

## Great Ming 881

Chapter 881: You Should All Come Up and See

Experimental Car No. 4 rampaged across the steppe, utterly unrestrained.

Invincible.

At its core, it was nothing more than a gigantic iron box.

Its chassis wasn't particularly thick—its designers had deliberately prioritized lightness—but it was still more than sufficient to deflect arrows and saber strikes. If these were the Manchus, armed with firearms, they might have had some chance of piercing its shell. But the Mongols possessed no guns at all.

Against this iron monster, relying solely on cold steel, they posed no threat whatsoever.

One Mongol cavalryman, fierce and unyielding, refused to retreat. Gripping a long spear, he spurred his mount forward. His horse was exceptional—fast and powerful—and in moments he caught up from behind, galloping shoulder to shoulder with Experimental Car No. 4.

He lifted his spear and thrust with all his strength toward the side window.

But the driver wasn't an idiot.

The moment he sensed the horse drawing alongside him, he yanked the steering wheel hard. The vehicle lurched sharply to the side.

The spear missed the narrow window and slammed instead into the iron shell beside it.

Clang!

The metallic crash rang out sharply. The thrust had been ferocious, but force was always met with equal resistance. The harder the cavalryman struck, the stronger the rebound.

He was thrown backward violently, nearly tumbling off his horse.

But he was Mongol-born, raised in the saddle. Even in such a dire moment, he somehow held on. His body rocked backward, then snapped forward again, using his waist to pull himself back into position, landing firmly in the saddle once more.

The cavalryman felt a surge of pride.

"My horsemanship," he thought smugly, "haha—truly unmatched..."

Bang!

Experimental Car No. 4 swerved straight into him.

Man and horse were sent flying.

"Stay away from that strange vehicle!"

"Dodge it!"

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's cavalry shouted frantically.

The heavy cavalry scattered in panic.

Their wedge formation had already been torn apart by Experimental Car No. 4.

At the same time, Zao Ying's unit—having briefly withdrawn to reload—was ready once more. The firearm cavalry surged forward again. A crisp, rhythmic volley rang out, and another large swath of heavy cavalry collapsed.

The Wushen tribe leader, the Ordos tribal leader, and the others watching this unfold could not possibly let such an opportunity slip away.

Mongols were like wolves by nature—masters of flanking maneuvers and coordinated assaults, experts at exploiting weakness.

"Charge!"

"Attack! The Han people have opened the way for us!"

"Assault!"

Large bodies of cavalry thundered forward, crashing into the disordered enemy.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen sucked in a breath, letting out a startled cry, momentarily frozen by indecision.

And in that brief hesitation, he saw it.

The strange iron vehicle had already punched straight through his cavalry formation and was now charging directly toward his command banner.

It wasn't coordinating with any unit. It wasn't waiting for support.

It was simply driving straight through the battlefield to kill the commander.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen shouted in disbelief, "This thing is outrageously arrogant! Who attacks the commanding general by driving straight through the front lines? That's not even a tactic!"

A subordinate beside him screamed in panic, "My lord, stop talking—run!"

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen muttered, "For the commander to flee at the very start of battle... that really doesn't seem appropriate, does it?"

Before his words had fully faded, the massive iron vehicle roared again—and actually accelerated.

Like a terrifying black beast, baring fangs and claws, it charged straight at him. A firearm protruded from its front.

Bang!

One of Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's subordinates screamed and collapsed to the ground.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen glanced sideways at the fallen man, then without another word, yanked hard on his reins and fled.

A commander abandoning the battlefield was catastrophic for morale.

Those smaller tribes allied with him had already been wavering. If not for the oppressive authority of Bo'erzhijin Elinchen's lineage—his claim to the blood of Genghis Khan—they would have scattered long ago like startled birds.

Now that they saw him fleeing, why would they remain?

"Hoo!"

With a collective cry, the allied forces broke and fled in chaos.

The Wushen tribe leader immediately ordered his men to shout together, "Why are you running? Surrender to me! Join my Wushen tribe—I guarantee you food this winter!"

The shout actually worked.

The fleeing smaller tribes slowed, then stopped at a distance. They turned back to watch, waiting for the battle to fully conclude before deciding where to pledge their loyalty.

As they watched, they saw the strange iron vehicle still chasing Bo'erzhijin Elinchen.

But no matter how terrifying it was, it wasn't particularly fast.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen rode the finest horse in the Ordos. The iron vehicle couldn't close the distance. Slowly, inevitably, the gap widened.

Before long, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen and his retinue vanished into the northern steppe.

Left with no choice, the iron vehicle turned back, its movements almost seeming... disgruntled.

It drove back to the cannon positioned behind the lines, hooked the tow hitch into place, and once again resumed its role as a towing vehicle.

Now it looked oddly docile.

But its performance on the battlefield had already carved deep fear into the hearts of every Mongol present.

The Wushen tribe leader and the others now looked at the iron car with something close to reverence—a fear born from the soul.

A voice screamed within their hearts:

Allying with the Han people was the correct choice. If we had sided with the Later Jin and fought the Han... it would have been us being chased by that iron monster just now.

Too terrifying.

Zao Ying approached the Wushen tribe leader. "We've already helped you win the most critical battle. The smaller tribes allied with your opponent have also switched sides. The rest shouldn't require our involvement anymore, should it?"

The Wushen tribe leader answered without hesitation, "If I still needed your help after this, I wouldn't deserve to be the new leader of the Ordos. My Han friends, please rest. Leave the rest to me."

—

By the end of the seventh year of Chongzhen's reign—

A massive hot air balloon floated above Gao Family Village.

A large basket hung beneath it, and inside stood a young graduate student, rising slowly into the sky.

The wind was strong, causing the balloon to sway. A long rope dangled down to the ground, where dozens of students clung to it with white knuckles, terrified that the balloon might be swept away.

A rather pretty young woman shouted anxiously, "Hold tight, everyone! Don't let my husband float away!"

The students burst into laughter.

"You're only engaged," they teased. "Not even married yet, and you're already calling him your husband?"

The woman's face flushed crimson. She wished she could disappear on the spot. But when she looked up at the balloon, worry overwhelmed her embarrassment. She faced the students bravely and repeated, "Please, hold on tight—don't let go!"

At that moment, laughter rang down from the balloon.

"Classmates!" the graduate student called cheerfully. "You should all come up and see! The feeling of looking down on the earth—it's truly amazing!"

Chapter 882: I Don't Like You

The students standing on the ground all looked up at the sky.

"It's floating so high. Aren't you scared?" someone shouted.

The graduate student in the air laughed loudly.

"What's there to be afraid of? This is amazing. Absolutely incredible. Looking down from this height feels unreal. Hurry up and come up too!"

His excitement instantly ignited everyone's interest.

So the group grabbed the ropes and pulled with all their strength, dragging the hot air balloon back down. One student climbed into the basket, then everyone pulled again. Then another student climbed in. Over and over again.

After several rounds, the students finally got tired.

Dragging it down every time required so many people. It was exhausting.

"We're graduate students, aren't we?" someone complained. "Why are we solving problems in such a primitive way?"

A few sharp-minded students quickly found a winch. After some clever adjustments, they secured the balloon's rope to it.

Now going up and down became effortless.

Everyone was having a blast when the village chief of Gao Family Village slowly wandered over.

"What are you kids playing with?" he asked curiously.

The students all laughed.

"Grandpa Village Chief, we're playing with a reconnaissance hot air balloon."

The old man raised his head and stared at the balloon slowly ascending into the sky, where a graduate student was still shouting happily.

His eyes immediately lit up.

"I want to go up and play too."

The graduate students broke into cold sweat on the spot.

"No, no, no, absolutely not. This is an experimental model. Its safety and stability haven't been verified yet. The last test balloon leaked and crashed. It almost caused a serious accident."

The Village Chief snorted.

"How old do you think I am? Still afraid of accidents? Whether I die early or late, it'll be within the next few years anyway. Before I go, I want to experience everything I never got to."

The graduate students hesitated.

"But..."

The Village Chief reached into his pocket, pulled out a handful of small silver coins, and snapped off tiny pieces, handing one to each student.

"Here. Grandpa's giving you some pocket money. Just let Grandpa ride it once."

The older he got, the more mischievous he became.

How could the graduate students argue with him?

After repeated pestering, they finally surrendered. The winch turned, and the balloon slowly descended.

The Village Chief happily climbed into the large wicker basket and floated upward.

The sensation of overlooking the land from the sky was completely unprecedented.

From above, the Gao Family Village stronghold shrank beneath his feet, surrounded by endless farmland. Nearby were the Gao Family Commercial District, the colorful Short-term Workers Village, and the Long-term Workers Village.

As he rose higher, the strange massive buildings of the Gao Family Village Ordnance Bureau came into view. Beyond them were the military camps beneath the distant cliffs. Even the Valley of Exiles farther away could be seen clearly.

Tears welled up in the Village Chief's eyes.

"Back then... our village only had forty or fifty people. And now... Gao Family Village has become this."

When he returned to the ground, the Village Chief was still overwhelmed with emotion. He grabbed the graduate students tightly.

"This thing is good. Truly good. Everyone in the village should go up and see how beautiful our home has become."

The graduate students smiled awkwardly.

"Everyone? Just letting you go up already broke several regulations. If more people ride it, Principal Wang will skin us alive."

The Village Chief snorted.

"Principal Wang? Tell him to come talk to me."

The graduate students exchanged glances.

Principal Wang would never dare speak in front of you.

The Village Chief suddenly remembered something.

"Oh right. All your research funding comes from Principal Wang, doesn't it?"

The graduate students nodded.

"Yes. And it burns money badly. This balloon alone cost hundreds of taels of silver. Principal Wang winces every time he hears about it."

The Village Chief waved his hand.

"That's where you kids are wrong. You need to learn how to make money with your inventions. Look at Laba. He learned about the new rice noodles and immediately opened a Laba Rice Noodle shop. He's making a fortune."

He continued confidently.

"You should also use scientific inventions to earn money, then use that money for research. That way, you can reduce Principal Wang's burden."

The graduate students froze.

"Huh?"

The Village Chief explained patiently.

"This hot air balloon is excellent. Charge people to ride it. Five taels of silver per person per ride. Hang a big banner under it. Once it goes up, won't everyone in the village see it? If a hundred people pay, wouldn't that cover your costs?"

The graduate students were stunned.

"You can make money like this?"

Their horizons were instantly broadened.

The wisdom of elders truly could not be underestimated.

The graduate students immediately took action. They found a long piece of white cloth and wrote large characters on it.

"Ascend to the Sky. Five Taels per Ride."

They hung the banner beneath the balloon.

Soon after, the hot air balloon rose into the sky once more.

The banner fluttered visibly.

In less than half an hour, everyone in Gao Family Village who had spare money rushed over.

The graduate students' silver reserves skyrocketed.

Ten days later.

In Xi'an Prefecture, a group of graduate students sat atop a newly manufactured truck and happily arrived at the center of the market square.

They unloaded a large pile of parts from the truck. After two hours of assembly, Hot Air Balloon Number Three stood proudly in the middle of Xi'an City.

Once inflated, it slowly lifted off.

A banner hung beneath it.

"Ascend to the Sky. Thirty Taels of Silver per Ride."

The price was six times that of Gao Family Village.

The graduate students joked that this price was deliberately set high so as not to exploit the poor.

The balloon had been airborne for less than half an hour when the gleaming Kulinan stopped directly beneath it.

Zhu Cunji, heir to the Prince of Qin, leaped out of the vehicle and shouted impatiently.

"Is it really only thirty taels? To fly that high?"

The graduate students nodded.

"Yes. Thirty taels."

Zhu Cunji waved his hand.

"Pay."

A guard immediately stepped forward and presented thirty taels of refined silver with both hands.

Zhu Cunji's face was full of excitement.

"Hurry up. Let this heir go up."

As the balloon descended, the Xi'an Prefect and a group of officials hurried over, staring with wide eyes.

Zhu Cunji glanced at them and suddenly burst into laughter.

"Why are you all staring? I am floating above Xi'an. That doesn't count as leaving Xi'an, does it? Hahahaha. Wahahaha. Wahahahahaha."

His laughter sounded like a villain straight out of a play.

The officials were speechless.

Zhu Cunji climbed into the wicker basket and rose higher and higher.

Soon, his voice drifted down faintly from the sky.

"The outside world is so damn beautiful. Wuwu. Let me out. I don't want to inherit the Prince of Qin's title anymore. I want to be a commoner. I want to go outside."

The officials and guards on the ground remained silent.

After some time, the Xi'an Prefect finally shouted upward.

"Heir. You didn't control your voice. We all heard you. Stop crying and come down."

"I wasn't crying," Zhu Cunji shouted back angrily. "How could I cry? What kind of person do you think I am? Crying? What a joke. You're talking nonsense. I don't like you."

At that moment, the large tablet computer in the market square suddenly began playing a song.

"If I were young and accomplished, without insecurity, having tasted regret and bitterness, fighting for wealth and status, yet now longing to retreat..."

Chapter 883: The Xingyang Grand Assembly

The seventh year of Chongzhen, deep winter.

Henan. Zhengzhou. Xingyang.

From the west, more than a thousand rebel cavalry rode in, reining in their horses amid the wheat fields outside the western suburbs. Soon after, enormous banners unfurled one by one, stretching from the distant cliff pass all the way southward. Flags blotted out the sky. Armor gleamed coldly under the winter sun.

From the southern mountains to the northern bend of the Yellow River, the land was flooded with men and horses, surging forward like clouds and waves. From dawn until dusk, the only sound was the constant neighing of warhorses. The camps sprawled for dozens of li, endless to the eye.

Wherever the rebel army passed, men and beasts trampled the earth flat, crushing everything beneath them. Roads five or six li wide were carved into the land, their numbers impossible to count.

This was how a local Henan gentry later recorded the scene.

The small county town of Xingyang had already been razed to the ground. Everywhere the rebel army marched, the paths beaten down by men and horses stretched five or six li wide.

Three hundred thousand soldiers.

All gathered around the tiny town of Xingyang.

Chuǎng Wang. Chuang Jiang. Lao Huihui. Geliyan. Zuo Jianwang. Cao Cao. Gaishiwang. Shetatian. Xi Ying Ba Da Wang. Heng Tianwang. Hun Shiwang. Guo Tianxing. Jiutiaolong. Shun Tianwang...

Countless rebel leaders had assembled on the open plains south of Xingyang city.

Chuǎng Wang, as the supreme leader, sat squarely in the main seat. The other bandit chiefs sat arranged in two long rows on either side.

"Ahem," Chuǎng Wang cleared his throat. "I've gathered everyone here today to discuss our future strategy..."

He stopped there.

He didn't quite know how to continue.

The truth was simple: he was badly educated.

Seeing this, his favored general, Chuang Jiang, immediately stepped forward to speak in his stead.

"We barely escaped the government army's encirclement in the Yunyang region," Chuang Jiang said loudly. "After great difficulty, we finally regrouped here in Henan. Now we stand in the Central Plains, with roads open in every direction. North, south, east, west—we can go wherever we wish. If we don't talk this through properly, we'll waste this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Before his words had fully settled, a snort of laughter came from nearby.

Chuang Jiang turned his head sharply.

It was Xi Ying Ba Da Wang.

Chuang Jiang's expression darkened. "Ba Da Wang, what exactly are you laughing at?"

Xi Ying Ba Da Wang rolled his eyes lazily. "I'm laughing because your first wife ran off with another man. Then your second wife did the same. And now you want to talk about leadership?"

"You—!" Chuang Jiang snarled.

His hand dropped instinctively to the saber at his waist.

Cao Cao, seated beside him, hurriedly reached out and pressed Chuang Jiang's arm down. "Easy, Brother Chuang Jiang. This isn't the time for infighting."

"Am I the one causing trouble?" Chuang Jiang roared. "It's this bastard who keeps stirring things up!"

Xi Ying Ba Da Wang looked utterly relaxed. "I'm just stating facts. If I've said even one false word, feel free to refute me."

Chuang Jiang fell silent.

The air turned unbearably awkward.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Lao Huihui suddenly broke the silence. "All my troops are heavy cavalry. Marching alongside your infantry is extremely inconvenient. Besides, I have no interest in the Central Plains. I prefer the Northwest. I intend to cross the Yellow River and return to Shanxi."

His meaning was crystal clear.

He had no intention of continuing to cooperate.

Xi Ying Ba Da Wang sneered, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "What, scared of the government army now? Afraid to fight? Looking for some deserted place to hide?"

Lao Huihui glared at him, eyes blazing.

Having just been mocked himself moments earlier, Chuang Jiang naturally stepped in to back Lao Huihui. "Ba Da Wang, watch your mouth! You curse everyone the moment you open it. Who exactly are you trying to provoke? Is there anyone here who has ever been afraid of the government troops?"

Xi Ying Ba Da Wang threw his head back and laughed loudly. "Not afraid? If none of you are afraid, then why are we all sitting here talking? Haven't you all been beaten into a corner by them, huddling together just to survive?"

Silence fell over the gathering.

Chuang Jiang exploded. "If even a single commoner can fight, how much more so an army of a hundred thousand! Our forces outnumber the government troops ten to one! Even if the Guanning Iron Cavalry arrived, they'd still be helpless. I'm not afraid of them at all!"

Xi Ying Ba Da Wang shot back immediately. "Big words. You really aren't afraid of the Guanning Iron Cavalry? Fine. As far as I know, Cao Wenzhao is leading them straight toward us right now. If you're so brave, why don't you go and chop him down?"

Chuang Jiang was rendered speechless.

The tension thickened once more, freezing the scene.

At the mention of Cao Wenzhao, every bandit chief felt a chill in his heart.

Chuang Jiang swept a glance around and understood immediately.

Uniting this rabble to fight the government army was impossible.

These people had no grand ambitions. They only knew how to burn, loot, and pillage. The idea of forging a truly unified force had never even crossed their minds.

This so-called Xingyang Grand Assembly...

Was utterly pointless.

Fine. If they couldn't unite, then they would split.

Chuang Jiang spoke gravely. "There's only one option left. We divide our forces. Each of us goes our own way. Whether we live or die—that will be left to Heaven."

The bandit chiefs exchanged glances, inwardly delighted.

Split up and run? Perfect.

Whoever wanted to deal with Cao Wenzhao could do so. The rest would be far safer scattering like startled birds.

In unison, they declared, "Chuang Jiang's plan is excellent!"

Thus, the "grand strategy" was settled.

There was no strategy at all—only chaos.

But there was still the question of where to flee.

When these roaming bandits divided territory, it was no different from street gangs carving up turf.

"You don't touch my karaoke hall."

"I won't raid your market stall."

"I won't step into the nightclub you protect."

"And don't even think about meddling in the red-light district under my control."

Chuǎng Wang then spoke up. "We'll draw lots to decide who goes where."

Lots were drawn, and assignments made.

Geliyan and Zuo Jianwang would head south to face the Chu forces.

Heng Tianwang and Hun Shiwang would go west to confront the Qin army.

Cao Cao and Guo Tianxing would camp between Xingyang and Sishui, scouting Zhongmou, Deng, and Wei, tying down the forces from Kaifeng, Guide, Henan, and Ruzhou.

Zhang Xianzhong and Chuang Jiang would focus entirely on the east. After capturing cities and towns, all gold, silk, and women would be divided evenly.

Lao Huihui and Jiutiaolong would act as mobile scouts, free to move and provide support wherever needed.

Fearing the western front might be too weak, Shetatian and Gaishiwang were added as reinforcements for Heng Tianwang and Hun Shiwang.

After the division was complete—

Xi Ying Ba Da Wang let out a cold chuckle and led his troops southeast.

Lao Huihui watched him go, sneering inwardly.

A bunch of useless fools, he thought. Good thing I drew the lot for central support as a roaming force. That means I can move freely. It'll make contacting the people from Xiaolangdi much easier.

Very well.

He would take things one step at a time.

—

The eighth year of Chongzhen, early in the year.

Fengyang.

Fengyang—also known as the "Imperial Homeland"—was the ancestral seat of the Zhu imperial clan. Their ancestral tombs lay within its territory.

Since ancient times, people of the dynasty cherished their hometowns deeply. Once they achieved success and wealth, they would always want to return home—investing money locally, helping elders and kin escape poverty. Even if they couldn't make their hometown rich, scattering rewards was considered mandatory.

Hence the saying:

"To return wealthy but not display it in one's hometown is like wearing brocade at night."

If you got rich, you had to show it. Otherwise, it was as if you hadn't gotten rich at all.

Everyone followed this rule.

Everyone—except the Zhu family.

Despite Fengyang being the Imperial Homeland, the Zhu clan had never managed it properly. Not only had they failed to enrich the people, they had exploited them doubly, reducing the locals to utter misery.

It was into this desperate land that Xi Ying Ba Da Wang arrived.

The impoverished people of Fengyang traveled hundreds of li to welcome the bandit. They eagerly presented him with detailed ledgers:

"This household is wealthy."

"That place has no soldiers."

Through these desperate locals, Ba Da Wang learned Fengyang's true condition.

The Zhu family, obsessed with fengshui, had never even built city walls around Fengyang.

What was that, if not a beautiful woman—drunk, naked, and lying right in front of him?

A gentleman might drape his cloak over her and escort her to safety.

But a villain?

For a villain, it was perfection.

On the morning of the fifteenth day of the first lunar month in the eighth year of Chongzhen, thick fog blanketed the land. Xi Ying Ba Da Wang led his Sweep-the-Ground King and Taiping King divisions in a sudden attack on Fengyang.

Zhu Guoxiang, the Fengyang garrison commander, hastily led his troops out to resist—but was killed in battle. Over four thousand government soldiers were wiped out. The remaining fifteen hundred dropped to their knees, chanting "Long Live!" to beg for mercy.

Yan Rongxuan, the Prefect of Fengyang, seeing the situation collapse, changed into a prisoner's uniform and hid inside the jail.

When the rebel army came to release the prisoners, they discovered Yan Rongxuan and beat him to death on the spot.

Xi Ying Ba Da Wang raised a banner bearing the words "Ancient Yuan True Dragon Emperor."

He set fire to the Imperial Mausoleum's sacrificial hall and Longxing Temple.

And then—

He ordered the Zhu family's ancestral tombs dug up.

Chapter 884: Cao Wenzhao Arrives

In the imperial study, deep within the capital.

The Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, felt as if his spirit had just been strapped to a jet plane and launched straight into the sky.

Moments earlier, he had finished reading a memorial.

The Mongolian Ordos Tribe had originally been preparing to surrender to the Manchus. But at the critical moment, a violent internal upheaval broke out among the tribes. The Wushen Tribe suddenly rebelled, overthrowing the Ordos leadership and seizing control.

This new Wushen leadership, however, had no intention of submitting to the Manchus.

The reason was simple: they had once clashed head-on with the Ming border forces—specifically with Assistant Commander Shi Jian, stationed at the ancient fortress of Wangjia Fork. After being brutally taught a lesson by Shi Jian at that very fortress, the Wushen Tribe had developed a deep-seated fear of the Ming. They no longer dared to make enemies of them.

Once the Wushen Tribe took power, the Ordos immediately ceased all raids into the Hetao region.

The border went quiet—instantly and completely.

For Zhu Youjian, news like this was nothing short of a beam of light piercing the darkest night. It sent warmth rushing through his entire body.

"Hahahaha!" Zhu Youjian burst out laughing—a sound he himself had not heard in a very long time. This time, the laughter came from genuine joy.

"This Shi Jian truly is something special! Every single battle report that carries his name ends in victory. Excellent! Simply excellent! In the past, only Hong Chengchou ever gave me this kind of peace of mind."

Standing beside him, Grand Eunuch Cao Huachun smiled faintly.

"Only officials who can ease Your Majesty's worries are truly good officials."

"Promote him!" Zhu Youjian declared without hesitation. "Promote him again. Is there a suitable post we can transfer him to? What about sending him to Henan to suppress the bandits?"

Cao Huachun stiffened slightly and replied with careful diplomacy,

"Your Majesty... Shi Jian's presence at the Yansui border garrison is precisely what keeps the Mongols frightened and obedient. If he were transferred to Henan, wouldn't the Mongols simply return to their old habits?"

Zhu Youjian fell silent.

That... was indeed a problem.

"Very well," he finally said. "Then promote him to Regional Commander of Yansui. Let him continue guarding Yansui and keep the Mongols in line for me."

Cao Huachun quietly exhaled in relief and muttered to himself:

Thank heavens His Majesty didn't act on impulse this time. Moving Shi Jian now would definitely provoke trouble along the border again. It's rare for him to be this level-headed. Truly, this emperor is not easy to serve...

In high spirits, Zhu Youjian turned to the next memorial.

It came from Censor Gu Guobao of the Ministry of Revenue, impeaching Chen Qiyu, Governor-General of Five Provinces, for mishandling critical frontier affairs—allowing the roving bandits to break out of encirclement and wreak havoc across Henan.

The next memorial followed immediately.

It was from Fu Yongchun, Censor-in-Chief of Shaanxi, likewise impeaching Chen Qiyu—this time for fabricating enemy casualty numbers. Despite bearing the immense responsibility of overseeing five provinces, Chen Qiyu had indulged bandits, toyed with rebels, neglected his duties, and deceived the throne.

Zhu Youjian's mood plummeted, as if he had been dropped straight down from the peak of a tower.

"Why?!" he roared, fury erupting.

"Other than Shi Jian, is there not a single man who can deliver me a victory report?!"

Cao Huachun did not dare to respond, allowing the emperor to vent alone.

"Exile Chen Qiyu to the frontier!" Zhu Youjian thundered.

Cao Huachun bowed deeply.

"This servant obeys."

"Where are the roving bandits now?" Zhu Youjian demanded.

"They are currently gathered in Xingyang, Henan," Cao Huachun replied.

"Xingyang..." Zhu Youjian murmured.

"For some reason, that place feels uncomfortably familiar. But where have I heard it before...?"

At that moment, a eunuch came sprinting in from outside. He was running so fast that he tripped over the threshold and slammed face-first onto the floor with a heavy thud. His cheek scraped violently against the stone, tearing off a large patch of skin. Blood instantly smeared across the tiles.

Zhu Youjian sucked in a sharp breath, his own face stinging in sympathetic pain.

Ignoring his injuries, the eunuch wailed,

"Your Majesty! Disaster! A terrible disaster!"

Zhu Youjian raised an eyebrow.

"What is it?"

"The roving bandits..." the eunuch stammered.

"They launched a surprise attack on Fengyang! They burned the Imperial Mausoleum's Sacrificial Hall and Longxing Temple—and—and they dug up... Your Majesty's... ancestral tombs..."

"What?!"

Zhu Youjian leapt to his feet.

"Is this report true?!"

"No one would dare fabricate such a thing," the eunuch replied, voice trembling.

Zhu Youjian froze.

He stood there, motionless, like a statue turned to stone.

No one knew how long passed before his body finally slackened. Without a word, he removed his imperial robes, leaving only plain garments behind. Then he hurried into the Imperial Ancestral Temple and dropped to his knees with a heavy thud...

Days later.

A new imperial edict was proclaimed throughout the realm:

"To all under Heaven:

Wash away this national humiliation.

Exert every effort to exterminate the bandits.

Within six months, all roving rebels must be completely eradicated."

Lu Xiangheng was placed in command of military affairs across Southern Zhili, Henan, Shandong, Sichuan, and Huguang, and was appointed Supreme Commander for the suppression of bandits.

Meanwhile, the people of Luoyang Prefecture were having the time of their lives.

The Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon had originally been requested by Bai Yuan from the Gao Family Village Committee. Naturally, once the design was perfected, the finished product was immediately handed over to him.

Thus, a cargo ship loaded with several mass-produced hot air balloons arrived at Mengjin County. From there, they were transported by land to Luoyang.

The Blue Hat engineers accompanying the shipment swiftly assembled one balloon in the open field behind Luoyang's South Gate.

Bai Yuan had intended this contraption strictly for military use. Unfortunately for him, the graduate students from Gao Family Village had become completely addicted to making money.

After all, whether military or civilian, usage was still usage. History was full of examples of military technology being repurposed for civilian profit. Why should this be any different?

Several balloons had been shipped this time anyway—what harm was there in using one to earn a little silver?

And so...

The hot air balloon rose and fell, ascending and descending nonstop throughout the day.

Thirty taels per ride was exorbitant—but not to the nobles and wealthy officials of Luoyang. To them, thirty taels was pocket change. The chance to soar into the sky and look down upon the world, however, was an experience they had never known in their lives.

It was worth every coin.

Just moments ago, the Princess Consort of Fu had descended from the sky. Now, it was the turn of the wife of Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng to ascend.

Women were curious creatures—normally timid, easily frightened. Yet when faced with thrilling, terrifying entertainment, their enthusiasm knew no bounds.

Even as they screamed in fear, they still insisted on going up.

"Ahhh! It's so high! It's terrifying!"

A woman's shriek echoed through the sky—three parts terror, seven parts exhilaration.

Just as the crowd was reveling in the spectacle, a Ming army unit slowly approached Luoyang's South Gate.

This force was impeccably equipped, armed to the teeth. Each soldier wore solid armor, carried keen blades, and rode powerful horses. Many of the armors bore deep cuts from sabers and punctures from spears, stained with dark, dried blood. The entire formation radiated a fearsome, battle-hardened aura.

At the center of the army, a great banner snapped in the wind, emblazoned with a single massive character:

"Cao."

In the lower right corner, smaller characters read:

"Assistant Commander for Suppression."

At the time, there were two Assistant Commanders for Suppression in Henan—Zuo Liangyu and Cao Wenzhao.

Thus, the moment the city guards saw the "Cao" banner, they knew at once: this was Cao Wenzhao.

And that terrifyingly disciplined army could only be the famed Guanning Iron Cavalry.

The Guanning Iron Cavalry was not a single, uniform force. Some units were all bark and no bite—good only at watching battles from afar. But others were truly ferocious, elite troops willing to fight to the death.

The unit under Cao Wenzhao belonged firmly to the latter.

The sentry immediately shouted toward the open field behind the South Gate, where Governor Fan Shangzheng was standing, watching his wife scream from the balloon above:

"Your Excellency! Cao Wenzhao has arrived!"

Chapter 885: General Cao, Focus on the Key Points

Cao Wenzhao, clad in heavy armor, stood in the open ground outside the south city gate. He lifted his head and stared at the strange object floating serenely in the sky, his mind filling with question marks.

He raised a hand and pointed upward.

"What is that thing?"

His nephew, Cao Bianjiao, poked his head out from behind him.

"Uncle, I've never seen anything like it either."

Cao Wenzhao frowned slightly and continued to look up.

His eyesight was exceptionally sharp. From this distance, he could clearly see a wicker basket hanging beneath the enormous balloon. Inside the basket, a woman clung tightly to the rim with both hands, screaming at the top of her lungs...

Cao Wenzhao shook his head, his expression grave and disapproving.

"To suspend a woman in midair and frighten her until she screams like that—what kind of cruel torture is this?"

Cao Bianjiao stared at him.

"Uncle, you had so many questions just now, and this is the one you latch onto? Shouldn't you first be wondering how that thing is flying so high in the air?"

Cao Wenzhao blinked.

"Hm? When you put it that way... you're right."

As they spoke, the city gates slowly swung open.

The Governor of Henan, Fan Shangzheng, stepped forward to greet them.

"General Cao—"

Before he could finish speaking, a rotund figure behind him suddenly surged forward with astonishing speed. His movements were oddly light, almost floating, as he curved around Fan Shangzheng and charged straight toward Cao Wenzhao with arms spread wide.

He ran while sobbing loudly.

"General Cao! I've been waiting for you for so long! Now that you're here, this king can finally sleep peacefully!"

Cao Wenzhao froze for a moment.

"Hm? Prince of Fu?"

The large man was indeed the Prince of Fu.

He was dressed in magnificent robes, his body massive, yet his charge carried tremendous momentum. Each step seemed to shake the ground. Crying and wailing, he rushed forward, clearly intending to throw himself at Cao Wenzhao's legs.

At the critical moment, Cao Wenzhao calmly shifted half a step to the side.

The Prince of Fu lunged forward... and grabbed nothing but air.

With a tremendous thump and a thunderous crash, he smashed face-first into the ground.

Cao Wenzhao spoke evenly, his tone steady.

"Your Highness, please restrain yourself."

Still sprawled on the ground, the Prince of Fu felt overwhelming grievance rise in his chest, tears spilling freely.

"The Guanning Iron Cavalry is finally here! Only the Guanning Iron Cavalry can make people feel at ease! Recently, bandits have been running rampant in Henan—each one more vicious than the last. They even threaten to boil this king alive and eat me! This king has been terrified out of his wits! Now it's fine, it's all fine—General Cao is here!"

A trace of disdain flickered across Cao Wenzhao's face—but it vanished in an instant, replaced by his usual stern composure.

He turned toward Fan Shangzheng.

Fan Shangzheng shrugged helplessly.

"His Royal Highness has always been like this. You'll get used to it."

Cao Wenzhao cupped his fists respectfully.

"This general has been ordered to Henan to suppress bandits. Passing through Luoyang, I have come to request military provisions."

This was standard procedure. Ming armies never carried more than a few days' worth of rations when mobilized. Supplies were always provided by local governments.

Fan Shangzheng nodded.

"Very well. No problem. Please camp your forces in the open grounds south of the city. This official will make the necessary arrangements."

With official matters concluded.

Cao Wenzhao once again pointed toward the sky.

"Why suspend a woman up there just to scare her? Listen to those screams—she sounds utterly miserable."

Fan Shangzheng's face instantly turned red.

"Oh? That's... that's my humble wife. She's actually having a wonderful time."

Cao Wenzhao's mind erupted with fresh confusion.

"That... is what you call 'having a wonderful time'?"

Fan Shangzheng cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Well, you see—"

Cao Wenzhao cut in.

"What exactly is that thing?"

Fan Shangzheng's spirits lifted at once.

"Ah! This is a marvelous invention brought here by Mr. Bai Yuan. It's called a Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon. Before a battle, a scout rides it into the sky. From high above, they can observe dozens of li in every direction. Traditional scouts become almost unnecessary."

Cao Wenzhao pondered this briefly, then his eyes lit up.

"I see! Remarkable indeed!"

Cao Bianjiao was equally stunned.

"That's incredible..."

Cao Wenzhao nodded solemnly.

"The scout's eyesight must be extraordinary."

Cao Bianjiao broke into a sweat.

"Uncle... are you really impressed by the scout's eyesight? Shouldn't you be impressed by the device's reconnaissance capability?"

Cao Wenzhao considered it seriously.

"Oh? When you say it like that... you're right."

Everyone present fell silent.

After a pause, Cao Wenzhao asked,

"Governor, can such a device be arranged for my army?"

Fan Shangzheng shook his head with an embarrassed smile.

"Ah... this isn't government property. It belongs to Mr. Bai. I can't make decisions about it. Even my own wife has to pay thirty taels of silver for a single use."

Cao Wenzhao frowned slightly.

"Who is this Mr. Bai?"

"That would be me."

A flash of white appeared behind Fan Shangzheng.

Bai Yuan stepped forward, dressed in flowing white robes. With a crisp snap, he opened the folding fan in his hand, revealing two bold characters:

Gentleman.

Cao Wenzhao couldn't help exclaiming,

"How dashing!"

Bai Yuan beamed with delight.

"You think I'm dashing too?"

Cao Wenzhao replied calmly,

"I meant the fan."

Bai Yuan's smile froze.

"Can you please focus on the key point?"

Cao Wenzhao nodded earnestly.

"Oh? When you put it that way, you're right. Let's focus on what matters, Mr. Bai. That Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon—does it belong to you?"

Bai Yuan nodded.

"It does."

Cao Wenzhao's expression grew serious.

"This device is extraordinary. If deployed before a battle, the enemy could never ambush us. Nor would we stumble into traps during an advance. It could fundamentally change the nature of warfare."

Bai Yuan smiled.

"As expected of General Cao—you grasp its strategic value immediately. I obtained this specifically for reconnaissance. Last time, when Lao Huihui raided Luoyang, his cavalry moved just as fast as my scouts. By the time my men returned to report, Lao Huihui was already upon us. At that moment, I realized... this simply wouldn't do."

Cao Wenzhao nodded gravely.

"That is indeed a serious problem."

For many years, he had campaigned across north and south, suppressing bandits wherever they arose.

Yet bandits were slippery creatures—darting through mountains, slipping along ravines, scrambling up slopes. Cao Wenzhao had always found this deeply frustrating.

Now, seeing this powerful Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloon, he felt an irresistible temptation.

"Mr. Bai," Cao Wenzhao said slowly, "what price would persuade you to part with this magnificent device?"

Bai Yuan smiled and shook his head.

"It's not for sale. We need it ourselves."

"To do what with it?" Cao Wenzhao pointed skyward.

Another woman's scream drifted down from above.

"So high! So terrifying!"

Fan Shangzheng sighed deeply.

"My wife is screaming again... how embarrassing. I'll have someone bring her down."

Bai Yuan waved his hand.

"The thirty taels she paid hasn't run out yet. Let her 'play' a bit longer."

Fan Shangzheng paused, then nodded.

"Oh. Right. Of course."

Cao Wenzhao nodded approvingly.

"I see. It would indeed be unreasonable to bring her down before her allotted time."

Cao Bianjiao wiped cold sweat from his brow.

"Uncle! Is that what you're focused on? Mr. Bai just said it wasn't for sale, yet he charges thirty taels for its use! That contradiction is screaming at you!"

Cao Wenzhao blinked.

"Hm? When you put it that way... you're right."

He snapped his gaze to Bai Yuan.

"You say it's not for sale, yet for thirty taels you let women 'play' with it. Are you deliberately trying to make things difficult for this general?"

Bai Yuan replied calmly,

"It's for rent, not for sale."

Cao Wenzhao nodded slowly.

"I see. That makes sense."

"Makes sense my foot!"

Cao Bianjiao leapt forward angrily.

"Mr. Bai! You're the militia instructor here, aren't you? Your duty is to protect your homeland and fight bandits! Since that's the case, you should be renting this reconnaissance-whatever-thing to us! We're here to suppress bandits in Henan!"

Chapter 886: Mind Your Character

Bai Yuan hesitated slightly when he heard this.

From a purely logical standpoint, as the instructor of the Gao Family Village Militia, lending such an important piece of equipment to an imperial suppression general was entirely reasonable. Refusing would actually seem strange.

But the problem was this—

These items were not Bai Yuan's personal property. They were collective assets of Gao Family Village. He had no authority to make such a decision on impulse.

At that moment, the golden-threaded image embroidered on Bai Yuan's chest suddenly gave a soft cough—so faint that only he could hear it.

Bai Yuan instantly understood.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had instructions.

He quickly turned to Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao and cupped his hands apologetically.

"Please forgive me," he said. "I suddenly need a moment alone."

He stepped aside to a secluded spot.

The golden-threaded Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke calmly:

"Gao Family Village transported three reconnaissance hot air balloons this time. Lending one to Cao Wenzhao is acceptable. However, his character must be tested first. If he is worthy, he may use it. If not, then he may not."

Bai Yuan inhaled sharply.

"A weapon of war like this—if it's handed to the imperial army, who knows whether one day in the future..."

He did not finish the sentence.

"...it might be turned against us."

Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed softly.

"It makes no difference. The technical difficulty of these hot air balloons is not high. Any competent artisan within the imperial system could replicate it after observing it a few times. There is no value in hoarding such a thing. On the contrary, letting Cao Wenzhao test it in real battle saves us manpower and risk. Of course—"

Dao Xuan Tianzun's tone turned firm.

"The prerequisite is absolute. His character must be clean."

Bai Yuan nodded.

"I understand. This subordinate will test him."

With this supreme directive in hand, Bai Yuan's path forward became extremely clear.

He returned to the two generals, a faint smile on his lips.

"General Cao," Bai Yuan said, "I've thought it over. We can lend you the reconnaissance hot air balloon."

Cao Wenzhao's face lit up instantly.

"Excellent!"

Bai Yuan raised a finger.

"However—this thing is expensive."

He gestured toward the balloon still floating in the sky.

"When we rent it out in Luoyang for amusement, one ascent costs thirty taels of silver. Just leaving it up here for a single day earns us three to five hundred taels without effort."

Cao Wenzhao fell silent.

"If the General wishes to use it for ten days, or half a month," Bai Yuan continued slowly, "then the rental fee would naturally be—"

Had this been someone like Zuo Liangyu, he might have flipped the table on the spot and seized it by force.

But Cao Wenzhao was not that kind of man.

After a few seconds of silence, he let out a long sigh.

"This general does not have that kind of money. I cannot afford it."

Bai Yuan's expression suddenly turned strange.

"General," he said lightly, "you've fought campaigns all across the realm. How could you possibly lack funds? Wouldn't it be easy to kill a few old women and children, cut off their heads, claim them as bandits, and receive generous rewards?"

The moment those words left his mouth—

Cao Wenzhao exploded.

"What did you just say?" he demanded.

Cao Bianjiao stepped forward at once, his hand gripping the hilt of his saber.

"Master Bai," he growled, "what do you mean by that?"

With a snap, Bai Yuan flicked open his folding fan, hiding half his face. His voice dripped with mockery.

"What do I mean? I merely spoke of the usual practices of the imperial armies, did I not?"

Cao Bianjiao was furious.

"You—!"

But Cao Wenzhao abruptly reached out and pressed a firm hand on Cao Bianjiao's shoulder, stopping him.

His face was dark, but his voice was steady.

"Master Bai," he said slowly, "it is true that discipline among imperial troops has long been rotten, and it is natural for the people to hold such opinions."

He met Bai Yuan's eyes directly.

"But I, Cao Wenzhao, am not that kind of general. And the Guanning Iron Cavalry under my command are not that kind of soldiers."

He continued coldly:

"I have no money. And even if I did, it would be used to pay my soldiers first. I will not rent this reconnaissance hot air balloon. It is not the only means of scouting. I have relied on my own scouts for decades and have fought my wars well enough."

He turned sharply.

"Bianjiao. We're leaving."

Cao Bianjiao was furious.

"Uncle! He insulted us like this—how can we just leave? He deserves a beating!"

Cao Wenzhao replied flatly:

"Why does he think the imperial army is like this? Whose fault is that?"

He spoke slowly, each word heavy.

"Instead of beating him, we should be beating those scoundrels who slaughter civilians and claim false merit. They are the ones who disgrace the army."

Cao Bianjiao could only sigh.

Just as the two turned to go, Bai Yuan called out:

"General—please wait."

Cao Bianjiao spun around, eyes blazing.

"What now? Are you looking for trouble?"

Bai Yuan spoke plainly.

"I've decided. I will lend you the hot air balloon."

"There will be no rental fee."

Cao Bianjiao froze.

"What?"

Even Cao Wenzhao turned back, surprise clear on his face.

Bai Yuan continued:

"I've long heard of General Cao. You served under Xiong Tingbi and Sun Chengzong, resisting the Manchu in Liaodong—fierce, cunning, and brave, earning great merit. In the seventh year of Chongzhen, you again faced the Manchu in Xuanfu and Datong. While other commanders hid behind their walls, you dared to challenge them head-on from the city."

He sighed softly.

"It was only because the enemy was overwhelming that victory was impossible."

With a snap, Bai Yuan closed his fan and bowed deeply.

"I salute you as a man of integrity. Therefore, this reconnaissance hot air balloon will be loaned to you—free of charge."

Cao Wenzhao was stunned.

"Oh... so that was the test."

He returned the salute.

"Master Bai, I noticed earlier—your fan has writing on the back as well. 'Six Arts,' correct?"

Cao Bianjiao nearly choked.

"Uncle! Are you really more surprised by the writing on his fan than by what he just said?"

Cao Wenzhao paused.

"Hm? When you put it that way... you're right."

The next morning, Cao Wenzhao led his army out of Luoyang, heading east toward Xingyang.

He assigned a special detachment to carry the components of the reconnaissance hot air balloon: the large wicker basket, the brazier used to heat the air, fuel supplies, and the massive balloon itself, carefully folded.

After seeing Cao Wenzhao off and ensuring his provisions were prepared, Fan Shangzheng also began making arrangements.

"Master Bai," Fan Shangzheng said seriously, "I must also join the suppression campaign. His Majesty has ordered that all rebels be eradicated within six months. I must participate in the encirclement."

Bai Yuan understood immediately.

Fan Shangzheng lacked confidence in his own troops and had come once again to seek assistance.

Bai Yuan cupped his hands.

"Very well."

The Gao Family Village Militia mobilized.

One thousand veterans and four thousand new recruits stayed behind to garrison Luoyang and Xiaolangdi. Bai Yuan personally led two thousand veterans and three thousand recruits eastward.

Once they left Luoyang, the severity of the situation became brutally clear.

Henan was utterly devastated.

A rebel force of three hundred thousand swept through the land like a plague of locusts, leaving nothing behind.

In the summer of Chongzhen's fifth year, the Yellow River had burst its banks, drowning vast regions. Immediately after came years of drought, lasting until the seventh year. And now—

The rebel army had arrived.

Natural disaster and human calamity struck together.

The people of Henan had not known peace for years.

East of Luoyang, the land lay completely barren.

Chapter 887: Get Me Down Now!

Henan.

East of Luoyang.

Fuxi Mountain.

Deep within the mountains, a river had carved out a narrow passage over countless years. This place was known as Luanma Ravine.

At this very moment, the ravine was a scene of utter chaos.

Men and horses were packed together in frantic disorder. Swords flashed. Spears stabbed. Halberds rose and fell. Human shouts collided with the terrified neighing of horses, while blood sprayed across rocks and mud without restraint.

The vanguard of the Ming relief army was trapped inside Luanma Ravine.

Commander Liu Honglie, together with Deputy Commanders Ai Wannian and Liu Guozhen, had been completely encircled by more than one hundred thousand rebel troops.

Their fate had already been decided.

This devastating defeat was not an accident. In truth, it was entirely deserved.

These generals had badly misjudged their enemy. In their minds, the rebels were still the same trembling rabble from years past, peasants who would scatter the moment they heard an official title or saw a government banner.

With only three thousand men, they had boldly advanced toward Xingyang, believing they could pursue and suppress an army rumored to number three hundred thousand.

What they failed to understand was that the rebels of today were no longer the rebels of yesterday.

Years of nonstop warfare had forged their core forces into hardened veterans. These men had survived countless battles, accumulating brutal experience through blood and death. They no longer fled at the mention of officials or constables. Instead, they had transformed into a terrifying armed force, capable of unleashing violence as relentless and concentrated as machine gun fire against regular troops.

For government soldiers to imagine that three thousand could hunt down and defeat three hundred thousand under such circumstances was not courage.

It was madness.

And madness led only to one outcome.

Death.

Ten li away, deep within the forested slopes of Fuxi Mountain, Cao Wenzhao's Guanning Iron Cavalry was resting.

Suddenly, the calm shattered.

A fast horse burst into the clearing at full speed. The rider barely managed to dismount before collapsing to the ground in front of Cao Wenzhao.

"General Cao, save them!" the man cried out desperately. "I serve Deputy Commander Ai Wannian. General Ai and General Liu Guozhen went to Luanma Ravine to rescue Liu Honglie, but now they are surrounded. I beg the General to quickly send troops for aid!"

Cao Wenzhao raised his brow slightly.

"Very well," he said calmly. "I will go at once to rescue them."

The messenger's face lit up with overwhelming relief.

Before anyone else could speak, Cao Bianjiao stepped forward.

"Uncle," he said urgently. "The terrain of Fuxi Mountain is extremely dangerous. Ravines and rivers intersect everywhere. If we rush into Luanma Ravine without caution, we may end up surrounded ourselves."

Cao Wenzhao's expression darkened.

He was no inexperienced officer. He was a famous general, well versed in military strategy. Under normal circumstances, recklessly charging into terrain like Fuxi Mountain was something he should never do.

Yet watching his comrades being encircled and crushed, while he stood by doing nothing, was something he simply could not accept.

To witness allied forces besieged and refuse to help was no different from abandoning them.

A memory surfaced in his mind.

The Battle of the Hun River, in the first year of Tianqi, 1621.

Back then, the White Pole Soldiers and the Qi family army had fought desperately against the Manchu. Meanwhile, the Guanning Iron Cavalry under Governor Yuan Yingtai had hesitated, refusing to march to their aid. They had stood aside and watched as both armies were completely annihilated.

It had become an indelible disgrace in the history of the Guanning Iron Cavalry.

Cao Wenzhao's face hardened.

"Deploy immediately," he ordered. "Prepare for rescue."

"Uncle," Cao Bianjiao said anxiously, "the rebel army outnumbered us by more than a hundred times."

"Even so, we go," Cao Wenzhao replied gravely. "I will not allow another Hun River to occur because of my hesitation."

"Then we must scout first," Cao Bianjiao insisted. "We cannot fall into their trap."

Those words struck Cao Wenzhao like a spark.

"That's right," he thought. "I borrowed the reconnaissance hot air balloons from Sir Bai, yet I have not used them even once. If not now, then when?"

"Launch the reconnaissance hot air balloon," he commanded.

The soldiers moved swiftly.

Following the instructions taught by Bai Yuan, they assembled the equipment piece by piece. A brazier was lit, and as hot air rose, the balloon gradually expanded.

Before long, it lifted gently into the sky.

A literate scout climbed into the large wicker basket. His face was pale, but his eyes were steady as the balloon ascended higher and higher.

A thick rope hung from the balloon, with a thinner rope attached alongside it. The soldiers secured the thick rope firmly around a tree to anchor the balloon against the wind.

Cao Wenzhao watched silently.

Beside him, Cao Bianjiao stared upward and shouted, "Scout, what do you see? Speak quickly. What do you see?"

"Stop shouting," Cao Wenzhao said calmly. "He cannot hear you from that height. Bring the bamboo tube."

Cao Bianjiao immediately understood.

He took out a prepared bamboo tube, placed a written note inside, and tied it to the thinner rope. Then he tugged on the rope in a steady rhythm.

High above, the scout felt the vibration and quickly pulled the rope upward, retrieving the tube. After some time, the tube descended once more.

Cao Bianjiao opened it.

His face turned ashen.

"It's over," he said quietly. "Liu Honglie's forces, Ai Wannian's forces, Liu Guozhen's forces. They are finished. The rebels have also prepared a trap for us. Tens of thousands of troops are hidden in the mountain gullies beside Luanma Ravine. If we charge in, those hidden forces will surge out from all directions and surround us completely."

Cao Wenzhao's expression grew grim.

"The rebels are capable of such tactics now?"

"More and more border troops and garrison soldiers have joined them," Cao Bianjiao replied. "They bring experience and strategy. Recently, they have also acquired a large number of high-quality weapons. Merchants must be secretly assisting them."

Cao Wenzhao fell silent for several breaths.

Then he asked, "Do we have reinforcements?"

"Yes," Cao Bianjiao answered. "Governor Fan Shangzheng of Henan is coming with the Henan garrison troops, along with Sir Bai's militia. They are about five li behind us. They have also launched a large hot air balloon. Look."

Cao Wenzhao turned toward the northwest.

Far away in the sky, barely visible unless one looked carefully, was a tiny black speck.

That was Sir Bai's reconnaissance hot air balloon.

Cao Wenzhao lowered his head and spoke slowly and firmly.

"We enter the ravine. Reinforce the vanguard. Rescue as many as we can."

"Uncle," Cao Bianjiao said urgently, "the rebels have tens of thousands lying in ambush. We will be surrounded if we go in."

"We have reinforcements coming from behind," Cao Wenzhao replied.

"But they are weak," Cao Bianjiao argued. "Governor Fan Shangzheng's garrison troops are useless, and those militia volunteers are even worse."

"They do not need to be strong," Cao Wenzhao said. "They only need to appear. While the rebels focus on surrounding us, the sudden presence of troops behind them will make them believe they have fallen into my trap. Panic will spread, and once panic spreads, formations collapse. With our backs against the wall, we can turn defeat into victory."

Cao Bianjiao inhaled sharply. "That is far too dangerous."

Cao Wenzhao's gaze turned cold.

"If you fear danger," he said, "why be a soldier at all?"

He raised his voice. "Convey my order. The entire army advances immediately to reinforce Luanma Ravine."

"Yes, sir!"

The three thousand Guanning Iron Cavalry surged forward, charging toward Luanma Ravine.

Wait.

Something seemed off.

High above, the scout stared downward in disbelief.

His army was moving.

Without him.

"General," he shouted in panic, "you forgot me!"

Frantically, he extinguished the fire in the brazier, lowering the temperature and stopping the hot air.

"Oh, my balloon. My dear balloon," he cried miserably.

"Get me down now. Now. Now!"

Chapter 888: The Ambush

At the very moment Cao Wenzhao's army surged into Luanma Ravine.

Five li to the northwest, beneath a slowly drifting reconnaissance hot air balloon, Governor Fan Shangzheng of Henan and militia instructor Bai Yuan were leading their forces forward.

Unlike Cao Wenzhao, they had not tethered their hot air balloon to a tree. Instead, after determining the proper altitude, several soldiers gripped the thick rope and pulled it along as the army advanced. With careful, periodic tugs, they allowed the balloon to float forward in tandem with the marching troops.

Naturally, this method had its inconveniences.

When the wind strengthened at higher altitudes, the soldiers below had to strain with all their might just to keep the balloon from being dragged away. They also dared not enter dense forests, fearing the thick rope would snag on branches and bring the balloon crashing down.

In short, problems arose everywhere.

Still, this was invaluable experience.

Every inconvenience, every flaw, would later be reported back to Gao Family Village, where the scientists could refine and improve the design. Progress was born from trouble, after all.

As the army continued forward, a bamboo tube suddenly slid down along the thick rope.

The soldier holding the rope reacted immediately and passed the tube to Bai Yuan.

Fan Shangzheng leaned over to read the message inside. His face darkened at once.

"Vanguard General Liu Honglie, Deputy General Ai Wannian, and Deputy General Liu Guozhen have all been ambushed in Luanma Ravine," he read aloud grimly. "The rebel army even set up a classic siege-and-reinforce formation. Despite having reconnaissance hot air balloons, General Cao still charged straight in. What are we supposed to do now?"

Bai Yuan shook his head.

"General Cao may sometimes miss finer details, but he is still one of the great commanders of this age," he said calmly. "He could not possibly walk into such an obvious trap without reason. He saw the ambush. There must be something else."

Fan Shangzheng hesitated. "Could it be that he simply could not abandon his allies? That he intends to save them even at the cost of his own life?"

"Impossible," Bai Yuan replied immediately. "A competent general does not knowingly rush to his death."

Then, two seconds later, Bai Yuan's eyes lit up.

"Look there," he said, pointing skyward. "General Cao also launched a hot air balloon. It's flying quite high. That black speck."

Fan Shangzheng squinted. "Yes. I see it."

"He knows we are five li to his northwest," Bai Yuan continued. "Once he engages the enemy, we will arrive in roughly half an hour."

Fan Shangzheng's eyes widened.

"So that's it. General Cao knew we were here. That is why he dared to charge into the ambush. Heavens. If we do not support him, he will be completely swallowed."

Bai Yuan sighed softly.

"He is bold. Perhaps a little too trusting. If we do not follow, then he truly will be jumping into a bottomless pit."

He turned to Fan Shangzheng.

"Governor, shall we go?"

It was a question that weighed heavily on the soul.

Fan Shangzheng froze.

When they had first set out, he had believed the rebel army would be easy to deal with. But now, hearing that three ranking Ming generals had already been surrounded, and that the rebels had even prepared a trap to lure Cao Wenzhao in, it was obvious that this enemy could no longer be underestimated.

These were not the foolish bandits of the past.

They were hardened warriors.

Fan Shangzheng glanced back at the Henan garrison troops trailing behind him.

Compared to the rebels, these men truly were... adorable.

"This official..." he stammered. "Ah... um... cough... we should still go. It is... somewhat dangerous, yes, but how could we abandon them? Master Bai, you will go with us, won't you?"

Bai Yuan smiled faintly.

The governor was clearly terrified, but at least he had not refused outright. That already placed him above Yuan Yingtai, the Liaodong Governor during the Battle of Hun River, who had simply declared that helping was pointless and watched his allies die.

"Since the Governor says we must go," Bai Yuan said, "then go we shall. This is an excellent chance to strike the rebels hard."

The entire army immediately increased its pace.

Before long, they reached the spot where Cao Wenzhao had previously camped.

There, a hot air balloon was slowly descending.

The scout above had finally managed to cool the air inside the balloon enough to begin his descent.

The moment his feet touched the ground, Bai Yuan's soldiers rushed toward him noisily, startling the scout into a sharp yelp. Only after recognizing them as friendly troops did he let out a long breath of relief.

"General Cao has already charged into the rebel ambush," he shouted urgently. "Please hurry and rescue him!"

"Don't worry," Bai Yuan said with a chuckle. "We are already on our way. But if you do not mind, we would like you to go back up and continue scouting for us."

The scout's face stiffened.

"Huh? Wait. Don't tell me you're leaving me alone again."

Of course, they did not abandon him.

They untethered the balloon from the tree, soldiers gripping the thick rope firmly. Once everything was secure, they sent him back into the sky.

Soon, two hot air balloons were drifting forward, dragged along by running troops. It was a truly unique sight.

Inside Luanma Ravine.

The three Ming divisions that had been encircled were finished.

Vanguard General Liu Honglie was captured alive.

Deputy Generals Ai Wannian and Liu Guozhen fell in battle.

Deputy General Liu Chenggong and Guerrilla General Wang Xi attempted to gather their remaining soldiers and force a breakout.

But this trap had been designed specifically to annihilate them.

Breaking out was no simple matter.

Rebel arrows poured down like rain.

Both Liu Chenggong and Wang Xi were struck by multiple arrows. Blood soaked their armor as they realized, with bitter clarity, that escape was impossible.

Just then.

From a distant ravine came the thunder of battle cries.

The Guanning Iron Cavalry had arrived.

Cao Bianjiao led the charge, spear first, plunging into Luanma Ravine. Cao Wenzhao followed closely with the infantry. The Guanning Iron Cavalry, well equipped and fierce, tore violently into the rebel formation, ripping open a massive breach.

Cao Bianjiao spurred his horse to Liu Chenggong and Wang Xi's side.

"How bad are your wounds?" he demanded.

Both men could barely speak.

"Not... good..."

"Damn it," Cao Bianjiao roared. "We fight our way out."

He reined in his horse, preparing to lead the two wounded generals through the encirclement once more.

Cao Wenzhao's infantry surged forward to support them.

Then laughter echoed from above.

"Hahaha. We've been waiting for you."

From the hillside, the Dashing General, personally leading his Old Eighth Squad, revealed himself.

"Fire," he ordered calmly. "Fire."

Arrows rained down from the slopes.

Cao Wenzhao's mind went blank for an instant.

Then came screams.

All around him, soldiers were struck and fell. His personal guards rushed forward, shields raised, forming a tight barrier around him.

Cao Wenzhao looked up the slope.

His heart sank.

The hillside was far too steep. His soldiers could not climb it. They could only endure the arrows, passively, helplessly.

Retreat was the only option.

"Hold the line," Cao Wenzhao roared. "Hold the line. Withdraw from the valley."

Before they could move, another roar thundered from behind.

From the ravine entrance, rebel shouts erupted.

"The Chuang Wang has arrived. Cao Wenzhao, prepare to die!"

"We are avenging our brother Wang Jiayin today."

"Do not think we still fear your Guanning Iron Cavalry."

"Thirty years east of the river, thirty years west of it. Never underestimate the poor."

"We are no longer afraid of you, Cao Wenzhao!"

Chapter 889: Submit a Memorial Against Them

Tens of thousands of rebels blocked the path ahead. Tens of thousands more pressed in from behind. From both sides of the ravine, arrows poured down like a black rain that never seemed to end.

The moment Cao Wenzhao truly grasped the scale of it, his heart sank.

If no one came to help, if they relied only on their own strength, then this ravine would very likely become his grave.

The Guanning Iron Cavalry raised their shields in unison. They formed a tight ring, backs pressed together, shields overlapping, bracing themselves against the endless hail of arrows falling from the slopes.

Their equipment saved their lives.

Any ordinary garrison unit would already have been wiped out under such fire.

Liu Chenggong and Wang Xi had already accepted death. Both men let out long, bitter sighs.

"General Cao," Liu Chenggong said weakly, his voice barely holding together, "you came to save us, only to trap yourselves here as well. We truly... truly owe you."

Cao Bianjiao clenched his teeth.

Will reinforcements even come?

And that Henan Governor, Fan Shangzheng. He had better not be a useless fool.

If he is, then Uncle and I will both die here.

Almost unconsciously, he glanced toward the northwest.

Then his eyes froze.

"Huh?"

High in the distant sky, two Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloons drifted forward, clear and unmistakable against the horizon.

They were not far.

Not far at all.

Cao Bianjiao's blood surged. "Hold on!" he roared at the top of his lungs. "Brothers, hold fast! Reinforcements are almost here!"

When Bai Yuan reached the mouth of the ravine, all he saw was a sea of rebel backs.

Chuǎng Wang's forces were blocking the entrance, facing inward, fully focused on crushing the Guanning Iron Cavalry trapped inside.

Then someone shouted from the rear.

"Government troops!"

Another voice followed, sharp with panic. "It's the Henan Governor's men!"

Rebels were still rebels.

They could fight when everything went their way. But the moment they were caught in a pincer, their courage collapsed instantly.

Bai Yuan did not waste a single word.

"Open fire."

The Flintlock Rifle soldiers pulled their triggers.

The roar of gunfire thundered through the ravine. Rebel bodies dropped in rows, cut down before they even understood what was happening.

Screams erupted.

"It's them!"

"That strange Flintlock Rifle unit!"

"Damn it!" someone yelled. "Don't panic! We still have hidden forces!"

From the slopes on both sides, rebel archers cautiously emerged.

They had no idea that every one of those positions had already been spotted by the Reconnaissance Hot Air Balloons. Their locations had been marked on maps and sent down through bamboo tubes long before this moment.

The Flintlock Rifle soldiers were waiting.

The instant the archers showed themselves, gunfire exploded from both sides.

Rebels screamed as bullets struck home, bodies tumbling down the rocky slopes.

"Do not advance recklessly," Bai Yuan ordered calmly. "Secure your positions first."

In truth, the order was unnecessary.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun had long drilled a single belief into his followers. Never gamble your life just to look heroic. Survival came first.

The Flintlock Rifle soldiers held their ground. They did not rush forward to rescue Cao Wenzhao. Instead, they sealed off every possible angle of attack, pouring fire into the hillsides until not a single rebel archer dared lift his head.

"Hold steady."

"Advance slowly."

Two thousand seasoned veterans began to push forward step by step.

Behind them, three thousand newer soldiers kept their rifles trained on the slopes, fingers tight on the triggers.

The rebels blocking the ravine entrance were smashed apart. Their formation collapsed into chaos, bodies piling over one another in desperate retreat.

Inside the ravine, the Guanning Iron Cavalry heard it.

Gunfire.

"So many rifles!"

"Reinforcements are here!"

Cao Wenzhao felt strength surge back into his limbs. "The Henan garrison is far better equipped than expected," he said loudly. "With this attack from both sides, the rebels will break. Guanning Iron Cavalry, now is the time!"

With a deafening roar, the Guanning Iron Cavalry charged.

They burst toward the ravine's entrance like a steel tide.

The rebel ranks shattered instantly.

Li Zicheng, the Dashing General, stared in disbelief. "Old Eighth Squad!" he shouted. "Stop them!"

He personally led his Old Eighth Squad forward. These were his Mizhi countrymen, his core troops, the elite foundation that would one day become the Fengtian Changyi Battalion of the Great Shun.

It did not matter.

Against the Guanning Iron Cavalry, they were still crushed.

Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao led a coordinated double charge.

The Old Eighth Squad broke and fled.

The siege of Luanma Ravine was over.

At last, Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao burst free from the valley.

Outside, rebel forces were in full collapse. Bai Yuan's Flintlock Rifle soldiers chased them relentlessly, driving them up the slopes like frightened rats.

Cao Wenzhao stared. "Bai Yuan?"

Cao Bianjiao blurted out, "This is unbelievable."

Cao Wenzhao nodded slowly. "Look at him. His robes are still spotless white, even after all this fighting."

Cao Bianjiao wiped the sweat from his temple. "Uncle, are you serious? You are admiring his clothes? Shouldn't you be shocked that all these Flintlock Rifle units are actually militia?"

Cao Wenzhao blinked. "Ah. Now that you mention it, that does seem strange. I thought they were Fan Shangzheng's troops. To think they belong to Bai Yuan... that truly defies reason."

Cao Bianjiao sighed deeply. "Uncle, when will you ever focus on the important part?"

By then, the battlefield had fully settled.

Liu Chenggong and Wang Xi's forces, rescued at great cost, had escaped the trap. Fan Shangzheng's Henan troops finally arrived, late as ever, and began tending to the wounded.

Military medics carefully removed arrows from Liu Chenggong and Wang Xi, applying poultices to stop the bleeding. Both men closed their eyes, exhausted, lying still on their stretchers.

Cao Wenzhao took a few steps toward Fan Shangzheng, then stopped. He turned and walked toward Bai Yuan instead, clasping his fists in solemn respect.

"Mr. Bai," he said seriously, "we owe you our lives. Without your timely aid, I, Cao Wenzhao, would have died in Luanma Ravine today."

Bai Yuan smiled faintly. "It was nothing."

Cao Wenzhao studied him for a moment, then turned back toward the stretchers. He tapped the edge of Liu Chenggong's and spoke coldly.

"You had only three thousand men, yet you chose to face hundreds of thousands of rebels. Was that not courting death? You forced multiple armies to rush here just to save you."

Liu Chenggong struggled to open one eye. "We never expected... their strength to rise so fast. In Shaanxi and Shanxi... we were the ones chasing them."

Wang Xi added weakly, "The key issue is... His Majesty ordered... the rebels must be suppressed within six months."

Cao Wenzhao stiffened. He let out a long sigh. "Six months? That is impossible."

Wang Xi's voice trembled with anger. "Because of this impossible order... Liu Honglie, Ai Wannian, Liu Guozhen. All of them died. Every one of them."

Nearby, Bai Yuan quietly tugged at Fan Shangzheng's sleeve.

"Quick," he whispered. "Submit a memorial against them. Accuse them of dissatisfaction with the imperial decree and harboring rebellious intent."

Fan Shangzheng did not know whether to laugh or cry. "Mr. Bai," he sighed, "this is hardly the time for jokes. His Majesty does not understand warfare and does not know the true state of the rebels. He issues commands on a whim. What else can we do?"

Chapter 890: Chen Ergou's Prodigious Life

While Henan spiraled deeper into chaos, a very different scene was unfolding far away.

On the Mongolian grasslands.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen, leader of the Ordos tribe, brought his daughter before the leader of the Wushen tribe. Without ceremony, he placed her hand directly into the man's.

"She is now your wife."

The Wushen tribe leader laughed loudly, triumph written all over his face.

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen turned to the assembled chieftains and raised his voice. "From this day onward, all members of the Ordos tribe shall obey my son in law's commands. Any who disobey will be treated as enemies of the entire Ordos."

The chieftains roared in unison. "Wushen! Wushen!"

The Wushen tribe leader made no effort to hide his joy, nor did he feel any need to. Mongols were not like the Han, obsessed with restraint or modesty.

When they were proud, they showed it.

Politeness came later.

Wushen raised both hands. The noisy crowd beneath the platform quickly fell silent.

"The Ordos will grow ever stronger under my leadership," he declared. "I will lead you all to unify the grasslands and restore the glory of the Great Yuan Dynasty."

"Wushen! Wushen!" the chieftains shouted.

"Our next step," Wushen continued, "is to attack the Chahar tribe. Only after they submit can we call ourselves the true heirs of the Great Yuan."

By this time, Ligdan Khan, the nominal emperor of the Yuan, had already died of illness. The Khan's seal, passed down since the days of Genghis Khan, was now held by Ligdan Khan's wife and children, who were sheltering within the Chahar tribe.

In other words, the Chahar tribe possessed legitimacy.

Wushen might have unified the Ordos, but without forcing the Chahar to bow, the dream of unifying Mongolia was still far away.

The chieftains erupted again.

"Wushen!"

"Attack!"

"Attack!"

The crowd howled like wild beasts, the atmosphere boiling over.

At that moment, a rider came galloping in at full speed.

"Report!" he shouted. "The Jurchen barbarians. Dorgon and Yue Tuo have led ten thousand troops across the river. They are forcing the Chahar tribe to submit to them!"

Wushen's face darkened instantly. "Those Jurchen barbarians dare steal our Khan's seal!"

The chieftains exploded with fury.

"We cannot allow this!"

"The grasslands belong to us Mongols!"

"We cannot hand them over to Jurchen barbarians!"

"Drive them back to the mountains to hunt!"

"Chase them back to the sea to fish!"

Wushen roared, his voice shaking the air. "My lords! We have been bullied by the Jin for far too long! Now is the time to strike back! Defeat the Jurchen barbarians, reclaim the Chahar tribe, and seize the Khan's seal!"

"Awooo! Awooo! Awooo!"

When the roaring finally subsided, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen stepped forward from the rear. His expression was troubled.

"My strong son in law," he said carefully, "your strength is great, but it may still fall short against the Jurchen barbarians. Unless you once again seek aid from the Han. If we possessed those strange, massive iron carriages of theirs, we would have nothing to fear."

Wushen replied confidently, "Do not worry."

Xi'an Prefecture. Chang'an Automobile Factory.

The factory had been divided into two major sections.

The front handled the production of civilian cargo trucks. The rear focused entirely on military armored vehicles.

After Experimental Vehicle Number Four had proven itself on the Mongolian grasslands, praise and reports flooded back from the front lines. The senior technical engineers of Gao Family Village immediately began thinking of improvements.

"The steam engine still needs to be smaller," one said. "It is too heavy and reduces overall power."

"All bearings, plating, and armor should be lightened," another added. "The enemy cannot penetrate it anyway. Thick iron plates are unnecessary."

"No," a third objected. "We should design two armor types. Light armor for enemies with cold weapons, and heavy armor for future battles against firearms."

"But heavy armor increases weight," someone argued. "It hurts maneuverability."

"When assaulting fortified positions," came the calm reply, "speed is not the priority."

After long debate, the armored vehicle was split into two models.

One became the Light Armored Car, focused on speed.

The other became the Heavy Armored Car, designed for frontal assault.

"Everyone," someone suddenly said, "we are forgetting something. Transporting artillery is becoming a problem."

"That is true," another agreed. "Our cannons are too cumbersome. We should mass produce small, lightweight cannons to be towed by the light armored cars."

Once consensus was reached, the product line expanded dramatically.

New production lines were required.

The Chang'an Automobile Factory began urgently recruiting talent, pulling skilled workers from factories across Gao Family Village's industrial network.

Artisans from Gao Family Village went without saying. But there were also countless Blue Hats and Yellow Hats from Xi'an's Xitie Factories One through Three, the Qichuan Ferry armory, Hancheng Steel Mill, Taiyuan New Steel Plant, Puzhou General Steel Mill, Yuncheng General Steel Mill, and many more.

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou were among those transferred.

They packed their belongings and carried letters of introduction stamped with large red official seals. Dressed in their best cotton clothes, they boarded the train bound for the Chang'an Automobile Factory.

Before the train even departed, Qi Cheng spoke excitedly.

"Ergou, I wonder which department we will end up in this time. Just thinking about it gets me fired up."

Chen Ergou replied casually, "I heard we are going to the armor section. They say our village's graduates designed two kinds of armor. Light armor and thin armor. We will probably be responsible for producing and assembling the thin armor."

Qi Cheng gasped. "Really? Where did you hear that?"

Chen Ergou smiled mysteriously. "Little Cuihua from the secretary's office told me."

Qi Cheng fell silent.

Alright. I give up. Truly.

Ergou was amazing. He had even won over Little Cuihua, the secretary from the steel transport factory.

Out of pure jealousy, Qi Cheng poked at him. "You are being transferred to Chang'an. You will be away from Little Cuihua for so long. Your feelings will fade. You will definitely break up."

Chen Ergou laughed. "Yes, I know. That is why we talked it over. She voluntarily requested a transfer to the Chang'an Factory to support the work."

Qi Cheng's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

At that moment, someone squeezed into the carriage.

It was Little Cuihua herself.

She had a youthful, delicate face, carrying the refined temperament typical of a graduate from Gao Family Village's Thirty Two Middle School.

Her eyes swept the carriage and landed on Chen Ergou.

"Ergou ge, I am here too," she said happily. "We are going to the Chang'an Factory together!"

Chen Ergou smiled back.

Their gazes met, brimming with warmth.

Qi Cheng felt so jealous he could die. "Ergou, your life is absurdly smooth. You even managed to win such a good girl. Your life is truly prodigious."

Chen Ergou burst into laughter.

"Chen Ergou's prodigious life," he said cheerfully, "has only just begun."