

Great Ming 861

Chapter 861: Zhu Cunji's Kulinan

In the eastern outskirts of Xi'an, beside the railway tracks, stretched a broad, flat tract of land leased by Gao Family Village.

The soil here was thin and barren, unsuitable for farming. Zhu Cunji had always been too lazy to bother with it, so it had long been left idle. When Gao Family Village built the railway through this area, the tracks veered slightly away from the main road and encroached upon a small portion of land belonging to the Qin Prince's Mansion. The mansion hadn't even bothered to send anyone to deal with it.

Thus, when Wang Tang came to negotiate leasing the land at a low price to construct an automobile factory, Zhu Cunji agreed almost without hesitation.

After all, it was useless land. Any rent was better than nothing.

And right now, he desperately needed money.

The construction of the West Yan Railway was consuming astronomical sums. Even a landowner as powerful and wealthy as the Qin Prince's Mansion was beginning to feel the strain.

On top of that, he was simultaneously funding the construction of the Dao Xuan Tianzun grottoes and developing multiple tourist attractions with attached commercial streets.

Money was pouring out like floodwater.

Fortunately, the food street in Sanhuan County and Li Jing's former residence had already begun generating revenue, finally providing a small but welcome trickle of return.

At this moment, Zhu Cunji was walking through the automobile factory under construction together with Wang Tang.

Large numbers of Blue Hats and Yellow Hats bustled about, hard at work.

The factory buildings were already complete, and equipment was now being moved inside.

Naturally, all of this equipment had been transported by rail.

The factory's location right next to the railway made transport exceptionally convenient. Gao Family Village had even built a temporary station here so that Blue Hats and Yellow Hats could easily get on and off the trains.

Zhu Cunji noticed a group of workers hauling an enormous stone vat into a workshop and couldn't help asking,

"What's that for? Why is the vat so huge?"

Wang Tang replied honestly,

"I don't know either. I'm just a weak, helpless, pitiful manager."

From the side, Gao Yiyi popped out, laughing as she explained,

"That's a vat for molten iron. Only stone vats can hold red-hot molten iron—nothing else will do. And that thing next to it is a mold. The workers pour the molten iron from the vat into the molds, and once it cools, individual car parts are formed."

Zhu Cunji suddenly realized,

"Oh! So that's how railway tracks are cast as well?"

Gao Yiyi nodded.

Zhu Cunji immediately pouted in exaggerated grievance.

"It looks so simple, yet you sold each section to me for two taels of silver."

Gao Yiyi smiled faintly.

"It looks simple, but producing high-quality molten iron requires countless hours of research and experimentation."

"All right, all right." Zhu Cunji waved his hand, no longer complaining.

He continued hopping around the factory with restless energy. For reasons even he couldn't quite explain, he was deeply fascinated by transportation. He loved massive trains, and this automobile factory fascinated him just as much.

Perhaps it was because he might never leave Xi'an in his entire life that he longed so intensely for vehicles capable of "quickly transporting him somewhere else."

He suddenly asked,

"This factory doesn't have a name yet, does it?"

Gao Yiyi nodded.

"We haven't decided on one."

Zhu Cunji let out a sly chuckle.

"Then I, the heir, shall name it."

"No!" Gao Yiyi and Wang Tang shouted in unison.

"Don't you realize how terrible you are at naming things?" Wang Tang continued. "Naming the big train 'Cunji' has already become a citywide joke in Xi'an."

Zhu Cunji immediately looked wounded.

"Is my name really that unpleasant?"

Wang Tang replied carefully,

"It's fine for a person. Absolutely unsuitable for a train."

Zhu Cunji snorted.

"Hmph! Are your naming skills so superior? 'Bamei No. 1 Factory' and 'Xigang No. 2 Factory'—what kind of appeal do names like that have?"

Both of them fell silent.

Seeing their silence, Zhu Cunji straightened proudly and declared,

"This place is Xi'an, which has been called Chang'an since ancient times. Therefore, I, the heir, hereby name this factory—Chang'an Automobile Factory."

Wang Tang thought for a moment.

"Oh? That name isn't bad at all."

Gao Yiyi nodded as well.

"I think it's quite good."

Just then, the embroidery of the Dao Xuan Tianzun on Wang Tang's chest suddenly opened its mouth and chuckled,

"The name Chang'an Automobile Factory is excellent. It is approved."

"Wow! Dao Xuan Tianzun is here!" Zhu Cunji exclaimed in delight.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun even says my name is excellent! Hahahaha! See? My naming skills are perfectly fine! Hahahahaha!"

The others exchanged glances, utterly speechless.

He truly shone the moment he received even the slightest praise.

As everyone stood there awkwardly chatting, a truck rumbled over from the distance and came to a stop beside them.

The driver jumped down and said,

"Chief Engineer Gao, I've delivered the rubber you requested."

Zhu Cunji immediately turned his head to look at the vehicle.

The moment he saw it, his eyes lit up.

"Is this the automobile the Chang'an Automobile Factory will produce? A small train that can run anywhere without tracks?"

Gao Yiyi nodded.

"Yes."

Zhu Cunji was overjoyed.

"Sell it to me! Sell it to me!"

Gao Yiyi shook her head.

"We can't sell it. This is the only one we have right now. It's constantly busy—just came back from Shangnan County, now it's rushing off to transport rubber, and after that it still has to deliver books to the Huangpu Military Academy. It has far too much work to do."

Zhu Cunji said confidently,

"I saw 'Experimental Car No. 3' written on its side. That means there must be others—Experimental Car No. 1 and No. 2. I, the heir, would be perfectly satisfied with either of those."

Gao Yiyi replied,

"Experimental Car No. 1 was made of wood and has already fallen apart. As for Experimental Car No. 2... it's still in the village."

Zhu Cunji's face immediately lit up.

"Give me Experimental Car No. 2, and I'll waive the rent for this factory land for five years."

That was an extremely generous offer.

Wang Tang, who handled the accounts regularly, ran the numbers in his head and immediately said,

"Chief Engineer Gao, this is a profitable deal."

Gao Yiyi nodded.

"If you say it's profitable, then it must be. Very well. I'll send someone back to Gao Family Village immediately to deliver Experimental Car No. 2."

Zhu Cunji burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha! Excellent! Excellent, excellent, excellent!"

The following day, Experimental Car No. 2 was delivered to Zhu Cunji.

In truth, Experimental Car No. 2 was in miserable condition. During the battle to defend the steel mill, it had run over and killed three bandit chiefs. Its front was badly dented, the bumper had been completely torn off, and the windows were shattered.

It screeched to a halt in front of Zhu Cunji, looking utterly dilapidated.

Zhu Cunji, however, didn't mind in the slightest.

He brought with him a large retinue of artisans from the Prince's Mansion, who circled the vehicle endlessly. Pointing at the dented front, he commanded,

"Fix this! And then paint the entire body gold."

The artisans hurriedly wrote everything down.

Zhu Cunji then pointed at the windows.

"Install the finest glazed tiles for the windows. The car doors are far too crude—cover them with the finest leather. All seats inside must be upholstered with white tiger fur."

He continued, growing ever more extravagant.

"How can the door handles be made of mere iron? Embed them with precious gems and jade, for me, the heir!"

His demands went on and on.

Several days later, a dazzling, resplendent automobile rolled onto the cobblestone streets of Xi'an.

A five-clawed golden dragon stood proudly upon the hood as its emblem.

The most luxurious automobile in the entire world had been born.

So much money had been spent on "decorating" this vehicle that Zhu Cunji's private treasury was completely drained—not a single copper coin remained.

Thus, he named it:

Kulinan.

There was no helping it.

The heir's naming skills truly were that awful.

Chapter 862: Lao Huihui Returns

While Zhu Cunji was living life to the fullest, indulging himself without restraint, his distant relative—Zhu Changxun, the Prince of Fu, whose fief lay in Luoyang—was trapped in a state of constant terror.

The rebel situation in Henan was worsening by the day. Although Bai Yuan was stationed in Luoyang, preventing rebel forces from directly storming the city, grim reports kept pouring in without pause: one town burned today, another county breached tomorrow. Worse still, these towns and counties were only a few hundred li from Luoyang itself.

The Prince of Fu found this utterly terrifying.

"Mr. Bai! Mr. Bai!" Zhu Changxun hammered frantically on the door of Bai Yuan's temporary residence. "Mr. Bai, wake up! A rebel army just passed through Ruzhou, burning and looting everything in its path! They're already so close to Luoyang! Don't sleep—get up and defend the city!"

The door finally opened.

Bai Yuan stepped out wearing only a moon-white inner garment, his expression one of deep annoyance.

"Your Highness," he said wearily, "you pound on my door at the break of dawn. If I don't rush out to greet you, I violate propriety. If I rush out like this, clothes in disarray, I still violate propriety. No matter what, propriety is violated—so I suppose I'll have to strike 'rites' off the Six Arts entirely. You really can't do this to me."

The Prince of Fu was on the verge of collapse.

"Forget propriety! Forget your clothes! The city needs defending! The bandits are practically at the gates!"

Bai Yuan frowned, visibly irritated.

"Ruzhou is more than a hundred li from Luoyang. Even if the rebels ran without stopping, it would still take them a full day. What exactly are you panicking about?"

"The rebels have cavalry!" the Prince of Fu shot back.

Bai Yuan rolled his eyes.

"Cavalry can't attack a city."

Hearing this, the Prince of Fu finally let out a long breath.

"Ah... right. Cavalry can't attack a city. Then what do I have to fear? Phew! That gave me quite a scare."

Just as the two were speaking—

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Alarm bells suddenly rang out across Luoyang. Warning gongs boomed in succession, and the entire southern half of the city instantly plunged into chaos. Countless civilians screamed as they ran:

"The bandits are here! The bandits are here!"

Bai Yuan blinked.

"Huh?"

The Prince of Fu shrieked in terror.

"Ahhh! Protect me! Hurry!"

A group of personal guards leapt out at once, forming a tight protective ring around the Prince of Fu.

Bai Yuan didn't even bother putting on an outer robe. Clad only in his moon-white inner garment, he sprinted straight toward the southern city wall. The Prince of Fu, still surrounded by his guards, was dragged along in the same direction.

While running, the Prince of Fu shouted,

"Mr. Bai! You clearly heard the bandits were coming—why did you run straight to the city wall yourself? Why didn't you order the militia to mobilize first?"

Bai Yuan replied without slowing down,

"If they need my orders to defend the city walls, then they're useless. In emergencies like this, the militia has its own contingency plans. The moment the alarm sounds, they assemble on their own."

The Prince of Fu stared blankly.

"Oh?"

When they reached the southern wall, the answer was immediately clear.

The militia were already in position.

Fully armed. Fully formed.

The Prince of Fu asked a few questions and learned that the moment the alarm rang, the militia soldiers had leapt out of bed, dressed, folded their quilts, grabbed their weapons, and rushed to the walls in one seamless motion.

Their speed and discipline were astonishing.

Compared to them, the official garrison troops were utterly disgraceful. The pitiful number of city soldiers were still running about in confusion like headless chickens.

As soon as Bai Yuan arrived, a militia captain stepped forward and reported crisply,

"Instructor Bai! Three thousand veteran militia and seven thousand new recruits have all assembled!"

Bai Yuan scanned the ranks and immediately spotted a recruit whose uniform was worn improperly. He pointed at him.

"Someone go check whether his quilt is folded."

Before anyone could move, the recruit stepped forward dejectedly.

"Reporting, Instructor... my quilt isn't folded at all. I woke up too late."

Bai Yuan nodded.

"One hundred push-ups."

"Yes, sir!"

The recruit stepped out of formation and began doing push-ups on the open ground behind the wall.

The Prince of Fu gasped.

"The enemy is about to arrive, and you're still punishing soldiers like this?"

Bai Yuan ignored him completely and instead asked,

"Why wasn't there an earlier scout report?"

A dust-covered man stepped forward—it was clearly a scout.

"Reporting! The approaching rebels are all cavalry, moving fast as the wind. They were no slower than this subordinate. By the time I returned to report, they were already within sight of the wall sentries."

Bai Yuan frowned deeply.

"As fast as scouts... troublesome. When reconnaissance hot air balloons can't be used, our reconnaissance capability has a fatal weakness. Write this down—we need a solution."

After addressing these two minor issues, Bai Yuan finally turned his gaze beyond the city walls.

Outside Luoyang, a cavalry unit stood watching the city with cold precision.

This force was nothing like ordinary rebel bands.

Typical rebels were ragged, poorly armed, disorganized, and low in morale. But this unit was different—uniformed, disciplined, and arranged in a proper cavalry wedge formation.

They were unmistakably elite.

Bai Yuan frowned.

"Which unit is this?"

The scout replied,

"Lao Huihui's forces."

"Oh? Lao Huihui?" Bai Yuan mused. "I remember him very clearly. That... who exactly was Lao Huihui again?"

Silence fell.

The Prince of Fu wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Lao Huihui is from Suide in Shaanxi. A Hui border army soldier. Most of his cavalry are Hui as well. Their combat strength is extremely formidable. This is important—remember it properly!"

Bai Yuan spread his hands calmly.

"I remember it very clearly."

The Prince of Fu dabbed away more cold sweat.

How can you say that with such confidence?

Bai Yuan's expression grew serious.

"Since they are border army veterans, we absolutely cannot let them get close. We must keep them at a distance. If they close in, our militia won't stand a chance."

He raised his binoculars and stared intently at Lao Huihui's army.

At the same time, Lao Huihui was staring right back at him.

Their gazes met across the open land.

Soon, fifty riders rode forward from Lao Huihui's ranks. They raised their voices and shouted in unison toward Luoyang:

"Listen well, princes, officials, gentry, and wealthy households of Luoyang! I am Lao Huihui! I don't like robbing ordinary common folk—I'd be ashamed to take what little they have. But when it comes to robbing you..."

Fear rippled through the city. Many people trembled. The Prince of Fu shrank back instinctively, his neck drawing in.

Lao Huihui continued loudly,

"If you don't wish to be robbed by me, then send out supplies. I won't ask for much this time—just one thousand shi of grain. Once I see the grain, I'll turn around and leave immediately. I will not harm Luoyang in the slightest."

A pause.

"If you don't provide it..." his voice turned cold, "I will circle Luoyang. And whichever gentry estate I pass, I will burn it to the ground."

The threat was aimed precisely at the gentry who had "fled into Luoyang City."

In those days, gentry estates were usually located in the countryside, close to their farmland. When rebels approached, these families would abandon their fortified manors and hide inside the city.

Lao Huihui's meaning was unmistakable:

I may not be able to kill you here—but I can burn down your ancestral home.

Are you afraid now?

Chapter 863: I Can Put a Bullet Through Your Head

When Lao Huihui's words echoed across the field, the Prince of Fu burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha! My ancestral residence isn't outside the city walls at all—it's deep within Luoyang itself! He can't touch it, he can't burn it, hahahaha!"

He laughed with undisguised glee.

But as he laughed, the faces of the local gentry—whose ancestral estates were scattered around the outskirts of Luoyang—turned deathly pale.

A minor official began to sob quietly, his voice trembling as he spoke.

"This humble servant was once a commoner, farming the land in Duanjiagou. The old house and fields, passed down through generations, are all there. If they are burned... then I... I would become the eternal sinner of the Duan clan."

Several merchants and landowners, despair etched across their faces, cried out in chorus,

"Hero! Please, don't burn it—don't burn it down!"

Lao Huihui threw back his head and laughed loudly.

"If you wish to keep your ancestral homes from turning to ashes, then gather a thousand shi of grain. I'm not asking for an outrageous sum."

The gentry exchanged uneasy looks, then instinctively huddled together, clearly preparing for a hurried consultation.

The Prince of Fu, meanwhile, stood aside with the air of a detached spectator, as if watching a lively street performance.

Bai Yuan, however, found the scene increasingly interesting.

He lifted a metal megaphone and shouted toward the field outside the city walls,

"Lao Huihui! Look this way! I am Bai Yuan. I offer you my respects."

Lao Huihui sneered.

"Save your flowery pretenses."

Bai Yuan replied calmly,

"Pretenses? You misunderstand. 'Among a gentleman's Six Arts, I value rites above all else.' This is no performance—I have always strived to conduct myself as a man of propriety."

Silence answered him.

Lao Huihui's face darkened with irritation.

"Do you even understand the situation we're in? And you still have the leisure to spout this nonsense?"

Bai Yuan remained unruffled.

"No matter the circumstances, propriety must never be abandoned. That is the true path of a gentleman."

Everyone listening rubbed their temples.

Lao Huihui rolled his eyes so hard they nearly vanished into his skull.

"Get to the point!"

Bai Yuan asked,

"It seems you've never been one to plunder the common folk?"

Lao Huihui snorted.

"What wealth do common folk have? Could I scrape together five taels of silver from an entire family? It's far more profitable to seize a Prince of Fu—one capture could yield hundreds of thousands of taels. And even setting aside the silver, if I boiled him and ate him, the Prince of Fu's ample flesh alone could feed three starving men."

The Prince of Fu gasped in horror.

"This king is absolutely not palatable!"

Bai Yuan laughed softly.

"Your refusal to prey on common folk suggests you still possess a trace of conscience. Tell me—what truly drove you to rebel? Perhaps we could discuss it."

Lao Huihui narrowed his eyes.

"What's this? Trying to talk me into surrendering with clever words? I'm not that easily fooled."

Bai Yuan replied,

"To abandon darkness and return to the light—how could such a choice be foolish?"

Lao Huihui burst into loud laughter.

"Do you really not know? I was once a great general of the border army—an official of the imperial court. If I surrender now, I'll just become an imperial official again. And what then? They'll still withhold my military pay! No matter how desperately I need it, they'll refuse to give it!"

Bai Yuan fell silent.

Ah.

So this man, like Lao Nanfeng, was another border soldier forced into rebellion by unpaid wages.

The difference was simple.

Lao Nanfeng's unit had wandered into the territory of the Dao Xuan Tianzun, where they now enjoyed full bellies, abundant supplies, and a life bordering on extravagance. Lao Huihui, on the other hand, still roamed the wilds—risking his life daily, fighting desperately for every mouthful of food.

Such was fate.

From the same starting point, lives could diverge into utterly different paths.

Bai Yuan let out a long sigh.

"What if we paid you your wages in full, and you laid down your arms? What then?"

The Prince of Fu's eyes lit up. He hurried to the battlements.

"You want military pay? That's easy! I'll give it to you! This king has plenty of money—I'll give it to you! Just stop rebelling. Wouldn't it be better to return to the court and serve as a general again?"

Lao Huihui scoffed coldly.

"Why should I trust you? I don't even trust Zhu Youjian, let alone a mere Prince of Fu. If I wanted your money, I'd rather break through Luoyang, throw you into a cauldron, and boil you alive. Wouldn't all the wealth in your mansion then belong to us?"

The Prince of Fu recoiled.

"Why do you keep talking about boiling people?!"

Bai Yuan sighed again.

He knew words alone would never be enough.

Lao Huihui had been deceived too many times. The court's credibility was long shattered. And even if Bai Yuan were to proudly display the banner of Gao Family Village, it would mean nothing—Lao Huihui had never even heard of such a place.

This was not the moment for clumsy, distant persuasion.

Before convincing Lao Huihui, he first needed to establish the authority and reputation of Gao Family Village in this man's eyes. That would require a far more direct method.

Bai Yuan raised the megaphone once more.

"Lao Huihui, look at the large rock between us. Do you see the small yellow flower growing on top of it?"

Lao Huihui squinted.

"I see it. What of it?"

Bai Yuan did not reply.

Instead, he swiftly drew his flintlock rifle.

Bang!

A sharp crack split the air.

The small yellow flower instantly burst apart, petals scattering into the wind.

Lao Huihui sucked in a sharp breath.

So far away... and yet so precise? What kind of terrifying skill is this?

Bai Yuan holstered the rifle and picked up the megaphone again.

"See that? Abandon any thoughts of attacking Luoyang. It is only because you refrain from harming common folk that I offer this warning. Otherwise, a simple ruse could have drawn you closer, and a single shot would have sent you straight to the underworld."

The words were arrogant.

But Lao Huihui understood the truth behind them.

If the defenders feigned weakness and lured him forward, reaching that distance would be effortless. The spot was still hundreds of paces from the city wall—far enough for him to lower his guard.

If they could shatter a flower at that range, they could just as easily put a bullet through his skull.

From that moment on, Lao Huihui regarded Bai Yuan with genuine respect.

Bai Yuan concluded calmly,

"Hold to your principles. Do not harm the innocent. We will meet again."

He said no more, simply watching the rebel army with a cool, assessing gaze.

After intense deliberation, the city's gentry and wealthy families did indeed send grain to Lao Huihui.

Naturally, it was not the full thousand shi he demanded.

After a fierce round of bargaining, they ultimately bought safety for their ancestral homes at the price of five hundred shi.

True to his word, once the grain was received, Lao Huihui ceased all activity around Luoyang. He withdrew his troops and marched southeast.

Only after the rebel army had retreated far into the distance did the Prince of Fu turn to Bai Yuan, his face filled with grievance.

"Master Bai, since you can put a bullet through his head from that distance, why didn't you lure him closer and kill him outright? Why warn him instead? Letting a tiger return to the mountains—how impractical and foolish!"

Bai Yuan scoffed.

"You understand abso—cough... I nearly spoke improperly. That would have completely negated the 'rites' among a gentleman's Six Arts."

He struck his familiar contemplative pose, head tilted forty-five degrees as he gazed at the sky.

"We are defending from within the city and have no way to encircle them. If I killed Lao Huihui, his cavalry would scatter in all directions. We'd never catch them—not even one."

"Once they escape, some 'Little Lao Huihui' or 'New Lao Huihui' will inevitably rise to take command. Their policy would shift from 'not plundering common folk' to 'plundering without restraint.' That chaos would spiral out of control and devastate the countryside. It is far better for Lao Huihui to remain in charge—for now, at least his forces have discipline."

Only then did the Prince of Fu truly understand.

"I see! That makes perfect sense! Master Bai's foresight is truly all-encompassing."

Bai Yuan watched the direction of Lao Huihui's retreat for a long moment. Then he turned and summoned Jiang Cheng.

"Send a few men," he ordered. "Lightly armed. Minimal escort. Make discreet contact with Lao Huihui."

Chapter 864: Wolves of the Steppe

In the seventh year of Chongzhen's reign, as late autumn settled in—

While the Central Plains of China still lingered in the tail end of autumn, the Mongolian Steppe had already been swallowed by bone-deep cold.

Every year, this season marked the beginning of suffering for the people of the grasslands.

Food grew scarce.

Livestock weakened.

Countless men and women froze or starved to death.

And so, year after year, when autumn turned sharp and cruel, the tribes fought like madmen—fighting not for glory, but for survival. Fighting for provisions.

At this moment, Hong Chengchou—Supreme Commander of the Three Borders—was personally patrolling the frontier. With his personal retainers and a detachment of border troops, he moved between forts, inspecting defenses, ever wary of Mongol incursions.

Suddenly—

A scout came galloping at full speed.

He did not even dismount. From horseback, he clasped his fists in a deep salute and shouted urgently,

"Report! Supreme Commander! Our spy embedded within the Ordos tribe has sent back critical news! Bo'erzhijin Elinchen, chieftain of the Ordos, intends to surrender to the Manchus! He is currently wavering, and is preparing to send emissaries northeast to negotiate!"

Hong Chengchou's heart clenched.

His expression darkened instantly.

More and more Mongol tribes were defecting to the Manchus with each passing day. Even the Ordos—one of the most renowned and powerful tribes of the steppe—was on the verge of turning.

If a tribe of this size pledged allegiance to the Manchus...

Then the Great Ming Dynasty—

Hong Chengchou let out a long sigh and looked toward the distant north.

"What can be done..." he murmured. "If only I had a strong army, one capable of pushing deep into the steppe and winning over the Ordos. If only..."

He knew it himself.

A beautiful fantasy.

A pipe dream without the faintest chance of becoming reality.

He did not know that—

Just over a hundred li to the northeast, two Mongol tribes were already locked in a brutal clash.

A true, head-on battle.

The chieftain of the Wushen tribe led his cavalry like a storm, smashing violently into the right flank of the Bo'er Su Te tribe. At the same time, the Otog tribe—already allied with the Wushen—attacked Bo'er Su Te's left flank with ferocity.

Two tribes against one.

The Bo'er Su Te tribe was immediately hard-pressed.

Their leader roared furiously amid the chaos, his voice carrying across the battlefield.

"Wushen! Otog! You've gone too far! This is the season to raid the Han for food to survive the winter—yet you insist on fighting me instead? Are you sick in the head? Go see a doctor!"

The Wushen chieftain acted as though he hadn't heard a single word.

Without hesitation, he drove his cavalry straight into the Bo'er Su Te front lines.

The formation shattered.

The Bo'er Su Te tribe teetered on the brink of collapse.

Just then—

From the northwest, the mournful sound of horns echoed across the steppe.

A fresh force appeared.

Cavalry in disciplined formation surged forward—the Dalad and Hanjin tribes had arrived.

The two chieftains laughed loudly as they rode.

"Bo'er Su Te! We've come to reinforce you!"

Joy burst across the Bo'er Su Te leader's face.

"I've been waiting for you!"

It turned out he had never intended to wait helplessly for death.

In recent days, the Wushen tribe had been aggressively clashing with and annexing neighboring tribes. The Bo'er Su Te leader had sensed danger long ago and secretly reached out to the Dalad and Hanjin tribes.

The three had formed a quiet pact.

Watch out for one another.

Unite if attacked.

Now, at last, the reinforcements had arrived.

The Bo'er Su Te leader threw his head back and laughed.

"Wushen tribe! Your arrogance ends today! Dalad, Hanjin—brothers, charge with me!"

In an instant, the situation reversed.

From two against one—

To three against two.

The Wushen and Otog tribes were immediately pushed into a disadvantage.

They began retreating southeast, their formations in disorder.

The Bo'er Su Te leader refused to relent.

"Chase them! Hunt them down! Today, the three of us unite—wipe out the Wushen, this scourge of the steppe!"

The three tribes surged forward with renewed momentum.

During the pursuit, however, the Otog tribe began to waver.

Their warriors' thoughts churned.

"The Wushen are weakening. Three tribes are chasing them. If we keep helping, we'll be hunted too. Maybe... maybe we should defect now. Join the other three and turn on the Wushen..."

Such was the law of survival on the grasslands.

Yet—

At that very moment, a cavalry force suddenly appeared on the southern horizon.

At its head rode a woman in armor.

Zao Ying.

The Wushen warriors burst into laughter.

"Haha! Our Han reinforcements are here! They always show up exactly when we're in trouble!"

The Otog warriors, who had just been entertaining thoughts of betrayal, immediately extinguished them.

"Damn it—the Han are here again!"

"This Han arquebus cavalry is terrifyingly strange. How do they always know when the Wushen are in danger, and appear at the perfect moment?"

"No, no. With the Han here, betraying the Wushen would be suicide."

"For now, obey the Wushen!"

In just a few minutes, the Otog tribe's resolve swayed back and forth like grass in the wind—only to finally settle back beside the Wushen.

Ahead, the Bo'er Su Te, Dalad, and Hanjin tribes remained completely unaware of the snare closing around them.

They roared as they charged.

"Wushen! Don't run!"

The Wushen tribe suddenly stopped.

They wheeled around in perfect unison.

The Otog tribe halted as well, standing firm beside them.

Two tribes faced the charging three—faces cold, expressions resolute.

Still blissfully ignorant, the three tribes thundered forward.

Then—

The Wushen and Otog cavalry split apart to either side.

Behind them, Zao Ying's unit was revealed.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The thunder of arquebuses ripped across the steppe.

In an instant, a massive swathe of the three tribes' cavalry was cut down.

After the volley, Zao Ying's unit pulled back.

The Wushen and Otog warriors surged forward like mad tigers, crashing into the disordered enemy ranks.

"Aoo! Aoo! Aoo!"

The Bo'er Su Te tribe was utterly stunned.

They had no idea what had just happened.

The Dalad and Hanjin tribes panicked as well.

"What was that?"

"What kind of demonic weapons are those?!"

The Wushen and Otog tribes became twin blades, slicing through the enemy formation, crossing and recrossing the battlefield.

As they momentarily separated—

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Zao Ying's unit fired again.

Another rain of bullets tore through the ranks.

Before the three tribes could even catch their breath, the Wushen and Otog surged through once more, ripping apart their flanks.

The battle ended swiftly.

In short order, all three chieftains surrendered together.

They declared their submission to the Wushen tribe, obediently offering up beautiful women and livestock as tribute.

Only then did the Wushen chieftain feel satisfied.

After sternly scolding the three leaders, he returned triumphantly to his settlement, laden with spoils.

"General Zao, thank you once again for your aid."

When dealing with other Mongol tribes, the Wushen leader was an alpha wolf.

But the moment he faced Zao Ying, he became the loyal second-in-command of the pack.

Zao Ying wasted no time on pleasantries.

She took out a letter and handed it to him.

"A letter from your wife and son."

The Wushen leader's eyes lit up.

He took it eagerly.

The letter was written in Han characters, but he could read it.

His wife's message—written by their son on her behalf—was short, only a few simple lines.

But his son's portion was much longer.

"Father, winter must be coming soon on the steppe, right? Your son at Gao Family Village misses you greatly. Recently, I've been learning textile techniques here. My sworn brother, Liu Maopao, helped provide the funds so Mother and I could start a small textile workshop..."

Reading on, his expression slowly changed.

"It made me think of our sheep back home. Our use of sheepskins and wool is far too crude. If we brought the wool from those sheep to my workshop, we could probably weave truly remarkable things..."

Chapter 865: Make Them Listen to You

The Wushen tribe leader looked utterly lost.

"We can already use sheepskin and wool to make clothes ourselves, can't we?" he asked, scratching his head. "Why do we need to send them to some textile factory to process them again? What exactly is the point of all this?"

Zao Ying answered bluntly, without the slightest hesitation, "Don't ask me. I only know how to fight."

The Wushen tribe leader truly didn't understand.

However, when he read the final lines of the letter, those words at least made sense to him:

"My sworn brother has already prepared a batch of supplies and asked General Zao Ying to help deliver them home, to be given to Father, in exchange for some sheepskin and wool. Please, Father, make the arrangements. Your son will surely use these items to accomplish great things."

The leader looked up, still puzzled.

"Supplies?"

Zao Ying nodded. "They'll be here soon."

Sure enough—

Not long after, a caravan slowly appeared on the steppe. It carried essential supplies the Mongols desperately needed: grain, large iron pots, tea, salt...

The quantity wasn't particularly large.

But on the grasslands of that era, Han Chinese goods were exceedingly rare. Even a small amount was enough to exchange for a great deal of sheepskin and wool.

One ox could be traded for one shi of rice and beans.

One sheep could fetch several dou of coarse grain.

The Wushen tribe leader said nothing further.

He immediately mobilized his people, gathered a massive quantity of sheepskin and wool, and handed everything over to the Han caravan.

In truth, trade between the Mongols and the Ming had always existed. Since the early Ming, official "border markets" had been established for precisely this purpose.

However, as conflicts between north and south intensified, and as disasters brought on by the Little Ice Age worsened year by year, the legitimate border markets had long since collapsed.

What remained were only small, secretive exchanges conducted in the shadows.

Now, with a Han caravan openly returning to the steppe once more, it was—at least for the Wushen tribe—a moment of genuine joy.

Once again, the Wushen tribe felt the benevolence of the Han people.

These Han were not only powerful—

They also brought supplies.

Supplies that could help them survive the merciless winter.

Forming an alliance with such people was truly the right choice.

As the Wushen tribe leader happily put away the supplies, Zao Ying approached him again.

"Oh, right," she said casually. "There's one more thing I need to discuss with you on this trip north."

The Wushen tribe leader instantly straightened, his tone becoming respectful.

"My dear Han friend, please speak freely. If it is within our power, we will certainly do it."

Zao Ying spoke plainly. "We've received intelligence. The Ordos tribe is preparing to surrender to the Jiannu."

Hearing this, the Wushen tribe leader couldn't help but let out a long sigh.

He knew well that the "Jiannu" the Han spoke of were the Jurchens—what they themselves called the Later Jin.

The Later Jin were terrifyingly strong.

They constantly trampled over the Mongols. Many tribes in the northeast had already defected to them.

And here in the west, the Ordos tribe had recently been ravaged by the Manchus. They had even driven Ligdan Khan into such despair that he fell ill and died.

The Wushen tribe leader spoke slowly.

"My dear Han friend, I know you are also fighting the Jiannu. My son mentioned in his last letter that you fought them at Xuanfu and Datong—and utterly routed them."

Zao Ying nodded. "Good that you know. The Jiannu are enemies of our Great Ming. We don't want to see the Ordos tribe surrender to them."

The Wushen tribe leader pondered for a long moment, then nodded.

"So... you want me to influence the Ordos' decision?"

"Exactly." Zao Ying grinned. "Don't let them surrender to the Jiannu. Make them surrender to you instead. Wouldn't that be better?"

"To me?" The Wushen tribe leader was stunned. "You want me to absorb the Ordos tribe? That... I don't have that kind of strength."

"You don't," Zao Ying replied calmly. "But we'll make sure you do."

She continued, speaking as if reciting casually, "According to our intelligence, the Ordos tribe is actually composed of many smaller tribes—the Khokhote, Xiba Guchin, Urad, Tangut, Otog, Dalat, Khangjin, Bersud, Wushen, Batejin, Khaliguchin, Khogit, Kriyas, Chahar, Minggat, Khorchin, Khuyaguchin..."

She waved her hand.

"Ah, there are too many. I can't remember the rest."

Zao Ying shrugged.

"Anyway, the Ordos is just a pile of tribes stitched together. To make the Ordos listen to you, you only need to..." She laughed softly. "Hehehe..."

The Wushen tribe leader's eyes lit up.

"I understand. You mean—I only need to make sure that more than half of these tribes listen to me."

"Exactly," Zao Ying said. "If someone refuses, you beat them. If you can't beat them, call me. I'll help you beat them. Once more than half of these messy tribes submit, the rest will naturally follow."

She smiled coldly.

"Then the Ordos won't surrender to the Jiannu. And wouldn't it be even better if, in the end, we beat the Jiannu until they surrender to us?"

This was no small matter.

Yet the Wushen tribe leader felt no fear at all.

The blood of the Mongols did not allow fear in such affairs—only excitement.

To absorb other tribes.

To grow stronger.

To expand one's own people.

This was the nature of the Mongols. Their way of life. Their lifelong pursuit.

Before, he wouldn't even have dared to imagine it.

But now—

With the overwhelmingly powerful Han flintlock cavalry at his back—

He absolutely could.

The Wushen tribe leader clenched his fists.

"Understood! Several tribes already listen to me. I'll gather them all, organize an army, and absorb them one by one. I will strive to make the entire Otot belong to me."

Zao Ying smiled.

"Go for it. I'm rooting for you."

Not long after, Zao Ying escorted the caravan—now loaded with massive quantities of sheepskin and wool—southward to Wangjia Fork Fortress.

This small fortress, now under the control of Gao Family Village, had already been transformed into a formidable military stronghold.

Shi Jian commanded a militia unit stationed there.

On one hand, they watched over the Wushen tribe to the north.

On the other, they dealt with bandits in northern Shaanxi.

After safely escorting the caravan here, Zao Ying did not continue south.

The goods were handed over to infantry escorts, who continued onward. Before long, the caravan arrived at Gao Family Village itself.

All the sheepskin and wool were then delivered to a small textile factory.

Its name was—

Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory.

Liu Maopao held eighty percent of the shares.

Zhebu held twenty percent.

The sheepskin and wool were piled up like small hills in front of the two boys.

Although Zhebu was technically a shareholder, he understood nothing about business. He could only stare in confusion and ask,

"Brother Bubbles... how are we supposed to use all this sheepskin and wool?"

Liu Maopao laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, Little Arrow. Even if you don't understand anything, your big brother understands everything."

He puffed out his chest proudly.

"I'll lead you straight to wealth and success. First, we'll buy textile machines. Then we'll hire women workers. And then—"

He burst into laughter.

"—then we start making big money! Hahahaha! As our factory grows bigger and bigger, all the wool from your tribe will come here for processing. Your tribesmen will get rich selling wool, and we brothers will also make a fortune. Wouldn't that be perfect? Everyone wins!"

Zhebu replied earnestly, "Thank you, Brother Bubbles. You help me with everything. You're truly too kind to me."

Liu Maopao laughed even harder.

"We're sworn brothers. No need for formalities!"

He waved his hand.

"Come on! Let's go buy the textile machines first. After that, we'll put up notices to hire women workers."

Chapter 866: Who Agrees, Who Objects?

During the Ming Dynasty, wool weaving was actually quite rare in the Central Plains. Han people traditionally worked with cotton and silk; wool processing was usually the domain of nomadic ethnic groups.

However, Shaanxi was different.

Because of the Silk Road, Shaanxi had long maintained extensive contact with various ethnic peoples and the Western Regions. Over time, its wool-weaving techniques absorbed elements from Han craftsmanship, Tuyuhun traditions, and Tibetan methods.

The result was a unique blend—ethnic boldness fused with Han delicacy and elegance.

This type of textile even had a name: a local specialty.

And it was extraordinarily valuable.

So valuable, in fact, that it could be selected as tribute and presented directly to the imperial palace.

That—

Was exactly what Liu Maopao and Zhebu's small textile factory was producing.

Zhebu's mother, An Jile, also came to the factory, bringing with her the wool-weaving techniques of the steppe peoples. At the same time, a group of Han women were hired, contributing refined Han craftsmanship to the production process.

After several days of careful adjustments and repeated testing, the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory's very first wool blanket was completed.

The quality was unmistakably tribute-grade.

The moment it left the factory, it was instantly snapped up.

Who among the slightly wealthier residents of Gao Family Village wouldn't want one?

However—

In the end, the wool blanket was purchased by the Village Chief himself.

The Village Chief was deeply respected. Between Gao Yiyi, Gao Laba, and Gao Chuwu, who would dare compete with him for something he wanted to buy?

Even Gao Chuwu—who swept across battlefields like an unstoppable force—would kneel the moment he faced the Village Chief's staff and say obediently, "Grandpa, I was wrong."

As for those who didn't carry the surname Gao, they naturally kept their distance even more.

Besides, the Village Chief was elderly. Wasn't it perfectly reasonable for an old man to want a warm blanket to sleep wrapped in?

If younger people fought an elder over something meant to keep warm, that would be unreasonable.

"Brother Maopao!" Zhebu cried excitedly, clutching the hefty payment the Village Chief had handed over. "Look, look! Our factory's very first product already made so much money!"

Liu Maopao smiled calmly. "Not bad. Not bad at all."

Even An Jile was visibly excited. "I never imagined that something made from just a bit of wool could sell for this much money! With this, we can buy so many useful things—iron pots, iron shovels, tea leaves..."

Liu Maopao nodded. "You can write to your father and discuss it with him. From now on, send all the wool from your tribe here. We'll process it and turn it into money, then buy supplies and send them back to the Wushen tribe. Your people will all become wealthy."

Zhebu's eyes lit up. "Oh? If I help my tribesmen get rich, they'll definitely be grateful, right? And when I become chief one day, they'll be even more obedient."

"Exactly," Liu Maopao said with a grin. "If anyone refuses to listen to you, their family's wool won't be sold. Then they'll starve."

"Brother Maopao is truly incredible!" Zhebu exclaimed with admiration.

Liu Maopao laughed loudly.

Zhebu immediately got to work writing the letter.

He had attended school at Gao Family Village for quite some time now. Writing simple family letters no longer required Liu Maopao's help.

He picked up a brush and carefully—though clumsily—wrote out a few basic Chinese characters, explaining the factory's success, asking his father to send more wool, and describing everything that had happened.

The letter was quickly dispatched by a Gao Family Village courier to Wangjia Fork Fortress, then carried onward by Zao Ying's cavalry to the Wushen tribe.

At this moment, the Wushen tribe was already gearing up for conflict.

After Zao Ying's previous conversation with the Wushen Chief, his ambitions had been completely ignited.

He gathered together the tribes he had already subdued, forming a coalition army, and began systematically crushing the smaller tribes that had yet to submit.

On the Mongolian steppes, this kind of thing was nothing new.

This was how life had always been.

Those who could resist fought back. Those who couldn't surrendered.

Clean. Direct. Without pretenses or melodrama.

However, the Wushen Chief soon encountered a problem.

Supplies.

The steppe grew colder with each passing day. If they only fought among themselves and refrained from raiding Han territory, they would gain no provisions.

And without supplies, surviving the winter would be extremely difficult.

It was precisely at this time that the Wushen Chief received his son's letter.

He read it carefully, his eyes gradually lighting up.

"Well, well!" he laughed. "Zhebu and An Jile are doing quite well for themselves! To think that cheap wool could sell for so much money. In that case, I'll send even more wool over there. Earn more money—and this winter won't be nearly as hard."

At this point, the Wushen tribe effectively controlled six or seven other tribes.

All the sheepskins and wool accumulated by these tribes were gathered together, bundled up, handed over to the trading caravans sent by Gao Family Village, and shipped south.

The reserves of several tribes were completely emptied.

As a result—

Massive quantities of wool flooded into the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory.

Soon, wool blankets, wool sweaters, and all kinds of woolen goods began pouring out at an astonishing pace.

The common folk of Gao Family Village could finally trade their thick, heavy cotton clothing for light, flexible wool sweaters.

The Wushen Chief's prestige skyrocketed.

Because he was not only fierce in battle—

He could also provide ample supplies for his people.

The tribes he had conquered now followed him with even greater loyalty.

In the seventh year of Chongzhen, early winter arrived.

The steppes were already locked in bitter cold.

In Ordos, a grand tribal council was convened.

The one presiding over the meeting was Bo'erzhijin Elinchen—a descendant of Genghis Khan, a representative of the old Yuan nobility, and the de facto ruler of the Ordos.

"Tribal chiefs," Bo'erzhijin Elinchen said slowly, "Ligdan Khan is dead. Our Great Yuan no longer has a leader. The tribes are fragmented. The Great Ming no longer trades with us or sends us supplies. The Jin watch us greedily, stirring trouble one day and attacking the next."

He paused, letting the weight of his words settle.

"Our situation is extremely dire. If this continues, we may not survive the winter."

The assembled chiefs remained silent.

After a moment, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen continued, "After careful consideration, I believe we should surrender to the Jin. The Jin are currently stronger than the Great Ming. Following the strong has never been a mistake."

He swept his gaze across the room.

"Who agrees?"

"Who objects?"

"I object!"

A voice suddenly rang out as a man leapt to his feet.

All eyes turned toward him.

It was the Wushen Chief.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's heart instantly burned with fury.

Someone dares to oppose me? This is an insult!

He was a descendant of Genghis Khan—the helmsman of the Ordos.

How dare this insignificant Wushen Chief be so bold?

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen sprang to his feet, his arm swinging out to slap the Wushen Chief across the face, intending to knock the insolent man to the ground in front of everyone.

But—

The Wushen Chief did not stand still.

He twisted his body, caught Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's wrist mid-swing, and locked their hands together, frozen in the air.

Chapter 867: I Want to Join the Great Ming

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen slammed the table, fury erupting from him like fire.

"Wushen—what outrageous nerve!"

At once, his personal guards and the tribal chieftains who supported him stood up in unison, stepping forward, hands hovering near their weapons, the air sharp with the promise of violence.

Yet what truly caught his breath—

Behind the Wushen tribe leader, the chieftains of Otok, Bersut, Dalat, Hangjin, and a large number of smaller tribes also rose. Without hesitation, they stepped forward as one, forming a wall in front of the Wushen tribe leader.

In that single instant, the balance of power in the council hall flipped on its head.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's face darkened.

"You—!"

None of the opposing chieftains spoke. They merely rested their hands on their sword hilts, eyes steady, posture unmistakably clear.

The Wushen tribe leader threw his head back and laughed loudly.

"My Wushen tribe refuses to surrender to the Later Jin. What are the Later Jin, really? A pack of Manchu barbarians! And what are we? The proud descendants of Genghis Khan himself! How could we ever bow our heads to barbarians?"

His voice thundered through the hall.

"We should follow the old path—trade with the Han, ally with the Han, and together crush those Manchu barbarians!"

The chieftains behind him echoed in unison, voices overlapping.

"The Wushen tribe leader speaks the truth! The Han are rich—only by trading with them can we survive! Following barbarians leads nowhere!"

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's rage burned hotter.

"The Han are weak! They can't defeat the Later Jin. Sooner or later, they'll be wiped out! If we side with the Han now, we'll be buried alongside them!"

The Wushen tribe leader sneered coldly.

"The Han are weak? Are you certain you're not mistaken?"

He gestured casually behind him.

"Ask these brothers of mine—who among them truly believes the Han are weak?"

A wave of awkward silence rippled through the chieftains.

Not long ago, every one of them had been thoroughly "educated" by Zao Ying's cavalry. The memory was still fresh—too fresh. To call the Han weak now would be to admit their own utter humiliation.

The Otok chieftain stepped forward first.

"Whoever dares say the Han are weak, I'll be the first to oppose him! The Han are absolutely stronger than the Manchu."

The Bersut chieftain followed immediately.

"In this world, no one is stronger than the Han. Against the Later Jin, we can still struggle. Against the Han—there isn't even room to fight back."

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen roared, veins bulging.

"Have all of you lost your minds?!"

The chieftains looked at him with expressions that were... strange. Almost pitying.

The Wushen tribe leader snorted.

"In any case, we will never agree to surrender to the Later Jin. Bo'erzhijin Elinchen—if you insist on going down that road, don't expect us to show you any courtesy."

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen laughed harshly.

"Fine! Fine! Fine! So you're rebelling now? If I'm afraid of you, then I'm no true descendant of Genghis Khan!"

The Wushen tribe leader's eyes flashed.

"Good. Then we'll settle this on horseback."

He turned and bellowed,

"Let's go!"

At once, a large group of chieftains followed him, turning their backs on the council hall and striding out without hesitation.

From behind them, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen roared,

"Come back! All of you—come back!"

No one turned around.

The wolf pack had already chosen its alpha. And it was no longer Bo'erzhijin Elinchen.

In a single day, the Ordos tribe split cleanly into two massive factions.

One gathered beneath Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's banner.

The other rallied around the Wushen tribe leader.

Both sides understood perfectly—

A great war was now unavoidable.

At the Cavalry Battalion's training grounds.

A group of "reserve cavalymen" stood on the sidelines, watching the veteran riders thunder back and forth across the field, hooves pounding, banners snapping in the wind. Their eyes burned with naked envy.

These so-called reserve cavalymen were not new recruits.

They had been with the Cavalry Battalion for a long time already. The problem was simple—Gao Family Village lacked horses. There were never enough warhorses to go around.

During training, they could only borrow the veterans' mounts to practice riding, reloading flintlock rifles, and firing from horseback.

"It's torture, not having a horse," one reserve cavalryman muttered. "At this rate, maybe we'll only see battle after the veterans retire."

Another lowered his voice.

"If someone gets wounded... or killed... maybe then—"

Before he could finish, he slapped himself hard.

Smack.

"I was wrong," he said solemnly. "I shouldn't even think such things."

The reserve cavalymen nearby exchanged looks, sighed, and then—

Smack. Smack. Smack.

They all slapped themselves.

That thought had crossed their minds too. Each slap was deserved.

"Not bad," a voice suddenly spoke from the chest of the first man—the Cotton-Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun. "At least you knew to punish yourselves."

The reserve cavalymen jumped in fright.

"Ah—greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

The Cotton-Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly.

"It's normal for humans to have dark, selfish thoughts from time to time. As long as you don't act on them, don't put them into practice, you can still be considered good people—and forgiven."

The men flushed red, embarrassment written all over their faces.

The Cotton-Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun continued,

"Don't worry. A batch of new warhorses will arrive very soon."

Everyone's eyes lit up.

"Really?!"

"They'll be here any moment now."

Almost the instant those words fell, a cavalry troop appeared on the southern official road in the distance. At their head rode none other than Tie Niaofei.

Before even reaching the camp gate, he waved enthusiastically from afar, laughter booming.

"Instructor Zao! Zheng Daniu! Long time no see!"

Zao Ying and Zheng Daniu, who had been awkwardly chatting atop the camp wall, broke into wide grins.

"Steward Tie! It really has been a long time!"

The three were old friends—companions from their days transporting supplies through Shanxi to the border armies of Xuanfu and Datong, and from their pursuit of the Eight Great Jin Merchants.

But after Dao Xuan Tianzun turned his gaze toward the Mongolian grasslands and relocated the Cavalry Battalion from Shanxi back to Wangjia Fork Fortress in northern Shaanxi, they had been separated.

Reuniting now filled them with unrestrained joy.

Zao Ying laughed loudly.

"Steward Tie, what brings you to northern Shaanxi?"

Tie Niaofei laughed just as hard.

"Delivering goods, of course! What else could I be doing for Dao Xuan Tianzun besides that? This time, I've brought warhorses seized from those Manchu dogs during the defense of Xuanfu and Datong."

Zao Ying's eyes lit up instantly.

Gao Family Village desperately needed warhorses. This was truly joyous news.

"Hahaha!" she laughed. "Now my reserve cavalymen finally get mounts of their own!"

Tie Niaofei smiled.

"Once I hand them over, I'll head back to Shanxi. I still need to keep supplying Xuanfu and Datong. Those border armies are miserable—the imperial court ignores them completely. Without supplies, they won't survive the winter. Rebellion would be their only choice."

Zao Ying let out a long sigh.

"I finally understand Lao Nanfeng."

Tie Niaofei burst out laughing.

"That guy doesn't need anyone's understanding. All he cares about is what song-and-dance performance is on tonight at the Puzhou Grand Theater, how many beauties are dancing, and whether any of them will show off a slim waist while swaying around."

Zao Ying froze for a moment—then laughed so hard her shoulders shook.

"You're absolutely right. That's exactly how he is. Hahahaha!"

Chapter 868: The Elopement

A tidal wave of warhorses poured into the hands of the long-awaiting reserve cavalry.

In the blink of an eye, the Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion expanded from one thousand riders to two thousand.

The very moment one reserve cavalryman received his own warhorse, he whooped with joy and leapt onto its back, urging it into a wide, reckless gallop around the training grounds. His laughter echoed wildly.

"Hahahaha! I'm a real badass now! I've got my own warhorse! Hahahaha! No more sitting in the rear waiting for the veterans to die off before it's my turn! Hahahaha!"

Drunk on excitement, he raised his musket and charged straight toward the firing range. From horseback, with practiced confidence—

Bang!

The bullet struck the bullseye cleanly. His marksmanship was excellent.

Unfortunately, the sharp explosion sent terror straight into the warhorse beneath him.

The horse screamed, reared violently, and bucked.

The reserve cavalryman was flung off like a sack of grain.

The onlookers immediately burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha! You idiot—are you still alive?"

The man scrambled back to his feet, dust all over his face, eyes full of confusion.

"Why'd it do that?" he muttered.

Zao Ying walked over, lips curled into an amused smile.

"These are Manchu horses, not our own," she said, half scolding, half laughing. "They haven't gone through adaptive training. Of course they'll panic if you fire a musket right next to their ears while riding them."

"Oh?" The reserve cavalryman stared at her, eyes wide and innocent. "So... our horses do get trained for that?"

"That's right," Zao Ying replied, her tone softening. "You must fire guns close to them repeatedly, get them used to the sound. Only then will they stay steady when you shoot from horseback. And if you want the horse to truly recognize you as its master, you must eat with it, sleep beside it, and build trust."

She looked around at the men.

"From today onward, this horse is your brother-in-arms. It will charge into danger with you, and it will share every victory and defeat."

Only then did the reserve cavalrymen fully grasp how deep the art of cavalry truly ran.

Zao Ying's voice thundered across the grounds.

"Step up your training! Build bonds with your warhorses! A great battle is coming, and soon. The pacification of the Ordos Tribe—only our Cavalry Battalion can accomplish it! Fight hard, and show the infantry what cavalry truly means!"

The cavalymen roared as one.

"OORAH!"

Henan Province, deep within an unremarkable mountain range...

Lady Xing, wife of Chuang Jiang, was personally overseeing the distribution of supplies to the rebel army.

She was no fragile woman sheltered behind silk curtains. Lady Xing possessed a quiet boldness and a sharp, worldly mind. Chuang Jiang trusted her greatly, entrusting her with the vital task of managing all provisions—daily rations, weapons, and battlefield supplies alike.

Even negotiations with Jin merchants were handled solely by her.

Over time, Lady Xing had seen far too much of the world.

There was a saying: "If only you had never seen the world, you might have loved my plain face forever."

Turn that line around, and its meaning becomes obvious—those who have seen the world rarely settle for the ordinary.

This was a truth shared by all humanity.

Unfortunately, Chuang Jiang was—ahem—not a man favored by appearances. Records described him as tall, sharp-cheekboned, with piercing eyes, a hooked nose, and a hoarse voice. He avoided alcohol and women, lived on coarse grain, and endured hardship shoulder to shoulder with his soldiers.

To Lady Xing, her husband had become increasingly... unappealing.

Just as these thoughts drifted through her mind, a personal guard entered the tent.

"General Fan Shan Yao has arrived to collect military provisions."

"Oh?" Lady Xing's spirits instantly lifted. Fan Shan Yao was famously handsome—exceptionally so—and she found herself utterly unable to resist that face.

"Quickly," she said, smiling, "invite General Fan Shan Yao inside."

Moments later, Fan Shan Yao stepped into the tent.

The moment his handsome features came into view, Lady Xing's heart skipped wildly.

With a casual excuse, she dismissed her guards, leaving only the two of them alone.

Fan Shan Yao suddenly stepped forward, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her close.

"Heh heh," he whispered, "I knew it. You like me, don't you?"

Lady Xing gasped softly, her reply dissolving into a flustered murmur.

Encouraged, Fan Shan Yao lifted her effortlessly and laid her onto the campaign bed, his hands already moving to loosen her clothes—

At that exact moment, the Deity of Decorum leapt dramatically into view, blocking the camera with righteous indignation.

The lens, most unwillingly, shifted away—settling instead on a tree just outside the tent. Two crows nestled together, beaks brushing affectionately.

When the camera finally returned to the tent, Fan Shan Yao was already fully dressed in his armor.

Lady Xing lay beneath the quilt, cheeks faintly flushed.

"My lord," she murmured sweetly, "now that we are truly together... you must take responsibility for me."

Fan Shan Yao replied gravely,

"If your husband discovers this, we'll both die without burial. The only path left is to elope."

Elopement—

The act of two lovers fleeing family and society, usually to some distant, unforgiving land, to scrape out a bitter life together.

Lady Xing frowned.

"But I don't want to flee to some desolate wasteland and suffer. I haven't yet enjoyed enough of this world's wealth and splendor."

Fan Shan Yao shook his head.

"Nor do I wish to die as a rustic nobody. But if word spreads that I seduced my brother's wife, I'll be cast out of the brotherhood. No man who commits such a sin is ever respected."

Lady Xing wrung her hands anxiously.

"Then... what can we do?"

Fan Shan Yao's eyes sharpened.

"There's only one choice left. We defect to the government."

Lady Xing gasped.

"What? Will the government even accept us?"

"I command five thousand men," Fan Shan Yao said calmly. "The government is desperate for troops. Why wouldn't they take me? I've heard that 'Madman He'—He Renlong—is operating nearby. We'll pledge ourselves to him."

Lady Xing hesitated, then nodded.

"Then... I'll trust you, my lord."

Fan Shan Yao flashed a smug, handsome grin.

"Heh heh. Leave everything to me. And, my dear... I suddenly want you again."

Lady Xing whispered softly,

"Come... come to me..."

In a few swift movements, Fan Shan Yao stripped off the armor he had just put on and leapt back onto the bed.

Once more, the camera tactfully turned away—this time to a tree where a pair of squirrels chased and tangled together playfully as dusk settled over the camp.

When the lens returned, dawn had already arrived.

Chuang Jiang had barely risen from his bed, teeth still unbrushed, when a soldier burst in, pale with panic.

"Brother Chuang Jiang—disaster! Lady Xing and Fan Shan Yao were secretly involved! They fled overnight with their troops! No one knows where they've gone!"

Chuang Jiang froze.

He lunged for Lady Xing's tent, yanking open the flap—

Inside was the aftermath of a fierce struggle. Bedding thrown into chaos. A sight too painful to behold.

His eyes turned blood-red.

"Why?" he roared. "My first wife, Han Jin'er, betrayed me. Now my second wife has done the same! Why? Why does this keep happening to me?!"

"No—!"

He dropped to his knees, slamming into the ground as he howled at the heavens.

"This isn't real! Why do you torment me so?!"

His nephew, Li Guo, rushed forward and helped him up.

"Uncle!" he said firmly. "From this day on, we devote ourselves entirely to rebellion. Women—we want nothing to do with them!"

Chuang Jiang clenched his fists, his expression turning hard.

"We will rebel," he said coldly, "and we will do it properly. But women... women are still necessary."

He exhaled sharply.

"Next time, I'll simply choose more carefully."

Chapter 869: That's a Secret

The head courtesan of the News Department had just arrived by boat at the Xiaolangdi Naval Base.

She was extraordinarily bold.

Having only just finished reporting on the Manchu invasion, she had immediately rushed to the front lines in Henan, turning her attention to the suppression of bandits.

After all, most women who ended up in brothels came from desperate backgrounds. Poverty, chaos, famine—these were familiar companions. Many of them had witnessed the horrors of war and starvation from an early age. Some had even seen cannibalism with their own eyes.

This head courtesan was no exception.

Her father had died of illness when she was still young, leaving behind a widowed wife and a daughter.

A widow with a daughter—such a family was a classic target.

Her father's relatives descended without mercy, seizing what little property remained.

Mother and daughter were driven from their home. Later, when bandits swept through, her mother was eaten like livestock. The girl herself survived only because she was delicate and pretty—still worth a few coins. The bandits sold her to a human trafficker.

She was resold again and again, until at last she was delivered to a brothel.

From childhood onward, she endured beatings and scolding, forced to study music, chess, calligraphy, and painting. She sold her art, not her body—the madam was waiting for her reputation to rise high enough to fetch a handsome price from some official or noble, who would buy her as a concubine.

That was the fate prepared for her.

She watched herself rise to become the head courtesan of Puzhou City's Crimson Revelry House, her fame second only to Cai Lin's. All that remained was for some wealthy patron to pay the price.

She had already resigned herself to this destiny.

And then—

Dao Xuan Tianzun arrived.

She was redeemed by the people of Gao Family Village, restored to freedom, restored to civilian status.

From that moment on, she became a "disciple of Dao Xuan Tianzun."

A single turn of fate, dramatic beyond imagining.

She was bold—because she had already seen her own mother eaten alive. What fear could possibly remain?

As soon as the large ship docked at the Xiaolangdi Naval Base, she instructed the Special Operations Team soldiers to set up their cameras. The lenses swept across the harbor, recording the warships lined up along the docks, one by one.

As she filmed, she narrated smoothly:

"Everyone, please look. This is Gao Family Village's Xiaolangdi Naval Base. Several gunboats and flatbed cargo ships are currently docked here. As for the exact number of gunboats—well, that's a military secret, so I won't elaborate. Close-up shots are also prohibited; we can only observe from a distance."

She was thoroughly enjoying herself when she noticed one particular ship at the dock being loaded with large quantities of supplies.

"Row over there. Film that ship," the head courtesan instructed, pointing.

The Special Operations Team immediately complied, rowing closer and aiming the camera at the cargo vessel.

"Everyone, take a look," she continued. "This appears to be a cargo ship currently being loaded. It seems to be carrying a substantial amount of grain, likely being sold to—"

Before she could finish, a man dressed like a merchant suddenly leapt out from the cargo ship, waving his arms frantically.

"No filming! No filming!" he shouted. "This ship cannot be recorded. It must not be broadcast."

From a distance, the head courtesan called out calmly, "Oh? Sir, why can't it be recorded?"

The man replied, "Come closer to the dock, and I'll explain."

Moments later, their boat pulled alongside the pier.

The man stepped forward and bowed politely.

"Greetings, young lady. I am Jiang Cheng, an instructor from the Xiaolangdi militia detachment."

The head courtesan returned the courtesy.

"I am Zhou Daya, a reporter from the News Department."

"Zhou... Daya?" Jiang Cheng froze for a moment.

Such a beautiful woman—refined, capable, and composed—calling herself Daya?

Seeing his confusion, she smiled faintly.

"This is the only real name I have. If you prefer elegant, fabricated names, I have many—'Flowing Sleeve Blossom,' 'Willow's Graceful Sway,' and so on. But I don't wish to use them."

Jiang Cheng paused, then suddenly understood.

He clasped his hands and bowed deeply.

"Daya is a fine name."

She nodded, then asked directly, "Instructor Jiang, why can't this ship be filmed? It looks like it's only carrying ordinary goods. What's the problem?"

Jiang Cheng leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"The cargo itself is ordinary. The recipient... is not."

She understood immediately.

"A military secret?"

"Exactly," Jiang Cheng whispered. "Even though you are a disciple of Dao Xuan Tianzun, it's best not to probe too deeply into this shipment..."

"Indeed."

A figure suddenly appeared on the shore, chuckling softly.

"Heh. This matter truly isn't suitable for public reporting."

Jiang Cheng was startled and hurriedly bowed.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

The head courtesan, however, said naturally,

"Ah—Teacher has arrived."

That single difference in address immediately marked the gap in status.

To be able to address Dao Xuan Tianzun differently from ordinary people—Jiang Cheng felt an involuntary surge of envy.

Li Daoxuan smiled and explained,

"The cargo on this ship is destined for the bandit leader Lao Huihui."

The head courtesan's heart skipped.

"Oh? That Lao Huihui?"

"Exactly," Li Daoxuan chuckled. "The Border Army Iron Cavalry. Not light cavalry—true iron cavalry. Fierce, brutal, and extremely dangerous. Mostly Hui people, mixed with surrendered barbarians and Han soldiers."

He glanced at Jiang Cheng.

"This shipment of grain is meant to establish contact with him. In the future, we'll need to win over this Border Army Iron Cavalry."

At last, the head courtesan fully understood.

"I see," she said softly. "Then this truly cannot be reported. If it became public, it wouldn't just endanger Gao Family Village—it would endanger Lao Huihui as well. Other bandits might attack him."

"Precisely," Li Daoxuan said with a smile. "But while it cannot be broadcast, that doesn't mean it shouldn't be recorded."

She blinked.

"Oh?"

Even Jiang Cheng was puzzled.

"If it won't be reported, why record it at all?"

Li Daoxuan laughed.

"For internal archives. Events like this are historically significant. Decades—perhaps centuries from now—when these records are finally made public, future generations will look back and gain a rare, vivid understanding of this era."

The head courtesan bowed deeply.

"Teacher, please allow your student to accompany Instructor Jiang to meet Lao Huihui and record this moment for posterity."

Li Daoxuan smiled, though his words carried weight.

"It will be dangerous. That's a border army. You've seen Lao Nanfeng's methods, haven't you? Border troops kill without emotion—like slaughtering livestock."

"I'm not afraid," she said firmly.

"Excellent," Li Daoxuan praised. "That's the spirit of a true journalist. Go, then. Since the destination is dangerous, I'll accompany you."

She beamed with joy.

"Thank you, Teacher!"

With Dao Xuan Tianzun's involvement, everything became far simpler.

She changed into plain men's clothing, bound her hair, tucked it beneath a cap. Though her manner still carried a hint of softness, unless one stared closely at her face, it was hard to tell she was a woman.

The Special Operations Team surrounded Li Daoxuan and her, forming a tight protective ring.

Jiang Cheng finished loading the ship with grain and brought along a squad of militia soldiers. Including one of Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatars and the Special Operations Team, fifty people boarded the vessel.

Only then did the ship depart from Xiaolangdi Naval Base, sailing downstream along the Yellow River.

Before long, Wenxian appeared on the northern bank.

Li Daoxuan smiled and said to the head courtesan,

"Look—Wenxian. That's the territory under Chen Yuanbo's responsibility. It's also Gao Family Village land."

Chapter 870: It's a Reward For You

The moment Wen County came into view, Zhou Daya was so excited she practically bounced on her feet.

"Wen County is incredibly far from Gao Family Village," she said eagerly. "There's no direct train here at all. You have to come by boat, so most of our villagers have never set foot in this place. Some don't even know what it looks like. If I film everything here and bring it back, it'll definitely make great news!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly. "Alright, then. Let's dock here for a while."

The cargo ship slowed and gradually approached the pier at Wen County.

This was an ancient ferry crossing, known as Ancient Cypress Ferry. Across the Yellow River, on the opposite bank, lay Solitary Cypress Ferry in Xingyang, Henan. Their names differed by only a single character—yet one stood north of the Yellow River, the other to its south.

Separated by water, the two ferry crossings faced each other in silence.

Both possessed a history stretching back more than two thousand years. They had borne witness to the rivalry of Chu and Han, the wars of the Three Kingdoms, and the rise and fall of the Sui and Tang dynasties.

From afar, Zhou Daya could clearly see that Solitary Cypress Ferry on the southern bank of the Yellow River remained as dilapidated as ever. In contrast, Ancient Cypress Ferry on the northern bank, close to Wen County, had been newly renovated and looked almost pristine.

It was like a pair of twins.

One raised by impoverished parents, struggling to survive.

The other adopted by a wealthy household, polished and well cared for.

Before the ship had even finished docking, Zhou Daya noticed countless cargo vessels of all shapes and sizes lined up along the shore. A bustling market had sprung up beside the pier, with merchants everywhere shouting, bargaining, and hawking their goods.

Jiang Cheng smiled as he explained, "Ancient Cypress Ferry has already become a key transit market for goods. Products from both the upper and lower reaches of the Yellow River converge here."

Zhou Daya immediately lifted her camera, recording everything with enthusiasm.

"Our Gao Family Village produces enormous amounts of grain, cotton cloth, and ironware," Jiang Cheng continued. "A large portion of it is transported here by cargo ship and traded. After that, other middlemen carry it downstream along the Yellow River and sell it elsewhere."

He paused briefly, then added, "I used to make my living doing this kind of work. But now I've washed my hands of it. These days, I focus entirely on helping Instructor Bai manage the Xiaolangdi Militia."

Zhou Daya nodded in realization. "So that's how it is! I've always wondered how Gao Family Village could possibly use up all that cotton cloth produced by those amazing textile machines. Turns out it's sold downriver!"

Jiang Cheng laughed. "A lot of villagers don't know this either. Once your footage airs on Gaojia News, everyone will finally understand."

Zhou Daya happily filmed for quite some time, capturing every angle of the pier and market.

Meanwhile, Li Daoxuan used the pause to quietly observe the overall development of Ancient Cypress Ferry. Under Chen Yuanbo's governance, this small county town had been managed remarkably well. The commercial district around the pier was flourishing, full of life and vitality.

After this short stop, the cargo ship resumed its journey, crossing the Yellow River toward the southern bank and docking at Solitary Cypress Ferry.

The moment they arrived, a heavy sense of decay and desolation washed over them.

The entire Solitary Cypress Ferry was eerily silent. Not a single soul could be seen. It was as though the place had been abandoned—or haunted.

Zhou Daya cried out in shock. "It's just one river apart! How can the difference be this huge?"

Jiang Cheng lowered his voice instinctively. "This area belongs to Xingyang. Recently, a large number of rebel factions have been active around here..."

Zhou Daya asked curiously, "A large number? How many are we talking about?"

Jiang Cheng whispered, "Seventy-two bandit camps, big and small. Altogether, two to three hundred thousand people."

Even though Zhou Daya was usually quite brave, the number made her scalp tingle.

"Then... wouldn't it be extremely dangerous for us to go ashore here at Solitary Cypress Ferry?"

Jiang Cheng nodded gravely. "Yes. Extremely dangerous, miss, you—"

He hesitated, then subconsciously turned toward the Dao Xuan Tianzun beside him for help.

Li Daoxuan smiled calmly. "Didn't we already agree to wait by the river for Lao Huihui?"

Jiang Cheng nodded quickly. "Yes. I arranged to meet him here at Solitary Cypress Ferry."

"That settles it," Li Daoxuan said, turning to Zhou Daya. "Don't leave the ship."

Zhou Daya puffed out her cheeks slightly. "With Teacher here, I'm not afraid."

Li Daoxuan smiled back. "This has nothing to do with fear. It's about whether something is necessary. Just zoom in and film from here. Don't put yourself in danger when there's no need. My guiding principle in Gao Family Village—no matter if it's men or women—is always the same: if a risk can be avoided, avoid it; if injury can be avoided, avoid it. Don't take meaningless risks just to prove bravery."

Zhou Daya obediently listened, setting her camera firmly on the bow of the ship.

Jiang Cheng and Li Daoxuan disembarked, accompanied by thirty militia soldiers. They had only lingered near Solitary Cypress Ferry for a short while when the thunderous sound of hooves suddenly echoed in the distance.

A massive formation of cavalry came charging toward them.

At the head of the force was none other than Lao Huihui.

It was clear that Lao Huihui had stationed scouts near the pier. When those hidden scouts spotted "Instructor Bai's ship" from afar, they immediately guided the main cavalry force forward.

The sight of the surging cavalry was truly terrifying.

As the riders drew closer, Jiang Cheng and the thirty militia soldiers couldn't help but tremble. For a moment, they feared that Lao Huihui's cavalry would simply charge straight through them.

If that happened, even if they emptied every round from their Chassepot rifles, they wouldn't be able to stop the onrushing tide of iron and hooves.

Fortunately, Lao Huihui was not a madman.

When he was still about ten meters away, he began to slow down. By the time he reached them, his warhorse came to a flawless halt.

Lao Huihui dismounted with a heavy thud, landing firmly on the ground and standing straight before them.

Only now, at close range, could his appearance be clearly seen.

He looked to be between forty and fifty years old. He wore armor, though it was concealed beneath a layer of Hui ethnic clothing. His face was weathered, etched with the marks of hardship and years of struggle.

"You're Instructor Bai's people?" Lao Huihui asked in a deep, steady voice. "Is the grain you promised me on that ship behind you?"

Jiang Cheng swallowed hard, completely overwhelmed by the man's presence, and couldn't respond immediately.

Li Daoxuan, however, answered with an easy smile. "Yes."

Lao Huihui cast a wary glance at the massive cargo ship. The grain was covered with tarpaulin, and he couldn't see the contents, causing a trace of suspicion to flicker in his eyes.

Li Daoxuan called out calmly, "Uncover the tarp. Let Lao Huihui take a look."

The special operations soldiers who remained aboard the ship immediately moved, pulling back the tarpaulin.

In an instant, the fully loaded hold of grain was revealed.

Lao Huihui himself remained composed, but the subordinates behind him collectively gasped.

"So much grain!"

"Excellent!"

"It's been so hard to get food lately!"

Lao Huihui raised one hand, and his subordinates immediately fell silent, not daring to make another sound.

He turned his gaze back to Li Daoxuan and asked in a low voice, "Why would you give me this grain for free? Instructor Bai isn't from Henan. I can't burn his ancestral home. In this world, no one treats me well without a reason. So tell me—what kind of deal is this? What do you want in return?"

Li Daoxuan replied evenly, "It's a reward for you. During these years of rebellion, you never looted ordinary civilians. You only targeted corrupt officials and wealthy families. Your troops are disciplined. That deserves encouragement."

Lao Huihui let out a cold snort. "Oh? A reward for me? Interesting. And tell me—by what right do you bestow such a reward?"