence. If you're interested, you can go take a look."

As expected, the scholars were instantly intrigued.

"Li Jing's former residence?"

"Let's go see it!"

Following the vendor's directions, they exited the city. Outside Sanhuan County's East Gate, rows of carriages were already lined up, drivers shouting enthusiastically:

"Carriages to Li Jing's former residence! Twenty wen per person, one way! Only twenty wen!"

The scholars were hardly short of money. They paid without hesitation, boarded the carriages, and soon arrived at a scenic spot nestled among green hills and clear waters.

A ramshackle house clung to the mountainside. A small river flowed beside it, its waters emerald-green, lending the entire scene a poetic charm.

That crumbling house was, of course, the so-called "Li Jing's Former Residence."

Li Daoxuan took one look and nearly burst out laughing.

The people from the Prince of Qin's Residence must have dug this place up from who-knows-where. The scenery was genuinely excellent—but the house itself was ancient, dilapidated, and barely standing.

Of course, whether it was real or fake didn't actually matter.

A wooden plaque reading "Li Jing's Former Residence" hung by the door. Inside were displayed a rusty iron spear and a small pile of tattered books.

Despite the meager exhibits, tourists crowded the place enthusiastically.

Ancient travelers had not yet been "hardened" by endless fake attractions. They were still innocent—almost adorable—in their enthusiasm.

The group of scholars was no exception. They circled the residence repeatedly, scrutinizing every item with wide-eyed fascination.

Someone suddenly recited aloud:

"Beneath Shentou Ridge stands Wei Gong's shrine,

Lofty towers, vaulted halls, and Jia's stele.

Laughable is the brat Han Zhen,

Commanding warriors with an infant's decree..."

A nearby scholar immediately exclaimed, "Excellent poem! Truly excellent! Young Master Zhang's literary talent is outstanding!"

Brother Gu, however, shook his head slightly and murmured under his breath, "That's a poem by Wang Han of the late Yuan and early Ming. One man copies, the others applaud... alas."

His voice was soft—too soft for anyone else to hear.

But Li Daoxuan, using his Focus ability, heard it clearly.

He paused, slightly surprised.

So it was written by Wang Han? Learned something new.

The others continued enjoying themselves, completely unaware.

Brother Gu, meanwhile, found a stone table by the river, sat down, took out his paper and brush, and began writing again.

"Sanhuan County is vigorously developing tourism. The flow of people between Xi'an Prefecture and Sanhuan County has become frequent. Wealthy officials and dignitaries from Xi'an spend money here, and the poor locals earn it... this is excellent. Even if Li Jing's former residence is fabricated, it is still worth promoting."

Amused, Li Daoxuan walked over and sat down directly opposite him.

Gu sensed someone across from him and looked up in surprise. He saw a young man who looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't quite place him.

"Esteemed brother?" Gu asked.

Li Daoxuan smiled. "My surname is Li. People call me Steward Li."

"Ah, Steward Li." Gu clasped his hands. "I am Gu Yanwu. May I ask what advice you have for me?"

At the sound of that name, Li Daoxuan's heart skipped a beat.

I knew it. This one truly is different.

This was indeed a prominent figure—but at the moment, still very young. Barely in his early twenties, he carried traces of youth and even a touch of naivety.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"We shared the same carriage earlier. On the train, I already noticed you stood apart from the others. Here, even more so—you stand like a crane among chickens. Are you recording what you see on this journey through writing and sketches?"

Chapter 853: The Immortal's Guidance

Gu Yanwu nodded.

"I am currently traveling the world, observing widely. Coming to Xi'an Prefecture this time felt like a country bumpkin entering a great city. Everywhere I looked, there were new and wondrous things. I recorded them all."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"What you're writing, my friend, doesn't look like a travelogue. It reads more like an analysis of how to benefit the nation and enrich the people."

Gu Yanwu blinked, momentarily startled.

"Ah? Brother Li, you saw what I wrote? You must be laughing at me."

But inwardly, he felt a spark of excitement.

This Steward Li wasn't talking about scenery, poetry, or idle elegance. He was speaking of governing the nation and the livelihood of the people—topics that instantly stirred Gu Yanwu's true interests.

His enthusiasm surged.

"Brother Li," Gu Yanwu said animatedly, "during this journey to Xi'an, I saw countless factories built on the outskirts of the city. They produce all manner of strange and ingenious objects. More importantly, they provide vast numbers of jobs for the common people—and the wages are generous! This is a sight of true national prosperity and popular strength. This is how a country ought to be governed!"

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"What a coincidence. I believe the same."

Gu Yanwu rubbed his hands together, eyes shining.

"I must write all of this down, organize it properly, and find a way to submit it to the imperial court. If His Majesty were to see it, perhaps it could be of some use."

Li Daoxuan replied calmly,

"If the Emperor sees it... I fear it may not bring about a good result."

Gu Yanwu froze.

"Oh? Brother Li, why do you say that?"

Li Daoxuan looked at him.

"My friend, are you truly unaware of the current Emperor's temperament?"

The moment those words left his mouth, Gu Yanwu stiffened.

As he thought deeper, cold sweat began to bead on his forehead.

Though he was still young and had not yet served in officialdom, he was hardly ignorant. Years earlier, at the gathering of the Fushe at Tiger Hill, he had personally heard veteran officials discuss the matter.

The consensus had been unanimous:

The current Emperor was harsh and ungrateful, suspicious and distrustful. His temperament shifted like wind and rain—utterly unpredictable. Serving under him required constant vigilance, as though walking on thin ice. A single misstep could mean dismissal, imprisonment, or worse.

This was not slander.

It was fact.

Gu Yanwu had personally witnessed governors of Shaanxi and Shanxi replaced one after another, as if mounted on a revolving door. Even the Grand Secretaries of the Cabinet rotated with dizzying speed.

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly.

"Have you ever considered that relying solely on the Emperor's momentary decisions to shape the fate of the nation... might be fundamentally flawed?"

Gu Yanwu sucked in a sharp breath.

"Bold words!"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Don't glare at me. It won't help. You're a man of insight—you've already thought about this yourself, haven't you?"

Gu Yanwu fell silent.

A tremor ran through his heart.

Because the man before him had pierced straight through to a thought he had buried deeper than any other.

Hidden in his heart was an idea he had never shared with anyone—the concept of collective governance.

Years ago, he had secretly written a short essay that stated:

'The ruler of the realm cannot govern alone.'The ruler of the realm cannot govern alone.

If he governs alone, punishments multiply.If he governs alone, punishments multiply.

If governance is collective, punishments cease.'

He knew full well that if this essay were ever revealed, it would be enough to cost him his head.

So he had hidden it.

Locked it away.

Never shown it to anyone.

Not even the elders of the Fushe knew such a thought existed.

It was pure treason.

Seeing Gu Yanwu completely frozen, Li Daoxuan said nothing further.

Slowly, he thought. Fishing requires patience. You can't spear the fish—you must let it bite willingly.

He gently patted Gu Yanwu on the shoulder and smiled.

"Let me suggest a few places for you to visit. But whatever you see or hear along the way, do not write it for the Emperor—or you may very easily lose your head."

Gu Yanwu asked blankly,

"Where?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly:

"Gao Family Village, Chengcheng County, Shaanxi.

Then Puzhou, Hedong Circuit, Shanxi.

After that, head north to Taiyuan, Shanxi. The new Governor, Wu Shen, is preparing to develop the province in earnest. If you go quickly, you'll find a great many things that truly benefit the world and enrich the people."

Gu Yanwu was stunned.

"Huh?"

Before he could ask anything else, Li Daoxuan turned and walked away.

Gu Yanwu jumped to his feet.

"Brother Li—wait! I still have something to ask! How did you—"

He wanted to ask how Li Daoxuan had known about collective governance.

But Li Daoxuan did not answer.

He had already switched his co-sensing connection outside the box. Without even putting on his golden gauntlet, he reached into the diorama, picked up Mass Production Model No. 3, and with a casual wave of his hand—

What Gu Yanwu saw was this:

The "Steward Li" before him shimmered, as though space itself rippled. In an instant, he appeared dozens of paces away. Another shimmer—another leap. Then, one final shimmer—

—and he vanished entirely.

Gu Yanwu gasped.

"Ah?! Shrinking the ground to an inch?"

His heart pounded violently.

"Who... who was that just now? An immortal? A demon?"

Fear seized him.

True, overwhelming fear.

Gu Yanwu immediately broke into a run, desperate to find someone—anyone—to talk to.

Just then, a group of tourists arrived from Xi'an. They were burly men with bulging muscles, dressed in matching uniforms. It turned out they were workers from Xi'an Baimei Factory No. 1, out on a group outing.

Gu Yanwu's eyes were drawn instantly to the embroidery on their chests.

A strange human face—somewhat abstract, stitched with thread—yet eerily familiar.

He froze.

"I've seen this... before."

Suddenly, realization struck like thunder.

"The Steward Li just now!" Gu Yanwu exclaimed. "That face—it's the same!"

The embroidered face and the lifelike silicone face were slightly different, which was why he hadn't recognized it immediately.

But now he understood.

The man who had spoken with him was none other than Dao Xuan Tianzun himself!

Could a mortal truly perform the immortal art of shrinking the ground to an inch?

Cold sweat poured down Gu Yanwu's face.

Shock.

Panic.

Awe.

After a long moment, he swallowed hard and made a decision.

"Gao Family Village, Chengcheng County... Puzhou... Taiyuan..."

"I must visit all three."

When an immortal points the way, how could a mortal refuse to follow?

Gu Yanwu sprang to his feet and shouted to his fellow scholars,

"Gentlemen! I have urgent business and must depart immediately. Enjoy yourselves!"

The others cried out,

"Eh? Brother Gu—don't rush!"

Gu Yanwu ignored them, sprinted toward the train station, and vanished in moments.

The scholars watched his retreating figure and shook their heads.

"Brother Gu is too impatient," one said.

"The boarding time is fixed anyway. Even if he runs, he'll still have to wait for us."

That evening, Gu Yanwu sat stiffly on a bench at the train station, waiting.

When his traveling companions finally arrived, the two sides stared at each other—

—wide-eyed and speechless.

Chapter 854: The Lights Come On

After a long journey, Gu Yanwu finally arrived at Gao Family Village proper.

By the time he stepped down from the train, dusk had already settled.

Standing on the platform, he watched as the sun slowly sank toward the west, tumbling behind the hills. The fall looked rather serious—as if Old Man Sun had tripped badly and wouldn't be getting back up anytime soon. At the very least, Gu Yanwu wouldn't be seeing him again until tomorrow morning.

Gu Yanwu was not fond of poetry, nor did he have the habit of forcing verses out of scenery.

So he merely glanced once and thought nothing more of it.

Instead, a question surfaced quietly in his mind.

The immortal guided me here... but what exactly am I supposed to see?

Just as that thought formed, he heard people who had disembarked alongside him chatting nearby.

"Oh! The sun's finally down—how lucky! We arrived just in time."

"Exactly, exactly. We'll get to see the moment the lights come on. That's the real spectacle of Gao Family Village."

Gu Yanwu was startled. He turned toward them and cupped his hands politely.

"May I ask, sirs... what do you mean by 'the lights come on'?"

The men laughed.

"Gao Family Village proper has already switched over to electric lighting. Every evening, once the sun fully sets, all the public lights turn on at once. That moment—ah—it's truly breathtaking."

Gu Yanwu's expression went blank.

Before he could ask further, a cheer suddenly erupted in the distance.

Outside the main fortress walls of Gao Family Village, a large crowd had already gathered. Many were holding tablet computers, watching the time tick down.

"The lights are coming on!"

"Countdown!"

"Ten—nine—eight—seven—"

Gu Yanwu stood there, completely dumbfounded.

When the final count ended, the crowd shouted in unison:

"Lights on!"

In the very next instant—

A row of lights flared to life along the eaves of the train station.

Then, as if responding to a silent command, lights ignited across the entire village.

The main fortress and the Gao Family Village commercial district lit up first—brilliant, colorful lights outlining rooftops, streets, towers, and walls. Buildings that had moments ago been swallowed by dusk were suddenly revealed in vivid clarity, glowing like something pulled straight out of a dream.

Gu Yanwu sucked in a sharp breath.

"Ah—!"

Around him, the villagers and visitors erupted in cheers.

"We see it!"

"So beautiful!"

"I'll never get tired of this—even after a hundred times!"

Gu Yanwu stared, stunned, then turned to the person beside him.

"What kind of lamps are these? Why are they so bright? Oil lamps? Candle lamps?"

The man chuckled.

"Electric lights."

"Electricity?" Gu Yanwu instinctively pointed at the sky. "Like lightning?"

"Yes," the man laughed. "Exactly like lightning."

"Really?" Gu Yanwu pressed.

A burly villager nearby joined in, grinning.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun caught the lightning from the heavens and stuffed it into our lamps."

Gu Yanwu: "!!!"

The shock was so great it nearly made his cerebellum shrivel.

At that moment, someone laughed nearby.

"All right, stop scaring the guests."

A man stepped forward, lightly chiding the burly villager. The villager stuck out his tongue and ran off.

Only then did Gu Yanwu get a clear look at the newcomer.

He wore official robes. Judging by the decorations, he was a seventh-rank official.

Gu Yanwu's heart jumped.

Seventh rank... in a mere village of Chengcheng County?

The Chengcheng County Magistrate was famous—Liang Shixian, a renowned Donglin Party member who had once refused to collect taxes to protect the people, openly defied the Emperor, and was subsequently reprimanded and frozen in place, serving over seven years without promotion.

Thinking this, Gu Yanwu hurriedly bowed.

"Greetings, Lord Magistrate!"

The man laughed.

"No, no. I'm not the magistrate here. I am Shi Kefa, Judicial Commissioner of Xi'an Prefecture."

"Judicial Commissioner of Xi'an?" Gu Yanwu blurted out. "Why would a Judicial Commissioner be in a mountain village of Chengcheng County? Has there been some mistake?"

Shi Kefa waved his hand casually.

"Don't worry about such things here. Official rank isn't worth much in this place."

Gu Yanwu froze.

"Then what matters?" he asked instinctively.

Shi Kefa smiled.

"Ability."

Gu Yanwu: "???"

Shi Kefa gestured broadly toward the blazing lights.

"Look at all this. These lights were created by a student named Ji Menghan. His standing and respect in Gao Family Village far surpass mine, a mere Judicial Commissioner."

Gu Yanwu could only manage a weak sound.

"Uh..."

Shi Kefa sighed, full of genuine admiration.

"I truly envy him. His grasp of physics is extraordinary. If only I had been half as talented."

Gu Yanwu: "Uh??"

Seeing the young man's utterly confused expression, Shi Kefa laughed kindly.

"You've come from far away, haven't you? Take your time. There are many fascinating things in this village—far more than just these lights. Walk around, look carefully, and see for yourself."

With that, Shi Kefa turned and disappeared into the bustling crowd in the blink of an eye.

Gu Yanwu stood there.

Speechless.

Utterly bewildered.

After a while, hunger reminded him of its existence.

He decided to find something to eat.

Following the glow of the streetlights, Gu Yanwu made his way toward the lively Gao Family Village commercial district.

Bathed in countless colorful lights, the entire area looked unreal—like a city conjured from a dream.

At the center stood an especially luxurious building. From afar, it looked unmistakably like a brothel.

Gu Yanwu thought to himself, Eating while listening to music wouldn't be bad.

He approached—then stopped.

Upon closer inspection, it wasn't a brothel at all.

The sign read: Shuixian Grand Restaurant.

"...Why does a restaurant look like this?" Gu Yanwu muttered. "Is something wrong with these people?"

But his stomach answered for him.

Never mind. As long as there's food.

He stepped inside.

Immediately, a young waiter approached. Neatly dressed, clean-cut, and handsome—nothing like the rough tavern servers Gu Yanwu was used to.

"Esteemed guest," the waiter said with a smile. "Please follow me. Do you have a reservation?"

Gu Yanwu shook his head.

"No."

"Just one person?" the waiter asked. "Please come this way. We have small tables available."

He seated Gu Yanwu, poured him tea, and smiled again.

"What would you like to eat? We offer a full range of northern and southern delicacies."

Gu Yanwu raised an eyebrow.

A small village in Shaanxi dares to claim it has both northern and southern cuisines?

Fine. Let's test you.

"Do you have Jiangsu cuisine?" Gu Yanwu asked.

The waiter smiled brightly.

"Of course. I'll bring the Jiangsu menu right away."

Moments later, the menu was placed before him.

Nanjing Roast Duck.

Pengcheng Fish Balls.

Old Duck Soup.

Stewed Shengqiao.

Square-Cut Roast Pork.

Lamb Hidden in Fish.

Crystal Pork Hock.

Stewed Crab Roe Meatballs...

Gu Yanwu stared.

If he didn't know better, he would have thought he'd returned to Jiangsu, seated in a grand restaurant of his hometown.

He pointed.

"This—Nanjing Roast Duck."

"Yes, sir."

"And this."

"One Pengcheng Fish Balls."

Wait.

Something was wrong.

Gu Yanwu suddenly looked up.

"Waiter... you can read?"

The waiter laughed.

"I know a few characters."

Gu Yanwu's eyes widened.

"You can read... and you're working as a waiter?"

Chapter 855: This Is Manipulation

The shop assistant maintained a well-practiced, professional smile.

"Being able to read isn't anything special here," he said casually. "Young people around my age—almost everyone can read. We want to earn a bit of extra money, but we still have classes during the day, so we don't have time for proper full-time work. We just do odd jobs after school."

He paused, then added proudly, "It's called work-study. Dao Xuan Tianzun strongly supports it."

Gu Yanwu was completely stunned.

"Young people your age... everyone is literate?"

The shop assistant laughed.

"Well, that might be overstating it a little. To be precise, most of the newcomers are still illiterate. It's the kids who've lived here for a few years who can all read."

Then he grinned.

"That's why newcomers have a harder time finding work in the village. They can only do pure manual labor at first. After that, they send their children to school, hoping that once the kids are educated, the whole family's fate will change."

Gu Yanwu: "..."

The shop assistant cheerfully turned around and went off to prepare his order.

Gu Yanwu sat there, utterly dazed.

Before long, two slightly older children entered the restaurant.

The shop assistant immediately greeted one of them warmly.

"Young Master, you're back!"

The older child burst out laughing.

"I told you not to call me Young Master! At school, you're my senior. Calling me that here—are you trying to embarrass me? Just call me Little Bubble!"

The shop assistant laughed. "Little Bubble sounds boring. Handsome Enough to Bubble is much better."

"Hahaha! That's right!" the boy said shamelessly. "I am incredibly handsome!"

Gu Yanwu noticed something strange.

Although the shop assistant addressed the boy as "Young Master," there was no sense of hierarchy between them at all. Their tone was relaxed, their exchanges playful—like two long-time friends joking without restraint.

The boy—Handsome Enough to Bubble—pulled the other child along, sat down heavily, and slapped the table.

"Dad! Mom! I'm starving! Get me something to eat. Oh—and Zhebu's here too. Make him a portion as well."

From behind the counter came the owner's voice.

"Zhebu's here too? Alright. Today I'll make you some Mongolian food. How about roast lamb leg?"

Zhebu's eyes lit up.

"Thank you, Uncle Liu!"

Gu Yanwu's heart jumped.

A Mongolian child?

His body stiffened instantly. He sharpened his hearing, every nerve going taut, and listened carefully.

Zhebu said quietly, "Brother Bubble, the lessons these past few days have been so hard. I really don't understand them."

Liu Maopao laughed.

"Well... you Mongolians grew up in harsh, cold lands. You haven't seen much of the world, so it's normal you don't understand these lessons yet. Don't worry—I'll tutor you."

Zhebu was touched.

"Thank you so much! If Brother Bubble didn't help me, I don't know how many beatings I'd have gotten from the teacher."

Liu Maopao waved his hand casually.

"No problem, no problem. Don't be afraid. Even if you're slow, I've got your back. Stick with your big brother—nothing will be too hard for you."

Gu Yanwu listened—and his brows slowly knit together.

Something was very wrong.

This Han child was "helping" the Mongolian child, yet his very first words subtly emphasized the other's ignorance and backwardness.

First, he belittled him.

Then, he positioned himself as the savior.

Classic manipulation.

It was a calculated rhetorical technique—undermine the other's confidence, then offer protection. Over time, the victim would become completely dependent.

If the term PUA existed in this era, Gu Yanwu would have already leapt up and shouted it aloud.

PUA was a sinister art. Used long enough, it could turn a person into a loyal hound—one who would help count the money even after being sold.

Such tactics between adults were already disturbing enough.

But to see one child using them on another?

A chill crept up Gu Yanwu's spine.

He nearly slammed his palm on the table, ready to leap up and scold that boy.

Just then, Zhebu spoke again.

"Brother Bubble, you're so amazing—and you're so good to me. I'm really grateful. When I grow up and return to the Wushen Tribe to become its leader, I'll give you a hundred cattle and sheep—no, two hundred! And I'll send you the most beautiful girl too!"

Gu Yanwu's heart skipped violently.

His raised impulse froze midair.

A tribal heir?

He slowly sat back down.

In an instant, everything became clear.

This wasn't just manipulation.

This was long-term strategic conditioning.

If successful, this Han boy would effectively gain influence over an entire Mongolian tribe.

In that case, Gu Yanwu naturally couldn't interfere.

Liu Maopao laughed loudly.

"Nonsense. Does your Brother Bubble care about your cattle or sheep? Look at our restaurant—doesn't it outweigh a few hundred animals? And look at my face. With looks like these, what kind of beauty can I not marry?"

Zhebu hesitated.

"Well... when you put it that way..."

Liu Maopao clapped him on the shoulder.

"I just want to be your brother. I don't covet your things. In the future, when you become a tribal leader and I join the Gao Family Village committee, we brothers will form an alliance."

His eyes gleamed.

"We'll march out together. Anyone who messes with us, we'll strike them down. The Manchu dogs—of course. But not just them. Whoever dares provoke us, we'll crush them together."

Zhebu was ecstatic.

"Good! Good! Following Brother Bubble into battle, I won't fear anyone! Brother Bubble is the most amazing person I've ever met!"

Gu Yanwu inhaled sharply, like choking on a mouthful of icy noodles.

Only now did he fully understand the depth of this "PUA."

The Mongolians were currently subservient to the Manchus, frequently assisting them in attacks on the Great Ming.

But if this plan truly succeeded...

One day, the Mongolians might instead become followers of the Great Ming—charging into battle alongside them.

The thought alone made Gu Yanwu's hands tremble.

This child... at such a young age... is already working for the Great Ming?

Gu Yanwu let out a long sigh.

"When I was his age," he muttered, "I was still playing in the mud."

Just then, the shop assistant returned.

"Honored guest, your Jinling Roast Duck and Pengcheng Fish Balls are ready."

He placed the dishes down neatly.

"That will be three taels of silver."

"What?!" Gu Yanwu shot to his feet. "That expensive? Is this some kind of crooked shop?"

The shop assistant replied calmly.

"Honored guest, you're eating Jiangsu cuisine in Shaanxi. Shouldn't that be expensive? Look at our decor. Look at the atmosphere. And look—every shop assistant here can read. Can the shabby taverns you usually visit boast such standards?"

He smiled.

"Honestly, three taels is quite cheap."

Gu Yanwu: "..."

"I don't quite understand," he admitted weakly, "but somehow... it sounds very reasonable."

And just like that, three taels of silver vanished from his purse.

It wasn't until the next day that Gu Yanwu fully realized the truth.

This place was deliberately designed to harvest the wealthy, extracting money from the rich and distributing it among the common people.

Ugh.

He had even written a short essay back in Sanyuan County, arguing that such practices benefited the nation and enriched the people.

Fine.

Fine.

He would accept it.

Free reading, at least.

Chapter 856: Advancing on All Fronts

Gu Yanwu stayed at the inn in Gao Family Village for three full days.

For those three days, he did nothing but wander about, eyes wide open, carefully observing this strange, almost unbelievable place.

Very quickly, he realized that Gao Family Village was fundamentally different from any other village he had ever seen in the Great Ming.

The common folk here were spirited and optimistic. They were not merely struggling to survive day by day—they were actively striving for a better life. Their horizons were broad, their minds constantly refreshed by Gao Family Village News, and they discussed current affairs with enthusiasm and confidence.

When they encountered injustice, they did not swallow it in silence.

They spoke out.

They criticized.

They argued.

They discussed how the nation could be improved.

Elsewhere, such conversations belonged exclusively to "officials" and "scholars."

But here—

Everyone talked about them.

This filled Gu Yanwu with a profound sense of satisfaction.

Unable to restrain himself, he took out his brush and, right on the wall of Gao Family Village's main fortress, wrote a line in bold strokes:

"Every man bears responsibility for the rise and fall of the nation."

Half an hour later, Fang Wushang—Gao Family Village's military inspector—appeared before him and arrested him on the spot for "vandalism and destruction of public property."

Considering that Gu Yanwu had traveled from afar, was unfamiliar with Gao Family Village's regulations, and was a first-time offender, the punishment was relatively light.

He was sentenced to community service.

First, he had to personally whitewash the wall he had defaced.

Second, he had to clean the train station for half a day.

Unfortunately, Gu Yanwu had never whitewashed anything in his life.

The result was disastrous.

Paint splattered everywhere—his clothes, his hands, his face. By the time he finally finished repainting the wall, he looked like a walking palette. Then he was handed a broom and ordered to sweep the train station without pause.

Coming from a family with eight hundred mu of ancestral land, Gu Yanwu was not lacking in money. Desperate to escape his misery, he hurriedly produced silver and tried to bribe Fang Wushang.

To his shock, Fang Wushang was utterly incorruptible.

Not only did he refuse the silver, he flew into a rage—

—and added another half-day of community service.

Early the next morning, Gu Yanwu rubbed his aching back and sore arms, boarded the train, and left for Puzhou.

Taiyuan, Shanxi

Taiyuan lay cradled between two massive mountain ranges—one to the east, one to the west.

Commanding rivers and mountains alike, it was the very backbone of the empire, a strategic stronghold treasured by every dynasty since antiquity.

At the height of the Ming Dynasty, Taiyuan Prefecture's population had once exceeded 4.2 million.

But by the Chongzhen era, after years of relentless drought, foreign invasions, and rampant banditry, the registered population had fallen to less than two million.

When Wu Shen saw the numbers, he couldn't help but shed tears.

Two million people.

What kind of suffering had swallowed the other two million?

"San Shier," Wu Shen said heavily, staring at the document in his hand. "Taiyuan still has nearly two million people. I have one million taels of silver bestowed by the Heavenly Lord—but if I divide it evenly, each person gets only five qian. What am I supposed to do?"

San Shier laughed.

"Lord Wu, you're here to govern, not to hand out porridge. Not all two million people are starving refugees. There's no need to calculate like that. You're worrying yourself for nothing."

Wu Shen's eyes lit up.

"Ah—you're right!"

San Shier continued, "According to the Heavenly Lord's consistent methods, the first step in developing any region is simple: give people work. Once they earn wages, they'll have money. Once they have money, they'll spend it. And once they spend it, every industry revives."

He smiled.

"A small lever can move a mountain."

Wu Shen nodded without hesitation.

"Logical."

He was a practical official, not a desk-bound theorist. Once his mind cleared, ideas immediately surged forth.

"The Manchus have just retreated," Wu Shen said. "Taiyuan is a northern border city—the people are still terrified. If I begin rebuilding border fortifications now and offer wages, they'll flock to us."

San Shier nodded. "Agreed."

"And roads," Wu Shen added. "We must build roads."

San Shier nodded again. "To get rich, build roads first."

Then he changed his tone.

"Lord Wu, don't think in terms of sequence. You have two million people right now—two million! That's enough manpower to launch every industry simultaneously. Don't worry about which comes first or which is more important."

He spread his hands.

"Let everyone work. My Blue Hat specialists can each oversee an industry. We advance on all fronts."

Wu Shen slapped his thigh.

"You're absolutely right! With so many people, what is there to fear? Let's do it!"

Taiyuan Prefecture immediately launched a massive recruitment campaign.

Road construction.

Factory building.

City repairs.

Militia recruitment.

From the moment Wu Shen arrived, the entire prefecture was thrown into furious motion.

At first, the common folk hesitated.

The list of government projects was long—too long. They feared the officials wouldn't pay.

But soon, a rumor began spreading through Taiyuan city and its surrounding counties.

"The new governor's nickname is Wu Million—he brought a million taels of silver with him!"

"He's insanely rich! Have you ever seen a million taels? It stacks up like a mountain!"

"They say Wu Million has divine fortune—his money never runs out. He used to be called Wu Hundred-Thousand, but the more he spent, the more money he had!"

"A man that rich wouldn't dare default on three catties of flour a day!"

"I'm going to try working for him."

In those times, a rumor was often more effective than an official proclamation.

The common folk were quickly drawn in by Wu Million's fearsome reputation.

Wu Shen, shrewd as he was, immediately realized the power of this nickname.

He ordered the million taels of silver hauled onto the city wall, piling them into a glittering mound that dazzled the eyes.

Then, he arranged for a special operations soldier from the Gao Family Village militia to disguise himself as an ordinary worker.

In front of a massive crowd, Wu Shen personally took a piece of broken silver from the pile and handed it to the "worker" as a reward.

"He really pays!"

"He's not like those other officials!"

"As long as the wages are real, I'll do anything!"

"Me too!"

The legend of Wu Million spread like wildfire.

With nearly two million people, the effect was explosive.

Within days, tens of thousands joined road construction.

Tens of thousands marched north to rebuild the border city and fortifications.

At the eastern and western foothills of Taiyuan, cement plants, coal mines, steelworks, and factories rose simultaneously, swallowing tens of thousands of workers.

The entire prefecture roared to life.

The sound of hammering, digging, and shouting echoed through valleys and plains.

This frenzy soon reached the mountains.

The refugees hiding there heard the news.

They were the "missing" two million—people erased from the household registry but still alive.

As they hesitated, another message reached them, carried by hunters sent by San Shier:

"Any refugee who comes down from the mountains to work will immediately have their household registration restored, regaining their status as commoners. This is what people call turning over a new leaf."

The mountains erupted.

Refugees poured down like a flood.

Taiyuan Prefecture's population surged overnight by two hundred thousand.

Chapter 857: Selecting the Academy Head Daizhou City.

Sun Chuanting sat atop the crumbling city walls, gazing toward the north.

His mood was anything but good.

The Manchus had indeed withdrawn—but not because they had been repelled. They had merely looted their fill and left of their own accord.

Although the "volunteer forces brought by Tie Niaofei" had dealt the Manchus a heavy blow, it was, at best, a tactical victory, one that yielded little strategic value.

After all—

It had been a defensive battle.

Winning a defensive battle a thousand times over would only allow them to cling to what they already had. It would never change the fundamental reality: the enemy struck, and they endured.

"When will we finally be able to counterattack?" Sun Chuanting muttered, clenching his wrist. "When will we strike at the Manchu stronghold? I truly long to pummel them, rather than being pounded again and again."

As he brooded in frustration, a mass-produced Heavenly Lord walked up beside him, waving cheerfully.

"Hey there, Mr. Sun!"

Sun Chuanting turned his head.

He recognized the figure at once—this was the distinguished guest who had arrived in Daizhou together with Instructor He Jiu. Ostensibly the leader of the new Jin merchant group, he was an unimaginably wealthy merchant known as Gentleman Li.

The old Jin merchant group consisted of traitors who supplied the Manchus.

This new Jin merchant group, however, organized volunteer forces to fight them.

Sun Chuanting held them in deep respect.

He immediately cupped his hands. "Greetings, Gentleman Li."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Mr. Sun, staring north again? Thinking about the frontier?"

"Indeed." Sun Chuanting let out a long sigh. "The frontier never brings peace of mind. When will we finally be able to pin the Manchus down and beat them soundly?"

Li Daoxuan's expression turned a little strange.

"In your opinion, Mr. Sun... do we still have a chance to pin them down and beat them?"

Sun Chuanting hesitated.

"Er... well..."

If that question were posed to an ordinary civil official with no understanding of frontier affairs, they would likely puff out their chest and proclaim confidently:

"Our Heavenly Dynasty is vast and prosperous! Sooner or later, we'll deal with those northeastern barbarians!"

But Sun Chuanting was different.

He was well-versed in both civil and military matters. He understood economics, politics, and warfare, and he was painfully aware of both the empire's strengths and its weaknesses.

And so—

This question left him completely frozen.

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly. "Lost your nerve?"

Sun Chuanting's expression darkened.

"If we continue fumbling like this, my Great Ming will never again have the chance to strike back. Instead, we'll be beaten over and over... until one day..." He trailed off, unable to continue.

Li Daoxuan changed the subject.

"Mr. Sun, what do you think of the volunteer forces' combat effectiveness?"

"Formidable!" Sun Chuanting answered without hesitation, his spirits lifting. "The militia volunteer forces organized by the new Jin merchants are the strongest army I have ever seen. Bar none."

Li Daoxuan chuckled again.

"Then tell me—do you believe these volunteer forces could fight their way into the Manchu homeland?"

Sun Chuanting shook his head.

"With all due respect... no."

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow.

"Though their combat power is terrifying," Sun Chuanting continued, "their commanding generals are... how should I put this... untrained."

Li Daoxuan smiled. "Please, go on."

Sun Chuanting spoke frankly.

"I fully acknowledge their battlefield strength, but warfare is not merely about charging and killing. Military strategy is indispensable. Several of their commanders lack even basic understanding in this regard."

"I've observed their camps. Only Old Nanfeng's unit shows proper encampment discipline. Gao Chuwu's and Bai Mao's units are utter chaos—camp selection, gate orientation, internal division—everything is a mess."

Li Daoxuan laughed inwardly.

Right on the mark. Exactly as expected.

Outwardly, he smiled calmly.

"Mr. Sun, I trust you can guess why this is so."

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"They are militias, after all. Unlike renowned generals from military families, they weren't raised studying strategy from childhood."

"Exactly." Li Daoxuan nodded approvingly. "You've grasped the heart of the issue."

"The art of war cannot be mastered without systematic study. Relying solely on crude experience may yield some results, but the tuition is steep—paid in the lives of countless soldiers."

Sun Chuanting murmured, "Oh?"

At last, he realized that Gentleman Li had been guiding the conversation toward a specific purpose.

His expression turned solemn.

"Gentleman Li, if you have something to say, please speak plainly. There's no need to circle around it."

Li Daoxuan grinned.

"Very well. I'll speak plainly."

He straightened slightly.

"Our militia volunteer forces possess advanced weapons and can overwhelm the Manchus in direct combat. But their deficiency in military strategy is severe."

"I fear that in future battles, they may fall victim to tactics such as fire attacks, water attacks, ambushes in valleys, or even be divided and surrounded—simply because of poor encampment or strategic misjudgment."

"In short," Li Daoxuan said evenly, "this is unacceptable."

"The militia must cultivate a proper corps of commanders—men who can fight and think. They must understand marching, encampment, formations, and battlefield command. This is a systematic body of knowledge that cannot be acquired without instruction."

Sun Chuanting finally understood.

"You want me to teach them?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head.

"Not merely teach. I want to establish a military academy."

"A military academy?" Sun Chuanting stared. "What... is that?"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Just as private schools teach reading and writing, a military academy teaches the art of warfare."

"You yourself mentioned that famous generals come from military families, learning 'family traditions' from a young age. But why should such vital knowledge be locked away within bloodlines?"

"If everyone contributed their inherited wisdom and taught others," Li Daoxuan said calmly, "then every commander in the Great Ming could master warfare. At that point—would we still fear the Manchus?"

Sun Chuanting sucked in a sharp breath.

"Ah!"

He was right.

Li Daoxuan pressed on.

"Mr. Sun, imagine this: your profound strategic knowledge combined with the militia's advanced weaponry. If these two were fused... could we not, one day, truly pin the Manchus down and defeat them utterly?"

Sun Chuanting closed his eyes.

In his mind, artillery thundered against Shengjing. Musketeers formed ranks, mowing down Manchu troops. Huang Taiji was dragged from his hiding place, kicked to the ground, and forced to kneel.

"Spare me! I'll never dare again!" Huang Taiji wailed.

It was pure fantasy—

Yet the satisfaction was so overwhelming that Sun Chuanting nearly forgot to breathe.

He opened his eyes.

His resolve hardened.

"I will teach."

Li Daoxuan's eyes lit up.

"Excellent! Then I entrust the position of Military Academy Headmaster to you, Mr. Sun."

Sun Chuanting did not waste a moment. He immediately set off for Gao Family Village.

Just as he departed—

Far away in the capital, the Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, was reading Sun Chuanting's memorials: *On the Enemy's Inherent Weaknesses* and *On the Standardization of Logistics and Transport*.

After finishing them, he nodded repeatedly.

"These essays are outstanding," he declared. "This man possesses true talent for frontier affairs. Find him—and appoint him at once!"

Chapter 858: Go See the Story You Wrote

The envoys dispatched by Zhu Youjian immediately set off for Daizhou in search of Sun Chuanting.

The Ministry of Personnel had already prepared an official appointment for him. Their plan was to first assign Sun Chuanting as Vice Prefect of Shuntian—a position commonly used as a stepping stone for future governors. As long as he served steadily for a period without incident, promotion to Governor or even Governor-General would naturally follow.

However—

When the imperial envoy arrived in Daizhou and searched everywhere, Sun Chuanting was nowhere to be found.

They asked around.

No one knew where he had gone.

With no other choice, the envoy returned to the capital, crestfallen, and reported to the emperor:

"The man who enjoys writing those frontier memorials... has vanished without a trace."

By that point, Zhu Youjian had already forgotten why he had wanted to promote Sun Chuanting in the first place. Since the man had disappeared, then so be it—

Meanwhile, Gao Family Village's Military Academy had already been completed.

Its location was Puzhou.

This was because future development would undoubtedly shift eastward. The original Gao Family Village was simply too remote. Puzhou, by contrast, was ideally situated—its transportation networks were superior, its facilities more complete.

And most importantly—

Its population was much larger.

A large population meant a larger talent pool.

At this moment, Puzhou had once again become a veritable "center of the world." Its bustling prosperity was already showing faint signs of rivaling the original Gao Family Village.

When Sun Chuanting arrived at Puzhou, he immediately saw someone waiting at the city gates.

The man was clad head to toe in mountain-patterned armor, standing straight-backed and imposing, leading a large group assembled to welcome him.

Sun Chuanting fixed his gaze on the man and couldn't help but pause.

"Eh? You are... one of the militia's generals. Lao Nanfeng?"

Lao Nanfeng chuckled, leaned in closer, and whispered quietly,

"Actually... my real identity is Brigade General."

Sun Chuanting froze.

"Eh?"

An imperial military officer—a Brigade General—had actually removed his insignia, disguised himself as a militia soldier, and gone to the northern frontier to fight the Manchus.

This revelation filled Sun Chuanting with admiration.

He immediately cupped his hands in a formal salute.

"General, what noble conduct! But if word of this were to spread, you could very well be stripped of rank and imprisoned."

Lao Nanfeng laughed heartily.

"Then let them strip me! What's there to be afraid of?"

Sun Chuanting shook his head seriously.

"General, please don't say such things. A general of your caliber—if truly stripped of office—would be a great loss to the Great Ming."

Lao Nanfeng waved it off.

"Small matter, small matter. No need to dwell on it. Come—let me show you the military academy."

Sun Chuanting blinked.

"Eh? It's already prepared? I thought we'd have to start construction from scratch."

Lao Nanfeng laughed.

"It was prepared several years ago. But without a suitable person to manage it, it's been left vacant all this time."

Sun Chuanting sighed sincerely.

"Master Li is truly farsighted."

Lao Nanfeng chuckled.

"His foresight extends far beyond this. You'll understand more as time goes on."

He led Sun Chuanting north of the city, to the banks of the Sushui River.

There, atop a broad stretch of yellow riverbank, stood a massive academy complex.

Lao Nanfeng smiled.

"This place is known as Huangshuitan in Puzhou. Hence, the academy is called Yellow Pole Military Academy."

Sun Chuanting nodded slowly.

"I don't quite understand why... but the name sounds extremely formidable. Why is that?"

Lao Nanfeng replied calmly,

"Once you officially take charge, the academy will begin operating. I'll provide you with ample teaching materials—ancient military treatises, contemporary military texts, and... celestial military treatises."

"Celestial military treatises?"

Sun Chuanting was stunned.

Lao Nanfeng did not explain.

He would understand eventually.

He continued,

"Additionally, the weapons used by our militia differ greatly from traditional arms. Their manuals, operating guides, and tactical instructions will all be compiled into texts and delivered to you."

"Mister Sun, you needn't worry about supplies," Lao Nanfeng added. "I'll handle everything."

Sun Chuanting was overjoyed.

"Many thanks, General."

"As for students," Lao Nanfeng went on, "the first batch will consist of all militia officers holding the rank of centurion or above. The numbers will be small at first, so it won't be too burdensome."

"Once they complete their studies and can serve as assistant instructors, we'll expand enrollment—opening it to ordinary soldiers, and even recruiting from the general populace."

Sun Chuanting was taken aback.

"Eh? Even ordinary soldiers? Most of them are illiterate—how can they learn?"

Lao Nanfeng grinned.

"Many of our soldiers are literate, especially the younger ones. If they grasp some military theory, they can be promoted to non-commissioned officers."

Sun Chuanting was completely speechless.

"In short," Lao Nanfeng concluded, "Yellow Pole Military Academy is new. Everything will be a process of trial and error."

"Mister Sun, just do what you think is right. Heavenly—ahem—Master Li also said that things might be a bit chaotic at first, but after a few days, everything will fall into order."

Sun Chuanting nodded solemnly.

"This is something no one has ever attempted. Since we're starting from nothing, let's work hard."

"Let's eliminate the Manchu threat as soon as possible."

As he spoke, Lao Nanfeng suddenly remembered something.

He reached into his robe, pulled out a movie ticket, and pressed it into Sun Chuanting's hand.

"Mister Sun, there's a screening tonight at the Puzhou Grand Theater—The Young Soldier of the Daling River Border Army."

"You actually wrote the story for this movie. Since you're here, why not go take a look?"

Sun Chuanting stared.

"Eh?"

He held the ticket, looking left and right in confusion.

"What... exactly is a movie? Wasn't the story I wrote for Tie Niaofei meant to be a comic?"

That evening, after dinner—

Sun Chuanting clutched the ticket, asking for directions as he walked, until he finally arrived at the Puzhou Grand Theater.

At night, the theater was the liveliest place in all of Puzhou.

Every evening featured rotating performances—song and dance, stage plays, operas, or movie screenings.

It was a dazzling world of entertainment.

Seeing the bustling crowd, Sun Chuanting felt inexplicably nervous.

It's my first time seeing a movie... Are there any rules?

When I enter, should I step in with my left foot or my right?

How do I make it look like this isn't my first time?

Just then, he noticed a young scholar nearby—refined, elegant, clearly someone of learning.

Sun Chuanting thought, This fellow looks reliable. If I follow him, I won't embarrass myself.

He stepped forward and cupped his hands.

"Greetings, my friend. I am Sun Chuanting, from Daizhou in the north. Have you seen this movie before?"

The scholar quickly returned the salute.

"I am Gu Yanwu, from Jiangsu. To be honest... I've only just heard of this 'movie' thing myself. This is my first time too."

They stared at each other.

Wide-eyed.

So... we're both country bumpkins.

In that moment, a silent understanding was reached.

But with people, once you have a companion, fear diminishes greatly.

Thus, the two instantly formed the First-Time Moviegoers Alliance, silently agreeing:

As long as we're embarrassed together, it won't feel embarrassing at all.

Chapter 859: Zu Dashou, Prepare to Die!

The two utterly unremarkable men stepped into the movie theater.

Their movements were cautious, almost timid—like first-time disciples entering a sect hall, terrified of breaking some unspoken rule.

Sun Chuanting lowered his voice.

"This ticket says '10–12.' What does that mean?"

Gu Yanwu examined his own.

"Mine says '10–11.' Ah! I understand now. These are seat numbers—row ten, seat eleven, and row ten, seat twelve. Our seats are right next to each other."

He laughed softly. "What a coincidence."

The two men followed the numbering, found their row, and sat down carefully, as if afraid the chairs might explode.

They had barely settled in when two young men beside them shot them sharp looks.

"What are you two doing?" one demanded. "You're sitting in our seats."

Sun Chuanting blinked, genuinely confused.

"Huh? Isn't this seat 10–12? It clearly says so on my ticket."

The young man took Sun Chuanting's ticket, glanced at it—and immediately snorted with laughter.

"My friend," he said, shaking his head, "this is a VIP ticket. Your seats are right up front—the best in the entire theater. Why are you snatching cheap seats from us common folk when you're holding something like this?"

Sun Chuanting froze.

"...What?"

Gu Yanwu smacked his own forehead.

"Ah! That's right! When I bought the tickets, I specifically chose VIP seats. And I remember very clearly—it cost quite a lot."

The two men hurriedly stood up and apologized.

Seeing their sincere and flustered expressions, the young men's annoyance immediately melted away. One of them even kindly pointed forward.

"Your seats are over there. Go on."

Sun Chuanting and Gu Yanwu scurried off, faces warm with embarrassment, and finally took their rightful places in the VIP section.

The area was... empty.

Completely empty.

The film *A Minor Border Soldier by the Daling River* had already been shown countless times. The nobles and gentry of Puzhou had long since lost interest, and nowadays the audience consisted mostly of villagers and townsfolk from the surrounding areas.

As a result, the VIP section was almost always deserted.

Sitting in the vast, empty space, with no one nearby to stare at them, the two men finally relaxed.

The movie officially began.

The opening credits flashed across the screen.

Screenwriter: Sun Chuanting

Gu Yanwu slowly turned his head and stared at Sun Chuanting as if he'd just seen a ghost.

"...You wrote this?"

Sun Chuanting coughed lightly.

"...Yes."

Gu Yanwu's eyes widened.

"Then why haven't you watched it before?"

Sun Chuanting's expression stiffened.

"Well... about that... ahem... circumstances..."

It was extremely awkward.

Thankfully, Gu Yanwu's attention was quickly seized by the film itself. The plot unfolded, the visuals vivid and lifelike, the actors' performances brimming with passion.

He stopped asking questions altogether.

Although Sun Chuanting already knew every twist and turn of the story, seeing it rendered so realistically on screen still struck him deeply. The battlefield scenes, the emotions, the sacrifices—it all hit far harder than words on paper.

Then, from the ordinary seats behind them, someone suddenly shouted:

"Kill the Manchu dogs!"

"Kill the Manchu dogs!"

"I'm joining the army!"

"Me too!"

"Let's slaughter those bastards!"

"They're killing our Great Ming people—I can't take this!"

"Kill the traitors!"

People of this era had absolutely no concept of "cinema etiquette." They shouted, cursed, and roared without restraint. No one thought it strange. On the contrary, the entire hall seemed to burn together with shared fury.

Manchu invaders.

Corrupt officials.

Traitors to the nation.

The curses rose and fell like waves.

The atmosphere was electric, surging with righteous anger.

Gu Yanwu glanced back at the boiling crowd and let out a quiet sigh.

"Every man bears responsibility for the fate of the world. I've repeated those words for years," he said softly. "Yet most people slept through them, impossible to awaken. Only now do I truly understand—this is how you ignite the will of the people."

Sun Chuanting nodded slowly.

"No wonder they're building a military academy here. The common people's desire to join the army and fight the Manchu is even stronger than that of the borderlands."

They were both men of insight. What they gained from this viewing went far beyond mere entertainment.

When they exited the theater, their hearts still pounded with lingering emotion.

Gu Yanwu stopped, turned, and bowed deeply to Sun Chuanting.

"Brother, the story you wrote is magnificent. When the day comes that the Great Ming finally crushes the Manchu invaders, your name will surely stand among the contributors."

Sun Chuanting's chest surged with heroic resolve.

"I won't fight the Manchu with words alone. The military academy will officially open in a few days. I'll devote myself fully to running the Yellow Pole Military Academy, training outstanding commanders—and we will overthrow the Manchu."

Gu Yanwu blinked.

"Yellow Pole Military Academy? What is that?"

Sun Chuanting explained, "At Yellow Water Beach, north of the city, a military academy has been built to train commanders. I am its headmaster."

Gu Yanwu's respect deepened instantly.

"When it opens, I will certainly come to observe and learn."

"You are most welcome," Sun Chuanting replied.

After several days of preparation, the Yellow Pole Military Academy officially opened.

The first batch of cadets was not large, all drawn from Lao Nanfeng's forces. Soldiers from farther regions would arrive gradually over the next few days by train.

Most of these men were seasoned border troops. Naturally, there were also many newly recruited soldiers—quite a few still undergoing "ideological training" and not yet eligible for the battlefield.

But that did not stop them from studying military strategy.

After all, both hands had to be grasped firmly.

Sun Chuanting stood at the academy gate, watching his "students" file in. Each one saluted and called out loudly:

"Hello, Headmaster!"

A powerful sense of pride welled up in his chest.

Gu Yanwu stood nearby, observing. For reasons he couldn't quite explain, any place filled with soldiers stirred something deep and stirring within him.

"Hello, Headmaster!" another cadet called out energetically.

Sun Chuanting turned, smiling.

"Excellent, excellent. Study diligently—"

He stopped mid-sentence.

His eyes locked onto the man's face.

"ZU! DA! SHOU!"

Sun Chuanting's roar shook the academy gate.

"Zu Dashou! You dare come to my military academy? Are you here to court death?!"

Gu Yanwu snapped his head over and instantly erupted as well.

"It is Zu Dashou! You audacious bastard—coming to Puzhou just to die?!"

The man being accused went pale and began waving his hands frantically.

"No! No! No! I'm not Zu Dashou! My surname is Chen! I'm a Qianhu under Brother Nanfeng! I'm on our side!"

Sun Chuanting sneered.

"Don't try to fool me. I'd recognize that face even if you turned to ash. You are Zu Dashou."

Gu Yanwu added angrily,

"I remember that face too. I've been dreaming of punching it!"

The two advanced, fists clenched.

Gu Yanwu was merely a scholar, but Sun Chuanting was another matter entirely—versed in both civil and martial arts, tall, powerful, and radiating killing intent. At this moment, he looked more terrifying than a battlefield general.

"Zu Dashou" screamed internally.

Utter terror seized him. He turned and ran.

"Don't hit me! I'm Qianhu Chen! I'm not Zu Dashou! Someone help me!"

The surrounding soldiers burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! Finally, someone not afraid of Qianhu Chen!"

"The era of Qianhu Chen ruling Gao Family Village with that face is over!"

Qianhu Chen shrieked as he ran,

"Don't come any closer!"

Sun Chuanting bellowed,

"Zu Dashou—prepare to die!"

Gu Yanwu shouted,

"Brother, I'll help you!"

"AAAAAAH—!"

The three figures tore off into the distance, sprinting wildly along Yellow Water Beach by the Sushui River, their shouts echoing into the night.

Chapter 860: I Don't Want To!

Shangnan County, Luo Xi's Garrison Camp.

Zheng Gouzi was in the middle of drilling a group of fresh recruits.

The sun was high, the dust thick, and the recruits' movements sloppy enough to make one's temples throb. Just as Zheng Gouzi was about to open his mouth and roar at them again, the urgent thunder of hooves suddenly rolled in from the south.

Several riders galloped in at full speed.

At their head was none other than Lu Xiangheng, the Pacification Commissioner of Yunyang.

This time, he hadn't brought his full Tianxiong Army, only a small escort of a few dozen riders. One glance was enough to tell—he wasn't here to fight.

Zheng Gouzi didn't spare him a look.

Luo Xi, however, quickly stepped forward to greet him.

"Commissioner Lu, you've been busy lately. I trust all has been well?"

Lu Xiangheng was clearly in high spirits.

Recently, the situation in the Yunyang region had improved considerably. The large bandit forces had already fled, leaving behind only scattered stragglers. The Tianxiong Army no longer had to fight tooth and nail every day.

On the political side, thanks to Steward Li's generous assistance, large quantities of supplies had been transported from Shaanxi. Not only had Shangnan County begun to develop steadily, but several towns in Yunyang had also received aid, allowing the common people to finally settle down.

With things going this smoothly, how could Lu Xiangheng not be happy?

Smiling broadly, he said,

"Just a few days ago, my Tianxiong Army chased a bandit force into the Shennongjia Mountains. That terrain is... ahem... not exactly friendly to large formations, so we're currently stationed east of the mountains, helping to stabilize the area and pacify the people."

At this point, Lu Xiangheng's expression turned a little awkward.

"The mountain villages surrounding Shennongjia are truly impoverished," he admitted. "This official wishes to provide relief, but I have neither sufficient funds nor grain. Petitioning the imperial court would take too long. After much thought, I had no choice but to come here—to see if Steward Li might still have some surplus grain."

"Even the landlord's family has no surplus grain left," Luo Xi blurted out.

The moment the words left his mouth, he clapped a hand over it in horror.

Lu Xiangheng shot him an irritated glare.

Zheng Gouzi leaned over from the side.

"Unfortunately, Steward Li had some business to attend to and has already returned to Xi'an."

In truth, one of the Dao Xuan Tianzun mass-produced avatars was standing right there in the room. But Li Daoxuan's attention wasn't focused here at the moment. The avatar had been idle for quite some time, so Zheng Gouzi could only claim that Steward Li was away.

Lu Xiangheng sighed, disappointment creeping into his voice.

"If Steward Li isn't here, then... there's no one who can make decisions, is there?"

No sooner had he finished speaking than a deep, rumbling sound rolled in from the north.

Everyone froze.

That sound—

They hurried to the city wall.

Looking north, they saw a strange sight: a massive iron vehicle, dragging behind it an enormous iron scoop, slowly advancing toward Shangnan County.

Lu Xiangheng's eyes widened in shock.

"What... what is that thing?"

Luo Xi stared blankly.

"Huh? Isn't that one of Xi'an's big trains? Why does it look smaller? And... there aren't any tracks on the ground. How is it moving?"

Of the three, Zheng Gouzi was the least surprised. He let out a chuckle.

"Oh, Young Master Bai must've tinkered up another new contraption. The big train can run without tracks now?"

He smacked his lips. "Tsk, tsk. What an invention."

The iron vehicle rolled closer and soon stopped before them.

Besides the driver, Flat Rabbit was sitting inside.

Recently, Flat Rabbit had been stationed at Tianzhu Mountain, managing surrendered bandits and overseeing their labor reform. Seeing him here was wholly unexpected.

Zheng Gouzi's eyes lit up.

"Lord Rabbit!"

Flat Rabbit beamed.

"Gouzi! Long time no see!"

Zheng Gouzi stared at him in surprise.

"Weren't you at Tianzhu Mountain? How did you end up here?"

Flat Rabbit laughed heartily.

"The labor reform camp there is mostly settled. It can run smoothly even without me, so I handed things over to my deputy. Just happened that this big cargo vehicle from Xi'an was heading this way, so I hitched a ride."

Zheng Gouzi gestured at the iron behemoth.

"This cargo vehicle is...?"

Flat Rabbit waved his hand.

"Does that even need asking? It's a new invention from our village! Look—fully loaded with grain, all to support Shangnan County's development."

At the sight of the grain, Lu Xiangheng was overjoyed.

"Excellent! New grain has arrived again! I wonder... would Steward Li be willing to let me borrow some for refugee relief?"

The moment he said this, Flat Rabbit nearly jumped up.

"What's wrong? Refugees? Where?"

Lu Xiangheng explained,

"On the outskirts of the Shennongjia Mountains, several villages are barely surviving. Bandit armies passed through recently and plundered them again..."

Before he could finish, Flat Rabbit was already restless.

"That won't do!" he exclaimed. "We have to help them—give them grain, give them grain!"

Zheng Gouzi hurriedly reminded him,

"Hey, Lord Rabbit, have you forgotten your past punishments? Public grain isn't yours to hand out just because you feel like it."

Flat Rabbit burst into laughter.

"Haha! Times have changed. I have authorization!"

He pulled out a token.

On it were the words: Chivalry Token

Below, in smaller characters: Special Permit for Disaster Relief and Material Allocation

Flat Rabbit held it up proudly.

"The Hea— ahem—Steward Li knows there's been unrest in Yunyang lately, and his attention is focused on the north. So he specifically issued this token to me! With this authority, if I say help the common people, then we help the common people!"

Zheng Gouzi clicked his tongue in amazement.

"This token is incredible..."

Only Flat Rabbit could ever receive such trust.

Because among all of Gao Family Village, the most pure-hearted and selfless person was Flat Rabbit.

The Tianzun didn't need to worry about him skimming supplies or enriching himself. That was why he dared to grant him such sweeping authority—to allocate materials freely.

This privilege wasn't given lightly.

For someone like Lao Nanfeng, the Heavenly Lord wouldn't dare. Too much power might corrupt him.

But Flat Rabbit was different. He had already proven himself managing the Tianzhu Mountain labor reform camp—careful, principled, and methodical. Giving him this token now was perfectly timed.

Lu Xiangheng, however, saw things very differently.

Steward Li handed such great authority to someone who looks this unreliable...

Sooner or later, the Li family fortune will be squandered away, he thought silently.

After the handover, Flat Rabbit distributed the grain: two-thirds remained in Shangnan County, while one-third was given to Lu Xiangheng.

It wasn't much, but it was a clear gesture of goodwill. More shipments would arrive later, and future relief would follow the same ratio.

Lu Xiangheng thanked them repeatedly and took his leave.

Once he was gone, Flat Rabbit turned to Zheng Gouzi.

"Gouzi, pack your things and come with me. Shangnan County won't see any fighting for a while. Leaving Luo Xi here alone will be fine."

Zheng Gouzi was baffled.

"Where are we going?"

Flat Rabbit grinned.

"The Tianzun said we're both fools and desperately need systematic military education. Otherwise, we'll never become great generals. He wants us to go immediately and enroll at the newly established Yellow Pole Military Academy in Puzhou."

Zheng Gouzi's face twisted.

"Ugh. I hate school."

Flat Rabbit sighed.

"I hate it too. But think about it—those brats and greenhorns who joined the militia after us are all rushing off to study now. If they graduate, get promoted, and end up commanding battalions while we're still squad leaders... wouldn't that be unbearably awkward?"

Zheng Gouzi fell silent.

Damn it... that would be incredibly awkward.

Flat Rabbit leaned in, smiling mysteriously.

"Oh, and one more thing. The academy doesn't just teach military strategy—it also teaches martial arts."

Zheng Gouzi froze.

"...?"

Flat Rabbit stroked the ancestral treasured sword at his waist and sighed dreamily.

"This time, I'll finally get to learn real swordsmanship, right?"

Zheng Gouzi snorted.

"Don't be ridiculous. There's no such thing as practical swordsmanship in this world. It's all flashy nonsense. You'd be far better off learning saber techniques."

"Impossible!" Flat Rabbit retorted.

"The sword is the king of all weapons! How could it not have real combat techniques? I absolutely refuse to learn saber techniques!"

Zheng Gouzi shook his head.

"Precisely because it's the king, the sword is for command—not for chopping people down. Stop being stubborn and learn saber techniques."

"I don't want to!"

Flat Rabbit wailed.

"Noooooo!"