

Great Ming 871

Chapter 871: Rewarding Good and Punishing Evil

Li Daoxuan said calmly, "A passerby? Why—can a passerby not bestow a reward? Must it always be a master, or a boss, or someone sitting on a throne?"

At the word passerby, Lao Huihui's expression stiffened slightly.

Li Daoxuan's tone shifted, becoming more deliberate. "A young man once wrote a line of poetry: 'The rise and fall of the world concerns every common man.' I find great truth in those words. I am but an ordinary man myself, yet I believe that every individual bears responsibility for what happens in this world."

Lao Huihui snorted. "So just showing up and tossing me a reward counts as taking responsibility for the world's affairs?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled lightly. "To ignore good deeds is wickedness. To leave evil unpunished is also wickedness. Therefore, to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked—that, in itself, is doing good for the world. Would you not agree?"

Lao Huihui fell silent.

He pondered.

This time, he had to admit that Li Daoxuan's words carried reason.

But then Li Daoxuan continued, his tone shifting once more. "That said, in giving you these provisions, I do have one small condition."

Lao Huihui sneered. "Ah. So all that came before was merely groundwork. All that talk of rewarding virtue and punishing vice—empty words. I knew there would be a condition in the end. That's how proper transactions work. Speak. Given a ship full of grain like this, as long as your demand isn't outrageous, I might consider it."

Li Daoxuan said evenly, "My condition is simple. From this day onward, you must maintain strict discipline within your ranks. You are not to harm the common people. Furthermore... you are not to associate with those scoundrels who brutalize the populace. If you can uphold this, I will guarantee a steady supply of grain. But if you fail—"

He deliberately stopped there, leaving the rest unsaid.

The unspoken consequences loomed heavily in the air.

Lao Huihui understood perfectly what those unfinished words implied.

And so, he chose not to hear them.

After a moment, he muttered, "As long as the grain keeps coming, why would I bother stealing bark and roots from the mouths of common folk? That condition, I can accept. As for refusing to associate with certain people..."

He cast a sharp glance toward the south. "Are you trying to sow discord among us?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "Is this sowing discord? Do you truly believe you and that rabble can coexist?"

Lao Huihui stiffened.

He remained silent.

That silence was itself an admission.

He clearly understood that Li Daoxuan was speaking the truth—but he refused to respond to such an obvious attempt at division.

Li Daoxuan waved a hand. "Enough staring. Move the grain."

Lao Huihui shot Li Daoxuan a long, complex look, his emotions unreadable. Then he raised his hand and gestured.

His heavy cavalry dismounted and strode toward the cargo ship.

At the bow of the ship stood a strange device, quietly filming everything. The cavalymen glanced at it only briefly before ignoring it. They had no idea what it was, and since it clearly wasn't a cannon, there was nothing to fear.

Soon, basket after heavy basket of grain was unloaded.

"It's really all grain!"

"Boss, this will last us at least several months!"

"Fine white flour—top quality!"

"And rice!"

"Huh? What's this?"

A heavy cavalryman picked up a square bamboo box. Three neatly written characters were inscribed on the lid:

Luncheon Meat.

Jiang Cheng recognized it instantly and nearly leapt out of his skin.

He rushed forward, practically vaulting onto the ship, snatching the bamboo box back in a panic. "Ah—my deepest apologies!" he said hurriedly. "This item isn't meant for you. It was accidentally mixed in with the cargo."

The cavalryman froze, utterly confused.

A few seconds later, he sniffed the scent lingering on his hands, and realization dawned on him. "This... is pork."

It turned out that when the Gao Family Village Militia had loaded the grain, they had done so out of habit, packing luncheon meat as if provisioning their own comrades.

But Muslims did not eat pork.

Sending pork to Muslims was not goodwill—it was provocation.

Jiang Cheng flushed red with embarrassment and immediately ordered his men to move all the baskets containing luncheon meat deep into the cargo hold.

This small but telling gesture did not escape Lao Huihui's sharp eyes.

Up until now, his expression had been stern, even distant. Yet at this moment, his mood visibly softened.

It was obvious this had been an unintentional mistake, not an insult meant to be magnified. Their swift effort to correct it demonstrated sincere respect for Muslim dietary customs.

To respect someone's food customs was, at its core, to respect the person.

And for those long regarded as "barbarians" by the Han people, receiving such respect carried extraordinary significance.

Lao Huihui spoke, his voice now carrying a hint of magnanimity. "It's quite alright. We are not so rigid. My army isn't composed solely of Muslims—we have many other ethnic groups among us, including Han people. This pork can be given to them."

He paused, then performed a deep, formal bow toward Li Daoxuan. "In a year of such terrible famine, your willingness to provide even meat is a kindness bestowed by heaven. How could I possibly be so petty as to resent that the meat happens to be pork?"

Li Daoxuan smiled gently.

Lao Huihui turned and barked at his men, "What are you all gawking at like startled pheasants? This is the Central Plains—Han people are everywhere. Is pork really so strange here? Carry it all back for our brothers from the other tribes! Damn it, it's a famine year—stop being so picky, or you'll truly starve!"

The heavy cavalrymen, faces flushed with embarrassment, quickly suppressed their aversion and resumed unloading the cargo.

Before long, the ship was completely emptied.

Lao Huihui had no carts prepared, so he simply ordered each cavalryman to shoulder a heavy pack. In a blink, all the provisions were secured to their horses.

He clasped his fists toward Li Daoxuan in salute. "For today's great generosity, I, Lao Huihui, will not forget it."

Li Daoxuan waved his hand dismissively. "Go. No need for ceremony. Stay in touch when the opportunity arises."

Lao Huihui tugged on his reins, turned his horse, and rode off.

The heavy cavalry followed, wheels turning as one. With a thunderous roar of hooves, they vanished from sight in moments.

Jiang Cheng stared in the direction they had gone and murmured, "They're heading toward Xingyang. I've heard that place is currently a hornet's nest of bandits."

"Indeed," Li Daoxuan said thoughtfully. "The seventy-two rebel forces are all converging there. The so-called Xingyang Conference is imminent. But in truth, there's nothing to discuss. A crowd of bandit chiefs will gather, pretend to deliberate, and in the end... they'll still scatter to plunder. No novelty at all."

Jiang Cheng stared, stunned.

Suddenly, realization struck him.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun was revealing a divine secret—foretelling the rebels' future actions.

Lowering his voice, he asked, "Then... what places will they plunder next?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly, a strange glint in his eyes. "They'll dig up ancestral tombs."

Jiang Cheng gasped. "What?!"

He couldn't understand it at all.

But divine secrets were never easy for mortals to grasp. Jiang Cheng did not dare press further, choosing instead to ponder the words in silence.

Li Daoxuan said simply, "Let's return."

The group boarded the cargo ship.

The vessel that had arrived heavy with provisions was now empty, light and swift.

They had only sailed a short distance when a medium-sized cargo ship appeared ahead, heading straight toward them. It rode high on the water, clearly empty—having completed its trade and now returning home.

Li Daoxuan paid it no attention.

But Jiang Cheng frowned slightly. "Something's not right about that ship," he said quietly.

Chapter 872: Strange Enemies

Journalists were, by nature, creatures of boundless curiosity—and the Chief Correspondent was no exception.

"What seems amiss?" she asked immediately.

Jiang Cheng raised his hand and pointed toward the empty cargo ship ahead. "We're already far from Xiaolangdi. Any merchant vessel operating in this stretch of the river must display its flag."

The Chief Correspondent blinked. "Why does distance from Xiaolangdi matter? Why do they have to show their flag out here?"

Jiang Cheng explained patiently, "Because the Xiaolangdi river bandits have already been wiped out by our Gao Family Village Militia. Near Xiaolangdi, the waters are safe, so ships don't need to fly their flags. But once you enter unsafe territory, any ship that wants to survive must display its flag clearly, so the bandits know who they belong to."

He continued, "Some merchant companies are powerful enough that the bandits won't dare provoke them. Their flag is a warning—stay away. Like our Five-Colored Dao Xuan Tianzun Flag."

He gestured toward the mast.

The Chief Correspondent followed his finger and looked up. Sure enough, a brilliant, five-colored flag fluttered proudly at the top of the tall pole.

"The moment our flag goes up," Jiang Cheng said calmly, "any river bandits will flee as far as they can. They know we're the ones who eradicated the Xiaolangdi bandits. Nobody wants to provoke that kind of force."

The Chief Correspondent nodded, understanding dawning.

Jiang Cheng went on, "Then there are weaker merchant companies. They pay protection money to bandits along the route in advance. When they show their flag, it's basically saying: I've paid my dues—we're on the same side. Don't rob me."

"I see," the Chief Correspondent murmured softly.

Her gaze returned to the empty ship gliding across the water ahead. She lowered her voice. "So this ship... not showing any flag at all... that really is strange."

She hesitated. "Could they be bandits themselves?"

A sailor nearby swallowed and asked cautiously, "Commander Jiang... should we open fire?"

Almost at the same moment, Hand Grenades were hurled.

Several struck wooden planks and bounced away; others arced through the air before detonating.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The explosions thundered across the river—but only a few scattered screams followed. There was no widespread wailing, no chaotic panic.

The Chief Correspondent sucked in a sharp breath. "Ah?"

It was obvious: the moment the grenades flew, the enemy had already withdrawn into the cabins—or perhaps into specially prepared hiding compartments.

But the seventy Special Operations Team soldiers were momentarily at a loss.

They weren't trained for naval combat. Simply standing steady on the rocking deck was already difficult, let alone fighting effectively.

At that moment, the strange vessel slowed slightly, subtly altering its course—as if intending to pass right alongside the Gao Family Village ship.

A sturdy man with bronzed skin stepped onto the bow of the opposing ship and shouted loudly, "We're a merchant vessel from downstream! We're not familiar with these waters. Could you point us toward Gudu Ferry? Have we already passed it?"

The flagless ship's movement was deliberate—its course unmistakably aimed at Gao Family Village's cargo ship.

Before any new orders could be issued—

A volley of arrows burst forth.

Arrows screamed through the air like a black storm.

Sailors cried out as several were struck, but thankfully, all had donned concealed armor for this journey. They had anticipated the possibility of Lao Huihui turning hostile.

The arrows struck armor with dull thuds. Most injuries were minor.

The distance between the ships closed rapidly.

In the blink of an eye—

Another rain of arrows descended.

Thud!

An arrow slammed into Jiang Cheng's chest, knocking him backward onto the deck.

The enemy was clearly well-prepared.

They had targeted Gao Family Village deliberately.

They had even taken precautions against flintlock rifles—thick wooden planks reinforced with thin iron sheets had been erected all across their deck. Archers hid safely behind these crude but effective shields.

The range had closed to well within arrow distance, completely negating the advantage of Gao Family Village's flintlock rifles.

The sturdy man cupped his hands and laughed loudly. "Much obliged, brothers! Running this route for the first time really had my head spinning. We heard there are plenty of fine goods brought from the coast to Gudu Ferry, so we planned to load up a ship and haul it back to Yongji Pier."

Thwack! Thwack!

Flintlock bullets slammed into the reinforced planks—but couldn't penetrate them.

The Chief Correspondent turned pale. "Commander Jiang!"

Arrows fell in sheets.

The eighty Militia sailors scrambled for cover as the sharp bang bang bang of flintlock fire echoed across the river.

Jiang Cheng shouted hoarsely toward the enemy ship, "This is a Xiaolangdi cargo vessel! Where do you come from? Do not approach any closer! Another step forward will be considered a provocation!"

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly.

The two ships continued passing one another—one upstream, one downstream.

This stretch of the Yellow River wasn't wide, and both ships occupied the center channel. From a distance, it looked almost like a head-on collision.

The Special Operations Team soldiers received the order and quickly escorted the Chief Correspondent back into the cabin.

On deck, sailors lit grenade fuses and hurled them again.

Jiang Cheng, who had just been knocked down, pushed himself upright with both hands, sitting back up. The arrow still trembled where it had struck his chest.

Beneath his merchant robes, concealed armor had saved his life—the arrowhead had barely pierced it, leaving only a shallow wound.

Jiang Cheng let out a grim chuckle. "From Yongji Pier, you say?" he shouted. "Then you should be flying the Five-Colored Dao Xuan Tianzun Flag!"

The strange ship continued drawing closer.

He called out again, "Gudu Ferry is upstream! You need to keep sailing in that direction—"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Leave the professional work to the professionals. Just make sure you protect the boys."

Jiang Cheng turned sharply. "Prepare for battle!"

On board were eighty Xiaolangdi Militia sailors and seventy Special Operations Team soldiers guarding the Chief Correspondent.

The instant the order was given, the eighty Militia sailors snapped into full combat readiness.

Jiang Cheng hesitated for half a breath.

In theory, opening fire without clarifying intentions wasn't proper.

"Only villains strike without words," he muttered. "Civility before combat—that's the code of the rivers and lakes."

Then his expression hardened. "But they're clearly prepared. They're coming straight at us! Hand Grenades—throw them!"

Before his words even finished—

A swift arrow shot out from the cabin behind the sturdy man.

It was blindingly fast.

Jiang Cheng wasn't a martial artist with lightning reflexes—he had no time to dodge.

He shook his head grimly. "They're not ordinary river bandits either. If they were, they would've seen our Five-Colored Flag long ago and fled. But look at them—they're advancing without hesitation. They'll be alongside us in moments."

Sound carried far across the river.

The enemy had heard everything.

This group was cunning—terrifyingly so.

They had deliberately rushed forward, betting that Gao Family Village wouldn't attack without cause. They used the excuse of asking for directions, dragging out conversation while closing the distance inch by inch.

Jiang Cheng roared in fury, "Damn it! Good thing I was prepared! Fire! Fire back!"

The sturdy man on the opposing ship burst into laughter. "So it is the ship flying the Five-Colored Flag! Brothers—charge! Kill every last one of those Xiaolangdi dogs!"

The pain was intense—

But not fatal.

"They even prepared defenses against Hand Grenades," Jiang Cheng said, alarm flooding his voice. "How do they know so much about us?"

His gaze darkened.

"Where... do these strange enemies come from?"

Chapter 873: Who Sent You

This was the first time the Gao Family Village soldiers had ever encountered an enemy so thoroughly prepared, and for a moment they felt completely at a loss.

In the past, every battle had followed the same pattern: throw a grenade, line up the muskets, fire a volley—and the fight was over. Victory, done and dusted. Over time, that had inevitably bred a sense of ease among the militia, as if war itself were a simple thing.

Arrogant soldiers are bound to lose.

This battle was an education.

Combat aboard ships was fundamentally different from fighting on land.

A ship was, by nature, a massive defensive structure. As long as the enemy made even minimal preparations specifically targeting Gao Family Village, the situation became extremely difficult to deal with.

The militia sailors shouted anxiously.

"What do we do?"

"We can't hit them!"

"They're coming closer—are they going to board us?"

"This is bad... if it turns into close combat, I—I—"

The Courtesan was badly shaken as well. The twenty special-operations soldiers were not skilled in naval combat to begin with, and now they were completely rattled. The intensity of the battle made the helmsmen overcorrect again and again, the ship pitching violently. Several of the special-ops soldiers were starting to feel seasick.

Li Dao Xuan let out a short laugh. "This is good. This fight counts as a learning experience for everyone. Dayan, make sure the video is recorded properly. Use it as a negative example—send it to the military academy afterward so everyone can see that even the Gao Family Village militia gets humiliated sometimes."

The Courtesan hurriedly replied, "Yes, sir!"

"Alright," Li Dao Xuan said calmly. "Time for me to stretch my legs."

He pushed open the cabin door and stepped outside.

The moment he did—

Thunk.

An arrow slammed into his chest, piercing the silicone outer layer and striking the steel breastplate beneath.

Li Dao Xuan glanced down. "Oh? Lucky. Good thing it didn't hit my face—my handsome looks are still intact. That was dangerous. Better close the cabin door. Wouldn't want stray arrows flying inside and hitting someone."

He turned around and shut the door.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Three more arrows struck his back.

That was just ridiculous.

Li Dao Xuan turned back around just in time to hear a deafening boom—

The two ships slammed together.

Back when they'd wiped out the Xiaolangdi river bandits, under Bai Yuan's command, the Gao Family Village militia had mastered hit-and-run tactics beautifully. But this time Bai Yuan wasn't present. Jiang Cheng lacked command experience, and the sailors had grown arrogant from repeated victories. A chain of poor decisions followed—so poor that they'd even allowed the enemy to board them.

This alone deserved a written self-criticism when they got back.

Li Dao Xuan had barely finished mentally complaining when enemies began pouring across from the other ship.

Bang!

A musket fired, and the first attacker pitched headfirst into the Yellow River.

But more followed immediately. The distance was now too short—there was no time to reload muskets. In the blink of an eye, the enemy was upon them, blades flashing.

A militia sailor barely managed to raise his musket to block.

Clang!

The enemy blade struck the gun barrel. Almost simultaneously, both men kicked out, feet slamming into each other's stomachs. Both were sent flying backward.

From that single exchange, it was obvious—

These enemies were physically strong. Strong enough to rival the Gao Family Village militia.

Which meant they were well fed.

And that usually meant wealthy households' private guards—the most elite of the elite.

"Damn it," Jiang Cheng roared. "Who the hell are these people?"

At that moment, a figure blurred past him.

Li Dao Xuan stepped forward to meet the boarding point between the two ships.

An enemy soldier leapt over and swung his blade straight at Li Dao Xuan's head.

Li Dao Xuan tilted his head slightly.

The blade struck his shoulder instead—

Clang.

Metal rang against bone.

The attacker froze, disbelief written all over his face.

Li Dao Xuan seized the moment and punched him square in the face. The sound of bones breaking echoed as the man flipped backward and fell into the Yellow River.

"Damn," someone shouted. "They hid a real fighter in the cabin!"

"He's the real leader. The guy talking earlier wasn't!"

The enemy immediately realized it. Li Dao Xuan was the true boss of the ship—anyone could tell just by how he dressed.

Hero's attire. Handsome face. Completely different from the rest of the soldiers.

"Capture the leader first!"

Three enemy soldiers attacked him at once, three blades slashing down together.

Li Dao Xuan didn't dodge.

He simply raised both hands to shield his face.

The attackers hesitated for a split second.

What kind of move was this? Was he telling them not to hit his face?

Fine. Then they'd stab his vital points.

Clang clang clang!

All three blades struck center mass.

But the sound was completely wrong.

The three attackers were stunned for a fraction of a second—

And Li Dao Xuan slammed into them with a single move: Iron Mountain Crash.

All three were sent flying.

One landed right in front of Jiang Cheng. Jiang Cheng drew his saber and chopped down, severing the man's neck. Blood sprayed across Jiang Cheng's face.

The other two were impaled by bayonets from militia sailors.

The enemy soldiers screamed in terror.

"What the hell is that thing?!"

"So it's boarding combat?" Li Dao Xuan said lightly. "I can do that too."

He leapt forward—straight onto the enemy ship.

The moment he landed—

Thunk. Thunk.

Two more arrows embedded themselves in his chest.

Li Dao Xuan didn't even bother looking at them. He kept walking.

Ahead of him, several enemy soldiers thrust forward with long spears.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Every spear struck home.

They plunged into his chest and abdomen. Several spears slid through the gaps between his steel ribs and burst out through his lower back.

The enemy soldiers were ecstatic. "Pierced clean through! Hahaha! There's no way he survives that!"

Then Li Dao Xuan twisted his body.

Using the torque, he ripped the spears from their grips all at once. The soldiers felt a massive force yank their weapons away.

Li Dao Xuan spun, sweeping the spears in a wide arc, smashing several men to the deck.

"How is he not dead?!"

The enemy soldiers were utterly terrified now, screaming as they retreated.

Li Dao Xuan advanced step by step, his face dark. "You know us very well. You prepared defenses against muskets and grenades. Impressive. Too bad you didn't know I'd be on this ship. Now speak. Who sent you to attack us? Answer, and you might live."

"RAAAH!"

Several more soldiers rushed him, hacking wildly.

At that moment—

Clang.

Every rib in Li Dao Xuan's chest flipped outward.

Each rib transformed into a razor-sharp steel blade.

In an instant, he became a human hedgehog, his body bristling with knives.

It was a sight that could make a man faint on the spot.

"Aaaah! Monster!"

Li Dao Xuan lunged forward into their ranks. No technique needed anymore—he simply slammed into people. Whoever he hit was instantly impaled by multiple blades.

In moments, bodies littered the deck.

Blood soaked the planks.

The lean, tough-looking man—the apparent leader—was completely petrified, trembling uncontrollably.

Li Dao Xuan grinned at him like a demon, lips pulled back. "You came prepared. You knew exactly how we fight. So tell me—who ordered you to attack us?"

The man looked left. Looked right.

Everyone was dead.

Only he remained.

The monster before him was utterly unstoppable.

Without a word, he turned—

And jumped straight into the Yellow River.

Chapter 874: Run Fitty Laps

The wiry man didn't say a single word.

He turned—and jumped straight into the river.

In that instant, Li Daoxuan understood everything.

This bastard was definitely a strong swimmer.

One look at that dark, sun-baked skin told the whole story—this was someone who'd grown up on boats. If he made it into the Yellow River, chances were high he'd escape alive.

"Run, my ass!"

Li Daoxuan flashed forward and jumped in after him.

The moment he followed him into the water, the wiry man was secretly ecstatic.

Hah!

I grew up on the water.

You're some pampered young master—how dare you jump in after me?

On land you might be a monster, but in the water? I'll have you cleaned up in three moves.

He'd thought this fight was lost for sure.

Never expected that at the very end, he'd get the chance to capture an important leader from Xiaolangdi.

That would be a huge merit when he got back.

So he didn't swim far after entering the water. Instead, he deliberately paused slightly beneath the surface.

Splash!

Li Daoxuan plunged down right after him.

The wiry man immediately swam over, reached out, and grabbed—ready to start a full-on underwater struggle.

But then—

He instantly realized he was wrong.

Li Daoxuan didn't fight him at all.

He simply reached out and grabbed his arm.

The wiry man violently shook his arm, trying to throw him off and counterattack—but Li Daoxuan didn't care in the slightest. He just clung on, refused to let go, and then... stopped struggling altogether.

Because Li Daoxuan—

Was a giant block of iron.

Even doing absolutely nothing, he generated an overwhelmingly terrifying sinking force.

The wiry man felt an enormous pull dragging him downward. Panic exploded in his heart. He thrashed upward desperately, trying to haul Li Daoxuan back toward the surface.

But—

No matter how good a swimmer you are, dragging something this heavy goes beyond human limits.

No matter how he paddled, he couldn't rise.

No matter how he struggled, they kept sinking.

Down.

Down.

Down.

Until everything around them turned pitch black.

On the boat, Jiang Cheng, the courtesan, the militia sailors, and the special operations soldiers were all leaning over the railing, staring into the river.

A long time passed.

Still no sign of the Dao Xuan Tianzun surfacing.

Nobody knew what was happening below.

Suddenly—

The cotton-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun hanging on Jiang Cheng's chest spoke:

"Alright. That guy will be sinking at the bottom forever."

"Huh? The Dao Xuan Tianzun is back?" Jiang Cheng blurted out.

"Then... the Dao Xuan Tianzun's dharma body—?"

"Let the dharma body sink to the riverbed."

That thing was far too heavy. Even Li Daoxuan himself couldn't swim back up with it. Might as well let it clutch the corpse and sink forever.

Besides, mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzun units were plentiful.

Li Daoxuan felt a bit annoyed.

No live captive meant they still didn't know who was targeting Gao Family Village.

By now, the soldiers were already cleaning up the battlefield.

Enemy corpses were tossed into the river "to feed the fish," politely termed a water burial. Soldiers wounded by arrows were wrapping their injuries.

Jiang Cheng had a small bloody hole in his chest. He was pulling out the arrowhead and applying golden wound medicine, his mouth twitching in pain.

"Those damn bastards nearly sent me straight to the afterlife," he cursed.

"Too bad we didn't leave anyone alive."

The courtesan frowned.

"They seemed very familiar with our weapons. Could there be a traitor among us?"

"No," Li Daoxuan said calmly.

"They knew our weapons were powerful, but they didn't know I was on the ship. They had no understanding of me at all."

"That means the information didn't come from within."

The courtesan and Jiang Cheng both snapped to attention.

Right—

The enemy knew to guard against firearms and grenades, but didn't recognize the Dao Xuan Tianzun at all.

That ruled out internal betrayal.

"They're people who know something, but not everything," Jiang Cheng said thoughtfully.

"They know the Five-Colored Dao Xuan Tianzun Banner represents us. They know what weapons we use. But they don't understand our internal structure—and they've never even heard of the Dao Xuan Tianzun's reputation."

He paused, then added slowly,

"Some bandit group?

Jurchen special agents?

Or... the imperial court?"

All of those were possible.

Li Daoxuan knew better than to jump to conclusions. Guessing without evidence only dug holes for yourself.

"Enough guessing," he said.

"When we get back, distribute the video of this incident to all departments."

He turned to the courtesan.

"Don't release it publicly. Send it secretly."

She nodded.

"This shouldn't be made public yet. We need to identify the enemy first."

"Yes," Li Daoxuan agreed.

"Let every department stay on high alert."

Then he suddenly chuckled.

"The defensive measures that ship used against us—

You recorded those too, right?"

The courtesan smiled.

"Every bit of it."

"Good," Li Daoxuan said.

"Send a copy to the scientists in Gao Family Village. Let's see what they think."

Puzhou — Huangpu Military Academy

Sun Chuanting drew a small mountain on the blackboard.

Then, with a stern face, he addressed the cadets below:

"When armies meet, avoid mountains unless you control the valleys. Occupy high ground, avoid climbing under fire—this is mountain warfare..."

Bang!

He slammed the desk.

"Flat-Rabbit!!!!

You dare sleep in my class?!"

Zheng Gouzi broke out in cold sweat and hurriedly poked the student next to him.

Flat Rabbit jolted awake with a shout, sprang to his feet, wiped the drool from his mouth.

"Ah? Ah—no, no! I wasn't sleeping! I was listening very carefully!"

Sun Chuanting glared.

"What did the last passage I explained mean?"

Flat Rabbit face went pale.

"Uh... just now..."

Zheng Gouzi quietly flipped *The Art of War* open to the correct page and slid it toward him.

Flat Rabbit swallowed hard, glanced at it, then looked up.

"Headmaster, what you just said was—when fighting the enemy, we should fight in dangerous valleys, fight on dangerous mountains, and basically wherever we fight, we'll definitely win."

Sun Chuanting pointed toward the training ground outside.

"Get out.

Run fifty laps."

Flat Rabbit trudged out, looking utterly dejected.

But the moment his back turned—

A trace of joy spread across his face.

Heh.

At least I don't have to listen to this sleep-inducing lecture anymore.

Running fifty laps is way more fun.

"You're still smiling?" Sun Chuanting barked.

Flat Rabbit jumped.

"You can tell I'm smiling even with my back turned?!"

Sun Chuanting said coldly,

"I can see the muscles beneath your ears lifting upward. If that's not smiling, what is?"

Flat Rabbit was stunned.

"Amazing... as expected of the headmaster. Truly sharp-eyed."

"Flattery is useless now," Sun Chuanting said.

"Besides fifty laps, copy The Art of War twenty times. Hand it in by tomorrow evening."

Flat Rabbit wailed.

"What?! No! Anything but copying! I'll run another hundred laps, just don't make me copy!"

Sun Chuanting snorted.

"If you don't finish copying by tomorrow evening, I'll report it to the village committee and confiscate your Knight-Errant License."

That—

Was a killing blow.

Flat Rabbit immediately straightened up.

"I guarantee completion of the copying task."

Chapter 875: You Play Huang Taiji

Flat Rabbit went to accept his punishment obediently. Sun Chuanting shook his head, then re-explained the essence of the points he had just made. Packing up his copy of The Art of War, he walked out of the classroom.

He had only taken a couple of steps when Gu Yanwu ran up to him, bowing deeply.

"Brother Sun!"

Sun Chuanting chuckled.

"Ah, Brother Gu, what perfect timing! I've just finished class and have a moment to spare."

Gu Yanwu smiled.

"I sought you out, Brother Sun, to discuss a matter."

Sun Chuanting raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Gu Yanwu said,

"I believe the art of cinema can greatly help enlighten the masses. Especially since most common folk are illiterate—films can awaken their concern for national affairs far faster than books ever could. The saying 'Every man bears responsibility for the nation's rise and fall' can only truly take root once public awareness is stirred."

"Oh?" Sun Chuanting mused.

"So... Brother Gu plans to make films?"

Gu Yanwu nodded.

"My family has some wealth. Our ancestors left us eight hundred mu of ancestral land. Funding a film would not be difficult."

Sun Chuanting laughed.

"You should be looking for Lao Nanfeng, not me!"

Gu Yanwu chuckled.

"That's because you, Brother Sun, once wrote *A Small Soldier of the Daling River Border Army*. I hoped to learn from you—what truly matters when crafting such a story."

Sun Chuanting smiled and shook his head.

"I wouldn't call myself experienced—just dabbling. But... how about the two of us writing another film together?"

Gu Yanwu's eyes lit up.

"Wonderful! What story shall we write, Brother Sun?"

Sun Chuanting said,

"The recent fighting in Xuanfu and Datong—the Manchu invasion that devastated those regions—wouldn't that make a powerful subject?"

Gu Yanwu brightened.

"A Small Soldier of Xuanfu and Datong?"

Sun Chuanting smiled wryly.

"We can't just reuse the same idea. We need something fresh. Come, let's think it through together."

As they talked, they noticed Lao Nanfeng strolling in through the academy gates, with Chen Qianhu following behind him, whispering eagerly:

"Brother Nanfeng, this time you must give me a heroic role!"

Lao Nanfeng laughed and shook his head.

"Where would a heroic role come from? We haven't even written the story yet."

Chen Qianhu persisted.

"Then hurry and find someone to write it! Make me righteous, noble, saving the wounded, overflowing with heroic spirit—"

Lao Nanfeng ignored him. Looking up, he spotted Sun Chuanting and exclaimed happily:

"Mr. Sun! I came specifically to ask you to write a story!"

Sun Chuanting chuckled.

"Everyone wants stories from me now. Do I really look like someone who enjoys writing all the time?"

Lao Nanfeng laughed.

"Who doesn't know Mr. Sun enjoys writing little tales?"

Sun Chuanting was momentarily speechless.

"So—about Xuanfu and Datong..." Lao Nanfeng began.

"Oh? You're interested too?" Gu Yanwu exclaimed excitedly.

"We were just discussing it!"

The three of them burst out laughing together.

"It's a great subject," Sun Chuanting said,

"but we haven't decided on the angle or the structure yet."

Chen Qianhu raised his hand eagerly.

"I've got one! I've got a story!"

All three turned to look at him.

Chen Qianhu launched into it:

"The protagonist is a man surnamed Chen from Datong. As a child, he was sent to Shaolin Temple to study martial arts. Twenty years later, he returns as a true master. Hearing that the Manchus have invaded Xuanfu and Datong, he rushes home. Alone, he kills more than a dozen Manchu scouts, saving every old man, woman, and child in his village. Then he organizes the villagers into a militia, holding off wave after wave of Manchu attacks. Just as the village is about to fall, reinforcements from Gao Family Village arrive. The village is saved, and he is recognized by Gao Family Village's leadership, recruited into their army, and appointed a Centurion."

He finished proudly.

"And that's how he becomes known as Centurion Chen!"

Lao Nanfeng, Sun Chuanting, and Gu Yanwu exchanged glances, then nodded together.

"The framework is quite good," Sun Chuanting said.

"Add more detail, maybe a romantic thread, and it'll be very effective."

Chen Qianhu was overjoyed.

"Really? You can actually use it?"

"Of course," Sun Chuanting said.

"I'll write it. We'll give Centurion Chen a childhood sweetheart—his fiancée waiting in the village. She'll be tragically killed by the Manchus, raising the emotional stakes."

Gu Yanwu added,

"We also can't rely solely on Gao Family Village's reinforcements. That would weaken the tension. Government troops should arrive first, be defeated, plunge the villagers into despair—then Gao Family Village arrives as the second wave."

"Excellent," Sun Chuanting agreed.

"That gives the story two emotional climaxes."

Hearing them refine the plot, Chen Qianhu was beside himself with joy.

Hahaha!

This time I finally get to be the hero—and the protagonist at that! My reputation is saved!

Just as he was laughing internally, Lao Nanfeng said:

"Perfect. Last time there was an actor named Zheng Dazhuang—his performance was excellent. I think I'll have him play Centurion Chen."

"What?!" Chen Qianhu froze.

"Then... what about me?"

Lao Nanfeng slowly circled him, looking him up and down, then nodded.

"We'll dress you in furs, darken your skin, braid your hair a bit. You can play Huang Taiji."

"What?!"

Chen Qianhu howled.

"No! I refuse to play Huang Taiji! I won't!"

Sun Chuanting commented calmly,

"He'd actually be perfect for Huang Taiji."

Gu Yanwu nodded.

"Even Huang Taiji himself might not play Huang Taiji as well as he would."

Chen Qianhu threw his head back and roared:

"Nooooo—!"

Snowflakes drifted down as the north wind wailed.

In the blink of an eye, snow piled up on Chen Qianhu's despairing figure.

As they were still laughing, a carriage rolled in and stopped abruptly. On it was a storage card nearly half a man tall.

The driver called out,

"Mr. Sun! The News Department has sent a special film for you to review. Oh—General Nanfeng is here as well? Perfect. You're also instructed to watch it. This is a direct order from the Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Sun Chuanting and Lao Nanfeng both grew serious. A "special film" from the Dao Xuan Tianzun was no small matter.

They lifted the heavy storage card and hurried to the academy's screening room.

The Huangpu Military Academy held a special status. Inside was a large, dedicated screening hall equipped with Celestial Treasure Mirrors personally bestowed by the Dao Xuan Tianzun, allowing students to view combat footage at any time.

Lao Nanfeng, most familiar with the equipment, quickly inserted the storage card into the tablet device, fixed it in place, and tapped the screen.

The film began.

"A naval battle?" Sun Chuanting exclaimed.

"Where did this happen?"

"That's not the key point," Lao Nanfeng said quickly.

"Look closely—those are Gao Family Village ships. But the other vessel... its origin is unknown."

"They've engaged!" Sun Chuanting said sharply.

"What? Their tactics—our flintlocks are being blocked, even the grenades are ineffective. Incredible... to think someone could counter our weapons like this. If we can think of it, the Manchus certainly can as well. We must be extremely cautious."

Chapter 876: Repeating Design

Sun Chuanting's brows knit tightly into a deep frown.

Lao Nanfeng stood beside him, watching the footage as well.

"Mr. Sun, how do you think this can be countered?"

Sun Chuanting considered it carefully for several seconds, then slowly shook his head.

"If we rely only on flintlock rifles and hand grenades, then those defenses are indeed impossible to break through. However—" he paused, "—we do not rely only on flintlocks and grenades. With cannons, those wooden barricades can be blown apart."

He continued gravely,

"In future operations, artillery must take priority. We must also prepare more heavy cannons."

Lao Nanfeng chuckled.

"Exactly. The Dao Xuan Tianzun sent us this footage precisely to remind us of that."

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"This video is extremely instructive. I'll turn it into a dedicated lesson for the cadets, so they never forget it. Weapons themselves are dead things—but people adapt. The enemy will constantly devise new and strange ways to counter our arms. If we underestimate them, people will die."

Meanwhile...

Back in Gao Family Village.

Bai Yuan, clad in flowing white robes, leapt down from the train.

It had been a long time since he'd last returned, and a wave of emotion surged in his chest.

In recent years, his attention had been focused entirely on Luoyang, Xiaolangdi, and the Gao Family Village navy. Now that he was back, he found that Gao Family Village itself had changed yet again.

The population had clearly grown larger, and the villagers' spirits were visibly higher. Prosperity and cheer seemed to hang in the air everywhere.

He had barely walked a short distance from the station when someone bowed deeply to him.

"Mr. Bai! Long time no see."

Bai Yuan turned, recognizing the face only after a moment. He laughed.

"Oh—Gao... Gao... Gao what was it again?"

The man said quickly,

"I'm Gao Laba! Gao Laba, the rice-noodle shop owner."

"Ah! Yes, yes, yes—Gao Laba," Bai Yuan said. "I remember now."

They exchanged a few polite words, and Bai Yuan continued on.

Every so often, more people greeted him.

"Mr. Bai!"

"Mr. Bai!"

"Oh, you are...?"

"I'm Li Da."

"Ah! Yes, yes, yes—Li Da. I remember clearly now."

By the time he finally reached the school, Bai Yuan felt as if his memory had just endured an endurance trial.

Even the gate guard recognized him.

"Mr. Bai, are you here to see Young Master Bai?"

Bai Yuan laughed.

"Indeed. I haven't seen my son in ages. I've come to challenge him to a duel—of mathematics!"

The guard immediately made a strange face.

"Mr. Bai... perhaps you should challenge him to a shooting contest instead. As for mathematics—it would be best not to challenge the Three Scientific Titans of Gao Family Village."

If the guard hadn't said that, it would have been fine. But those words struck a nerve.

"Hmph!" Bai Yuan snorted. "Mathematics is one of a gentleman's Six Arts! I value it greatly. Why shouldn't I challenge my own son? Don't look down on me!"

Fuming, he marched straight toward the research laboratory.

The guard watched his back, shaking his head.

"The waves behind push the waves ahead... the front waves die upon the shore. Mr. Bai, take care."

Soon, Bai Yuan arrived at the most mysterious, profound, and baffling place in the entire school—the research lab.

The moment he stepped inside, he nearly tripped over a cannon barrel lying waist-high on the floor. Startled, he quickly stepped around it.

As he went deeper, he saw half-assembled steam engines, strange axles, and even a mechanical leg meant for the mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzun units.

After searching for a long while, he finally spotted Young Master Bai, huddled together with two other vaguely familiar men. The three were bent over a palm-sized metal disc, absorbed in discussion.

The disc had six holes.

At a single glance, Bai Yuan recognized that each hole was perfectly sized to hold a bullet.

He instantly forgot why he had come at all and hurried over.

"What are you researching?"

Young Master Bai heard a voice but didn't even look up, failing to recognize his own father.

"Repeating flintlock rifles," he replied flatly.

Bai Yuan froze.

"What?"

Young Master Bai explained patiently,

"Look—this disc has six chambers. Load six bullets into it, then attach it to the flintlock. Fire one shot, rotate the disc, align the next chamber with the firing mechanism, and fire again."

Bai Yuan's eyes widened.

"Amazing! Brilliant! Quick—make one for me!"

Young Master Bai said nothing, his brows only furrowing more deeply.

Another middle-aged man spoke instead.

"That won't be possible so quickly. The main issue is the rotating disc itself. Once added, it compromises the barrel's airtight seal. When fired, gas leaks through the gap between the revolving chamber and the barrel, weakening the bullet's force."

Bai Yuan turned.

"And this gentleman is...?"

"Song Yingxing," the man replied.

"Ah, yes, yes, yes—Song Yingxing," Bai Yuan said. "I remember clearly now."

Another man added,

"There's also the mechanical issue. The recoil puts enormous stress on the barrel, and the revolving mechanism could be damaged easily unless we further improve steel quality."

Bai Yuan nodded.

"And you are...?"

"Wang Zheng."

"Ah! Yes, yes, yes—you're Wang Zheng. I remember now."

The three scientists stared at the disc in silence, deep in thought.

Bai Yuan suddenly said,

"Then why not abandon the disc altogether? Use a magazine instead—a spring at the bottom pushing bullets upward. Each time a shot is fired, the spent cartridge is gone, and the spring feeds the next round. Wouldn't that be mechanically simpler? Easier to seal, less fragile?"

"Hm?"

All three men turned to stare at him at once.

Only then did Young Master Bai finally recognize his father. He jumped up and bowed deeply.

"Father—you've arrived."

Bai Yuan snorted.

"Hmph. I've been standing here forever. Is this truly the first time you've noticed me?"

Young Master Bai broke into a cold sweat.

The other two ignored the family drama completely.

Wang Zheng's eyes lit up.

"Mr. Bai's idea is excellent. However, we currently use paper cartridges. With continuous firing, unburned paper residue could easily clog the barrel. Therefore, we could design a hinged mechanism at the rear—manually open it to eject debris while simultaneously feeding the next round..."

The more he spoke, the more excited he became, immediately sketching designs.

On the wall, the portrait of the Dao Xuan Tianzun seemed to grin.

He could tell that, without realizing it, the scientists of Gao Family Village had just stepped onto the development path of the Kalthoff Repeating Rifle.

Indeed—once the foundational principles exist, technological progress becomes inevitable.

At that moment, Bai Yuan suddenly said,

"Right—enough about repeating bullets. I almost forgot why I came."

Young Master Bai straightened.

"Please speak, Father."

Bai Yuan's expression turned solemn.

"A few days ago, Lao Huihui's heavy cavalry launched a sudden raid on Luoyang. At the time, the Dao Xuan Tianzun was absent, so we couldn't deploy the Dao Xuan Tianzun's reconnaissance hot-air balloons. As a result, the enemy and our scouts arrived almost simultaneously."

He paused, face dark.

"This cannot continue."

"We need reconnaissance methods that do not rely on the Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Chapter 877: Science Can Also Be a Matchmaker

"So, not relying on Dao Xuan Tianzun's reconnaissance methods?"

The question left the three scientists in momentary contemplation.

After a few seconds, Song Yingxing broke the silence: "It's not particularly difficult, just quite dangerous."

Bai Yuan quirked an eyebrow.

Song Yingxing elaborated, "Having studied physics, we understand that Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloons operate on the principle of hot air rising. As long as the upward force generated by the hot air is sufficient, lifting a living person into the sky poses no challenge, does it?"

He then chuckled. "In other words, if we construct a Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon large enough, we can send someone soaring into the heavens ourselves, eliminating the need for Dao Xuan Tianzun's aid in aerial reconnaissance."

At his words, everyone present erupted in delight.

"What a brilliant scheme!" they exclaimed. "Let's build a colossal Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon!"

Wang Zheng affirmed, "Given Gao Family Village's current technological capabilities, constructing an enormous Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon presents no real difficulty."

Bai Gongzi suggested, "We can fashion the balloon's envelope from oiled canvas and weave a spacious, lightweight basket from sturdy vines to hold the passengers."

Bai Yuan interjected, "And the fuel? It must be lightweight."

Song Yingxing mused, "Charcoal and rapeseed oil are both worth experimenting with."

After a quick consultation, the group immediately called out, "Students! Prepare for action!"

A large contingent of graduate students immediately surged into the room from outside.

As soon as the scientists articulated their concept, the graduate students dashed out, each moving to their assigned tasks. These young researchers possessed exceptional practical skills; they didn't even require artisans, being perfectly capable of fabricating all manner of devices themselves.

Soon, large sections of oiled canvas were meticulously stitched together, and massive woven baskets were procured with equal speed. The graduate students hastily assembled a fire pit, loaded it with a small amount of fuel, and began the heating process...

The colossal Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon swiftly began to inflate with hot air, its enormous envelope swelling and rising, slowly lifting off the ground.

A wave of exhilaration swept through the onlookers.

"It actually works!" they cheered. "It truly works!"

A courageous graduate student promptly leaped into the basket, declaring, "I'll be the first to attempt this ascent!"

Those nearby gasped in alarm.

"Hold on, don't be so hasty!" one cried. "What if it flies up and can't come back down? You'll perish!"

The intrepid graduate student merely laughed.

"Impossible!" he scoffed. "Simply extinguish the flame, and it will descend just as quickly."

Even as he spoke, the "colossal Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon" was already beginning its ascent.

The people below shouted with giddy excitement, while the airborne graduate student bounced with even greater exhilaration.

Yet, their elation proved short-lived.

How could such a hastily assembled, crudely constructed experimental Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon truly soar?

It had barely climbed ten meters when a distinct snapping sound echoed.

The seams, unable to bear the strain, had ripped open.

Air hissed from a rapidly expanding tear in one corner of the balloon.

Then, it began to plummet diagonally from the sky, drifting uncontrollably towards a nearby concrete building.

The graduate student in the descending balloon shrieked, "Help me!"

On the ground, the onlookers were equally terrified and scrambled to follow.

Then, with a deafening crash, the balloon slammed into the concrete building.

By a stroke of uncanny bad luck, the basket collided precisely at the height of a window.

The graduate student in the basket was unceremoniously ejected, tumbling headlong through the window as if he were refuse being tossed away.

The window, lacking glass, clearly belonged to no affluent household; only a simple curtain offered privacy.

The graduate student burst through this curtain and plunged inside.

Immediately, a piercing feminine shriek tore through the house.

"Help! A scoundrel has broken in through the window and is assaulting me! Help me!"

Before her cries for help could truly gather momentum, another loud bang reverberated as the door burst open.

The scientists, followed by a throng of graduate students, stormed inside.

They found themselves in a sparse, humble room where a young woman, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, lay sprawled on the floor, pinned beneath the graduate student.

The woman was clearly petrified, her body seemingly paralyzed by fright, for she merely continued her incessant screaming, incapable of resisting or even pushing the man off her.

The graduate student, knocked unconscious by the fall, lay motionless atop the woman.

Upon seeing the crowd surge into the room, the woman burst into wrenching sobs.

"Save me, good people, save me!" she wailed.

"This man is taking advantage of me, an outsider from Houjia Village!

My parents are gone, a solitary woman with no one to protect her.

He leaped through the window, wrestled me to the ground... intending to violate my honor... Oh, my good name!"

A stunned silence fell over the room.

The graduate student slowly regained consciousness, shaking his head groggily.

"What in the world just happened?" he mumbled.

The crowd simply gestured for him to observe his predicament.

He glanced down, only to discover himself sprawled atop a young woman.

With a startled yelp, he scrambled away in utter mortification.

The woman remained on the floor, still weeping.

The graduate student remained frozen for a prolonged moment, then spoke in a hushed tone.

"Miss... I shall take responsibility and marry you."

The woman's sobs continued unabated.

"Who would marry a scoundrel like him?" she cried.

"Villagers, beat him! Beat this villain to death!"

Bai Yuan stepped forward to explain.

"He is no scoundrel, dear lady. He is a graduate student from Thirty-Two Middle School, currently engaged in research on aerial reconnaissance using Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloons. This was merely an unfortunate accident; he quite literally fell from the sky. Everyone present can attest to that."

The woman's sobs ceased abruptly.

"Not a scoundrel?" she echoed. "A graduate student, you say?"

The assembled crowd affirmed with unanimous nods.

The woman's home was situated not far from the school, and she was intimately familiar with its goings-on. She often witnessed the graduate students' peculiar experiments and their spectacular failures.

She simply hadn't anticipated that this particular mishap would land quite literally in her own living room.

The woman sprang to her feet, scanning the young man from left to right.

He was, she mused, quite handsome.

His age was suitable, his looks agreeable, and he was, moreover, a first-class intellectual from Gao Family Village, a talent reserved for scientific and technological advancements.

His future prospects were boundless.

The woman's eyes lit up with delight.

"You just said you'd marry me?" she pressed.

The graduate student nodded solemnly.

The woman was ecstatic.

"You cannot go back on your word!" she exclaimed.

"Everyone here heard you!"

The graduate student scrutinized her more closely.

Indeed, the young woman was quite beautiful!

Overjoyed, he blurted out, "You... you're truly willing to marry me?"

The woman's delicate face flushed slightly.

"Yes," she whispered.

In that instant, their eyes met, a perfect, unforeseen match.

The onlookers collectively shook their heads.

"There's simply no reasoning with you impetuous youngsters," they muttered.

Bai Yuan, ever the stickler, chimed in.

"When the two of you tie the knot, be sure to summon me to officiate the ceremony. I have a particular fondness for presiding over rites, and among a gentleman's six arts, I am very particular about the 'rites' aspect."

The others merely exchanged exasperated glances.

"Well, it seems scientific advancement also has an unexpected role in matchmaking," Song Yingxing mused with a sigh. "Quite delightful, actually."

Wang Zheng, however, clapped his hands sharply.

"Hold on, everyone, that's quite enough!" he declared.

"We are engaged in serious scientific endeavors here, not idle gossip!"

Return to the school, repair the colossal Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon, and let's begin the second attempt!"

Everyone's spirits instantly perked up.

"Indeed!" they chorused. "This concerns a crucial reconnaissance mission!"

They hastily made their apologies and exited the woman's modest home.

Only the graduate student and the young woman remained, their gazes locking, each finding the other more captivating with every passing moment.

After a long silence, the graduate student finally spoke, his voice hushed.

"My dear lady, I must attend to my duties now.

I shall dedicate myself to this research, striving for distinction,

so that when I return to marry you, I can offer you a truly exceptional life."

The young woman offered a slight curtsy, a radiant smile gracing her lips.

"Yes!" she replied.

Chapter 878: Time for a Test Run

As the scientists of Gao Family Village embarked on a new round of research, a different scene unfolded at the Chang'an Automobile Factory. As the scientists of Gao Family Village embarked on a new round of research, a different scene unfolded at the Chang'an Automobile Factory.

The first mass-produced truck, the "Chang'an No. 1," slowly rumbled out of the workshop.

Being a mass-production model designed to cut costs, the vehicle was rather spartan.

It didn't even have a proper windshield, as glass production at the time still required artisans to craft each pane individually, making it quite costly—far too precious to install on a bulky, utilitarian truck.

To maximize cargo capacity, the vehicle's own weight had to be minimized. So, beyond its core structure, every other component was simplified; even the roof was a mere sheet of thin wood.

No sooner had it rolled out of the workshop than the truck was put to arduous labor.

Workers piled a chaotic assortment of materials into the truck's cargo bed and laughed heartily, saying, "Take this to Xi'an and deliver it to Manager Wang."

The new driver turned his head, a crestfallen look on his face.

"It's a brand-new truck! Are you really going to use it to haul a load of filthy rubbish?"

The workers chuckled.

"It's destined for this fate sooner or later. Don't you know how grimy Experimental Vehicle Three is by now?"

The driver resigned himself to his fate. Hauling a pile of scrap, he drove towards Xi'an.

It wasn't long before he reached Xi'an.

Just as he approached the city gate, he encountered Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's heir, in his Kulinan. It was a dazzling, incredibly stylish vehicle.

Zhu Cunji's latest obsession was cruising through Xi'an in his Kulinan, showing off his vehicle to anyone who looked. He even occasionally took his consort for a spin in the passenger seat.

His personal guard, however, suffered greatly. They could only pursue the Kulinan on horseback, a grueling task.

The vehicle ran on coal, and refueling in Xi'an was effortless, allowing the Prince of Qin's heir to drive all day. His guards' horses, however, were not so fortunate.

Consequently, the weary guards had to swap horses frequently, both riders and mounts exhausted beyond words.

Spotting a gleaming new truck approaching, Zhu Cunji immediately perked up. He abruptly swerved his Kulinan in front of the new truck, demanding,

"Hey, is this one of the new vehicles just produced by the Chang'an Automobile Factory?"

"Yes, Your Highness," the driver replied.

Zhu Cunji scrutinized the truck from every angle, then exclaimed with delight,

"Excellent! I want one too!"

The driver offered a wry smile.

"Your Highness, you already own a magnificent, gleaming Kulinan. Could you possibly fancy this rather humble, mass-produced truck?"

Zhu Cunji scoffed.

"Only children choose between two things. Adults want everything."

The driver could only stare.

"Never mind," Zhu Cunji declared.

"There's no point discussing it with you. I'll go to the Chang'an Automobile Factory myself, wait by the gates, and buy one. Hahahaha!"

With a decisive turn of the steering wheel, the Kulinan veered toward the Chang'an Automobile Factory. His guards, a mix of exasperation and amusement, spurred their horses to follow.

"Your Highness," they cried, "it's dangerous outside the city! Please don't ride so fast!"

Zhu Cunji yelled back,

"Danger, my foot! The entire area around Xi'an belongs to Dao Xuan Tianzun now. Where would bandits even hide? What danger are you talking about?"

The guards grew frantic.

"Your Highness, you," they shouted, "you are the greatest danger to yourself!"

Zhu Cunji frowned, a question mark hovering over his head.

No sooner had the thought formed than he felt something was amiss. Driving while distracted was a grave mistake.

With a sudden lurch, the vehicle veered off the paved road and plunged into a waterlogged paddy field beside the path.

The gleaming Kulinan sank into the field's thick mud. Zhu Cunji tumbled into the muck himself, emerging covered in mud.

Standing there, he shrieked,

"My car! Quick... someone, help! Get it out of here!"

The guards, however, rushed to his aid first.

Zhu Cunji bellowed in frustration,

"I'm not important! The Kulinan is! Save my Kulinan, quickly!"

Everyone exchanged bewildered glances.

The large contingent of guards exerted Herculean efforts, even borrowing several oxen from nearby farmhouses to assist.

Finally, they managed to drag the Kulinan back onto the road.

But it was now caked in mud, utterly unrecognizable.

Zhu Cunji gasped, heartbroken.

"The paint is chipped! Chipped! Oh, my little Nan, my little Nan... It's all Daddy's fault for not driving carefully. Daddy won't ever let you tumble into a field again!"

The guards stared, utterly dumbfounded.

The Prince's heir was calling himself "Daddy" to a car.

He's lost his mind, they thought.

What none of them realized, however, was this...

Just as the mass-produced truck rolled out of one section of the Chang'an Automobile Factory, from another, highly-secure rear production area, another vehicle was simultaneously emerging.

Experimental Vehicle Four!

This particular vehicle, the fourth experimental model, had been outfitted with weapons at the suggestion of the blacksmith Gao Yiyi. It had undergone several revisions mid-development.

Initially, Gao Yiyi had affixed two ramming horns to its front, grandly claiming that "piercing wounds and blunt trauma were distinct."

After being ridiculed by Young Master Bai, the horns were removed, and a flintlock rifle was mounted instead.

But Young Master Bai soon identified a rather glaring flaw.

This was a vehicle, not a person. It could haul substantial weight, so why bother with just a flintlock rifle mounted on the front?

Wouldn't a proper cannon be better? It certainly had the capacity to carry one.

Consequently, the flintlock rifle was discarded, replaced by a cannon barrel.

However, the vehicle, now sporting a cannon barrel, fired only once before a massive plume of thick smoke billowed into its interior.

The driver and the gunner in the passenger seat were nearly suffocated to death.

Thus, the vehicle underwent another modification.

The flintlock rifle was reinstalled at the front, while the large cannon was relocated to the rear, becoming a towed artillery piece.

When firing was required, the vehicle would have to halt, turn around, and allow the rear-mounted cannon to aim and fire at the enemy.

Since the vehicle was now towing artillery, it clearly couldn't be limited to paved roads.

It would inevitably be involved in combat and thus needed to traverse rough terrain.

So Young Master Bai, after much deliberation, equipped it with massive rubber tires.

This increased its ground clearance, allowing it to navigate highly challenging terrain.

In the end, Experimental Vehicle Four had become an incredibly ugly monstrosity, a design only its mother (or father) could despise.

"What's the plan for this vehicle?" the workers asked Young Master Bai.

"Where should we test it? The Manchus haven't invaded yet, and the bandits in Henan haven't attacked Luoyang. It seems we have no opportunity to test it."

Young Master Bai pondered for a while.

"Send it to Wangjia Fork's ancient fortress in Northern Shaanxi, hand it over to Zao Ying's cavalry battalion. They can test it on the grasslands, as it seems a major battle is imminent there."

On the Mongolian grasslands, a colossal battle was already unavoidable.

The question of who would rule the Ordos region had progressed to the final stage: a contest of brute force.

Dozens of tribes had rallied under the banner of Bo'erzhijin Elinchen.

Meanwhile, another score of tribes had gathered beneath the Wushen tribe's banner.

In terms of overall military strength, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen held a clear upper hand.

As a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, he commanded immense influence across the grasslands. A single rallying cry from him would see countless smaller tribes flock to his side.

The Wushen tribe, on the other hand, was a relatively new power, having only risen in prominence in recent years.

To the smaller tribes deep within the grasslands, who was Wushen?

They didn't know. They'd never heard of them.

Wushen clearly lacked popular support.

Chapter 879: Always Stay Strong

Light cavalry units, one after another, converged upon the Wushen Tribe. Light cavalry units, one after another, converged upon the Wushen Tribe.

The decisive battle was imminent!

The Wushen Tribe's most loyal—or rather, the tribes they had most thoroughly subdued—sent their cavalry. The Otok, Bosut, Dala, and Hanjin cavalry had already arrived at the Wushen Tribe, completing their initial assembly.

Tribes from further afield were still on their way, leading their forces.

The Otok tribal leader stood before the Wushen tribal leader.

"My dear elder brother," he began, "though many warriors have gathered, our total strength is still five thousand less than Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's. We will be at a disadvantage in a direct fight."

The Wushen tribal leader chuckled.

"Don't worry, the Han cavalry will arrive."

The Otok tribal leader replied,

"It would certainly be best if the Han cavalry came. However, even with their help, we still face a shortage of provisions. Warriors can't fight with strength if their bellies aren't full."

The Wushen tribal leader continued to chuckle.

"Relax, the supplies will be here soon."

As they spoke, a massive caravan appeared on the southern plains.

The Wushen tribal leader exclaimed with delight,

"They're here! My son's caravan has arrived!"

Countless carts rolled in from the south, laden entirely with food.

Even the Otok tribal leader was startled.

"So much?" he gasped.

The Wushen tribal leader burst into hearty laughter.

"This is what we got back from the wool we sent last time, after it was processed at my son's factory!"

With such an abundance of grain, the Wushen tribal leader's demeanor grew expansive and confident. He waved a hand decisively.

"Distribute the food among all the tribes! Let every warrior eat their fill, and then we will make Bo'erzhijin Elinchen kneel!"

The leaders of the other tribes, witnessing the Wushen Tribe's immense supply of provisions, couldn't help but be utterly convinced and filled with admiration.

With food, winter would be much easier to bear!

A soldier reported,

"Chieftain, two carts are carrying a large amount of coal. We're unsure of their purpose."

The Wushen tribal leader looked greatly puzzled.

"Coal? Are the Han people planning to send us coal for warmth?"

"No, no, no," the cart driver hauling the coal chuckled.

"This is for Experimental Car No. 4. Otherwise, Experimental Car No. 4 won't be able to get home."

The chieftain stared blankly.

As they chatted, the Han reinforcements arrived—two thousand cavalry, not a large number.

However, any tribal leader who had faced these Han cavalry forces knew their terrifying power. Their fearsome flintlock rifles were far more potent than bows and arrows. From a great distance, they could strike down enemies, man and horse alike, and even heavily armored cavalry couldn't withstand their bullets...

The Wushen tribal leader hastily went to greet them, bowing from afar to Zao Ying.

"We will once again rely on your assistance," he stated.

Zao Ying returned the bow, but offered no superfluous pleasantries.

There was no point in exchanging polite words with the Mongols; they respected only strength, not courtesy.

The Wushen tribal leader immediately noticed that within Zao Ying's forces, beyond the cavalry, there was a peculiar large vehicle.

The vehicle sported a chimney belching black smoke, and as the Wushen tribal leader's gaze swept over it, he saw the driver shoveling coal into its boiler.

He was utterly bewildered.

"This... so the coal is for this thing," he murmured.

"And behind it, it's dragging a cannon?"

"Yes, it is," Zao Ying confirmed.

"It's an artillery vehicle."

The Wushen tribal leader remained somewhat dumbfounded.

He had certainly seen Han people using oxen and horses to pull large cannons, but the speed of such artillery carts was incredibly slow, utterly incapable of keeping pace with cavalry. Such things were entirely useless on the vast grasslands.

Zao Ying offered no further explanation.

"This vehicle is merely for experimentation, not the main event. Just focus on your own tasks."

"Ah? Very well!"

The Wushen tribal leader quickly turned to greet the other tribes. Each tribal leader received supplies, ensuring their cavalry could enjoy a good meal and have their grain pouches filled.

Although they were about to go to war, smiles bloomed on the faces of these men.

Mongols did not fear battle; they feared only the biting cold.

Everyone waited a while longer, and then several more distant tribes arrived. The moment they appeared, they immediately received food from the Wushen tribal leader, each face beaming with joy, roaring,

"We will forever be the Wushen Tribe's most loyal allies!"

The Wushen tribal leader couldn't help but swell with pride.

Witnessing this, Zheng Daniu couldn't help but whisper,

"Yingzi, if this continues, won't the Wushen become... well... what was that phrase again?"

"It's called the tail wagging the dog," Zao Ying whispered with a soft laugh.

"Don't worry! These Mongols might claim to be the Wushen Tribe's most loyal friends forever, but should the Wushen's strength falter even slightly one day, they would immediately betray them, perhaps even tearing the Wushen apart to devour them."

Zheng Daniu gasped.

"Ah? They're that ruthless?"

Zao Ying explained,

"Such is the law of the grasslands. So, whether the Wushen become too powerful for their own good hinges entirely on how much support we provide. The Wushen's own warriors suffered heavy losses in our initial battles. Their core strength isn't actually robust; it's our backing that makes other tribes their 'most loyal allies.' The moment we withdraw our assistance, the Wushen Tribe will instantly become a drowning dog, hounded by everyone."

Zheng Daniu understood.

"So, the Wushen will always have to obediently follow our commands. No tail wagging the dog then?"

Zao Ying murmured,

"And we, too, must always remain strong. Otherwise, we risk the Wushen's backlash... that's just the cruel reality of this world, a law no one can escape."

Zheng Daniu flinched.

"Oh, my! I really don't like such a harsh place. Wouldn't it be better if everyone just got along and ate delicious food?"

Zao Ying gazed fondly at Zheng Daniu's perpetually innocent face, a faint smile playing on her lips.

"Don't worry. Dao Xuan Tianzun said that culture can help two different peoples find a common sense of belonging. As long as we continuously spread Han culture, allowing the Mongols to learn the same knowledge and understand the same principles as us, one day they will abandon their current way of life and live happily alongside us."

Zheng Daniu beamed.

"Oh! That would be truly wonderful!"

In the distance, a lone rider galloped furiously toward them...

The rider, still astride his horse, was shouting something in Mongolian, his voice hoarse with exertion.

The Wushen tribal leader sprang to his feet, crying out,

"Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's forces are here! Prepare for battle! Everyone, prepare for battle!"

"Prepare for battle!"

All the Mongol cavalry stirred with excitement. Large detachments of soldiers wheeled and moved, forming a vast battle array.

Zao Ying also waved a hand.

"We will advance alongside the Wushen Tribe! Experimental Car No. 4, what are your intentions?"

Experimental Car No. 4 was not under Zao Ying's direct command; its driver had arrived with a testing mission and possessed independent decision-making authority.

The driver snapped a crisp salute to Zao Ying. He was a soldier from the artillery battalion, and he declared loudly,

"Reporting, Instructor Zao! Experimental Car No. 4 will provide you with artillery support!"

Chapter 880: Experimental Car No. 4

Ranks were formed.

Dozens of tribes raised their banners, vast cavalry formations unfurling across the grassland like a living wall. Warhorses stamped and snorted, armor clinked, and the plain itself seemed to tense.

Opposite them stood Bo'erzhijin Elinchen, commanding nearly ten thousand cavalry. His lines were dense, orderly, and oppressive—an overwhelming display of force.

By contrast, the Wushen tribe's side looked painfully thin. Barely four thousand riders waited there, their formation sparse and fragile by comparison.

The Wushen tribe leader glanced back over his shoulder, his gaze settling on the Han Chinese cavalry behind him.

That was his trump card.

That was where his confidence came from.

His eyes then caught sight of Experimental Car No. 4 rumbling toward the rear of the formation. Suddenly, the front half of the vehicle disengaged from the cannon it had been towing.

The cannon swivelled in place, its black muzzle slowly turning until it pointed straight at Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's cavalry. Meanwhile, freed from its burden, the front section continued forward, drawing level with Zao Ying's unit.

"One cannon?" the Wushen tribe leader thought, frowning. "What use is that?"

He had seen Han Chinese cannons before. They fired solid iron balls—terrifying in noise, but against a charging cavalry, little more than an annoyance. One cannon alone? Practically meaningless.

And yet...

As his eyes lingered on that massive iron monstrosity—the forward section of the machine—an inexplicable unease crept into his chest.

Anyone with even the most basic understanding of warfare could tell at a glance:

This thing was terrifying.

From Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's ranks, dozens of warriors shouted in unison, voices rolling across the plain.

"You dogs across the field! How dare you oppose Bo'erzhijin Elinchen? Today we'll teach you a lesson in blood and steel! You'll learn who truly rules these grasslands!"

The Wushen tribe answered immediately, their own shouts rising to meet them.

"The blood of Genghis Khan has thinned! Bo'erzhijin Elinchen is nothing but an empty shell! From this day on, everyone on these plains will bow to me!"

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's face twisted with fury.

"Charge!"

"To the charge!"

The Ordos cavalry surged forward as one, howling like wolves unleashed.

These were the elite heavy cavalry of the Old Northern Yuan nobility—heirs to the fearsome Mongol horsemen of legend. Both rider and mount were clad in heavy armor. Once they began their charge, their momentum was like a collapsing mountain, impossible to stop.

The Wushen side, by comparison, looked pitiful—almost entirely light cavalry.

A stab of panic went through the Wushen tribe leader. He instinctively turned his head toward Zao Ying.

And in that instant, he saw the lone Han Chinese cannon.

A thin trail of smoke curled from its fuse.

"BOOM!"

The roar echoed across the grassland. Horses unaccustomed to gunfire screamed and reared, hooves tearing at the earth.

A dark cannonball ripped through the air.

It traced a smooth arc... and plunged straight into the heart of Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's heavy cavalry.

Cavalry formations were nothing like infantry blocks—their spacing was wide. Hitting a rider directly with a solid iron shot was about as likely as winning the grand prize in a lottery.

As expected, the shot struck no one.

It slammed into open ground.

And then—

"BOOM!"

It exploded.

Shrapnel and steel pellets burst outward in a violent storm. Heavy armor, thick as it was, proved utterly useless. Plates were pierced with dull, nauseating thuds.

A warhorse screamed and collapsed sideways.

Its rider was flung screaming from the saddle.

With a single blast, a gaping hole was torn straight through the spearhead of the charge.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen sucked in a sharp breath.

"What in the blazes was that cannonball?!"

The Wushen tribe leader burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha! Incredible—absolutely incredible!"

Moments ago, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's cavalry had charged with arrogant confidence. Now, one cannon blast had shattered their momentum entirely.

"Charge!" the Wushen leader roared.

"Charge!" Zao Ying echoed.

Zao Ying's arquebus cavalry surged forward, a fast-moving line charging directly toward the heavy cavalry.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen roared in disbelief, "Han Chinese cavalry? Charging our Mongol heavy horsemen head-on? Are you mad?! Tell me—shout it! Who commands the greatest cavalry in the world?!"

His officers shouted in unison:

"Mongols!

Genghis Khan!

Mongols!

Genghis Khan!"

The ancient nobility of the Northern Yuan screamed themselves hoarse, still clinging to the fading afterglow of past glory.

They failed to realize that the Northern Yuan had already reached the dusk of its age.

"Fire!"

At Zao Ying's command, gunfire erupted.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The front ranks of the Mongol heavy cavalry collapsed instantly, men and horses tumbling together in chaos.

No matter how thick their armor, it was meaningless against breech-loading rifled guns.

But after firing, Zao Ying's riders had to peel away—reloading took time.

The cavalry wheeled sideways, desperately buying seconds to reload.

But then—

The front section of Experimental Car No. 4, which had advanced alongside Zao Ying, did not veer away.

Freed from its towed cannon, it was far more agile than before.

Black smoke billowed as it rumbled forward, charging straight into the cavalry.

A musket extended from its front.

Bang!

A cavalryman fell.

Just as Zao Ying expected a pause for reloading, the soldier seated beside the driver moved with astonishing speed. He shoved the gunstock forward—the breech snapped open. Burnt powder and paper spilled out, and a fresh round slid smoothly from the magazine into the chamber.

Another push. The breech sealed shut.

Bang!

Another cavalryman dropped.

One shot per breath.

Zao Ying and Zheng Daniu stared in stunned silence.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Experimental Car No. 4 unleashed continuous fire, every breath producing another shot. Mongol riders fell one after another, thrown from their saddles like broken dolls.

Across the field, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen stood dumbstruck.

"What... what in the heavens is that thing?"

After several shots, the vehicle was slow to turn and couldn't disengage in time. Mongol cavalry pressed closer. A young rider drew his bow and loosed an arrow.

Clang!

The arrow bounced harmlessly off the armor.

Experimental Car No. 4 was built for war. After having its "head" nearly crushed once before, its armor had been heavily reinforced. Even its viewing port—a narrow slit of thickened glass—was designed to withstand punishment.

An arrow stood no chance.

With ranged attacks useless, the two sides collided.

In the blink of an eye, the monstrous machine was upon them.

The Mongol heavy cavalry panicked. Riders at the front yanked hard on their reins, swerving desperately to either side.

Those with clear sight managed to escape.

Those behind them couldn't see.

When the front ranks scattered, the riders behind suddenly saw the iron beast bearing down on them—far too late to react.

"CRUNCH!"

The sound was sickening. Screams of men mixed with the shrieks of dying horses as Experimental Car No. 4 plowed straight through the formation, overturning riders and crushing them beneath its treads.

This spectacle didn't just terrify the enemy.

Even their allies were shaken to the core.

The Wushen tribe leader muttered under his breath, awestruck:

"I always knew the Han Chinese were formidable... but I never imagined they were this formidable."