

Great Ming 891

Chapter 891: Underworld Level Overtime

When Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou stepped off the train at Chang'an Station, the platform was already packed shoulder to shoulder.

Everyone there had the same destination.

All of them were technical backbone staff transferred from factories across the region to the Chang'an Automobile Factory. Most wore plain civilian clothes, but hats were everywhere. Some were worn properly, some perched crookedly, others tucked under arms.

After a quick scan of the crowd, Chen Ergou felt a sudden pressure on his chest.

"Brother Cheng," he whispered, "there are way too many Blue Hats here."

Qi Cheng nodded slowly. "Yeah. At least a hundred. Maybe more."

The weight of that realization settled heavily on both of them.

Back at the steel mill, Blue Hats were rare creatures. Surrounded by Yellow Hats, even those with the Trial marking on their hats stood out like cranes among chickens. Without realizing it, they had begun to walk straighter, speak louder, and believe, just a little, that no one nearby could match them.

Now, standing at the gates of the Chang'an Automobile Factory, surrounded by nothing but Blue Hats, that confidence collapsed instantly.

"There is always someone better," Qi Cheng sighed. "If I had stayed at the steel mill, I might really have believed I was unmatched."

Chen Ergou laughed softly. "Coming to Chang'an was the right choice. Otherwise, we might never improve again. But standing here, I suddenly feel fired up."

They followed the flow of people into the factory grounds.

Snippets of conversation drifted past them.

"Which department are you in?"

"Bearings."

"Steam engines."

"Steam engines? That's impressive."

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou both glanced over instinctively.

Steam engines were core technology. Compared to that, working on armor plates felt almost crude.

The steam engine technician noticed their looks and waved his hands hurriedly. "It's nothing special. I just follow the drawings from above. The real genius is Young Master Bai. Even a few words from him are worth years of work."

Only then did Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou understand.

This man was humble because his daily reference point was someone like Young Master Bai.

It was a simple truth.

The higher one's horizon, the more modest one became.

The lower one's horizon, the easier arrogance took root.

Both men silently committed that lesson to memory.

Next came registration.

Then dormitory assignments.

Then luggage transport.

Then workshop postings.

After a whirlwind of activity, they finally stood at their assigned workstations.

They had barely settled in when a man in a white hat burst into the workshop, voice ringing loud and clear.

"Starting today, the entire military production department of the Chang'an Automobile Factory is entering underworld level overtime!"

The Yellow Hats erupted immediately.

"Underworld level again?"

"That kind of overtime will kill people!"

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou looked at each other in confusion.

"What does underworld level mean?" Chen Ergou asked.

A Yellow Hat hurried over, eager to curry favor. "Engineer Qi, Engineer Chen, underworld level means overtime so intense it works you half to death. When you go home, you feel like you can see the gates of the underworld waving at you."

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou jumped. "That serious?"

The Yellow Hat lowered his voice. "Anyway, don't expect more than four hours of sleep a day."

"Four hours?" Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou exchanged a look.

Then both burst out laughing.

"Hahaha. We thought underworld level was something terrifying," Qi Cheng said. "Four hours of sleep? That's generous."

The Yellow Hat froze. "Huh?"

Qi Cheng grinned. "Back when we were bandits, hunted by officials, hiding in the mountains every day, four hours of sleep was luxury."

Chen Ergou nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly. Some days we barely slept two hours. So this underworld level lets us sleep four? What's there to be afraid of?"

The white hatted supervisor shouted again. "Twenty days! Leadership's target is twenty days! Ten Light Armored Cars! Starting now, everyone work until you drop!"

"Ten in twenty days?" the Yellow Hats cried. "It took a full month just to build Experimental Car Number Four!"

The supervisor roared back. "Times have changed! We have experience now, and a flood of new technicians! Ten in twenty days is achievable! Everyone move! Overcome every difficulty!"

The workshop erupted into motion.

Armor blueprints were handed out. Hammering began almost immediately, the sound ringing in steady rhythm.

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou exchanged a glance and jumped in.

As Blue Hats, they did not swing hammers themselves. Instead, they oversaw workflow, assigned tasks, checked blueprints line by line, and inspected every armor plate for size and thickness.

In other workshops, the same scene played out.

Steam engines.

Bearings.

Armor.

Rubber tires.

Steering wheels.

Cannons.

Even glass windows.

Gao Family Village's system of standardization had existed for years, but on a limited scale. Now, with full vehicle production underway, its terrifying efficiency finally revealed itself.

As the Chang'an Automobile Factory plunged into underworld level overtime,

far away in Gao Family Village itself, a different kind of crowd gathered.

Young women lined up outside the gates of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory.

The factory had begun its third major recruitment drive.

They had come to apply for work.

At first, the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory had attracted little attention. But people soon realized that its products were formidable competitors.

Wool had always been precious to the Han. Its insulating power far exceeded cotton. A thin layer could keep out bitter cold.

Gao Family Village had long since solved the problem of survival. Now, people demanded comfort.

Wool sweaters, scarves, and garments sold out almost as soon as they appeared.

Not only in Gao Family Village, but also in Heyang County, Han City, Puzhou City, Hedong Circuit, Hejin County, Pingyang Prefecture, and Xi'an.

Liu Maopao reacted quickly.

He recruited more female workers.

Purchased more textile machines.

Expanded production at full speed.

This created jobs for women and, at the same time, absorbed ever increasing quantities of wool from the Mongolian grasslands.

As the Wushen Tribe conquered more and more small tribes, wool flooded southward.

And the expanding factory swallowed it all without pause.

Chapter 892: That's Exactly Right

The group of women applying at the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory all shared the surname Hou.

They came from Houjia Village, the same village where Zhang Fengyi had nearly died in battle. They were also the women Li Daoxuan had once shielded with his divine form, protecting them from slaughter.

Among them was a young woman surnamed Hou, named Lan.

She was the same Hou Lan who had been knocked flat by a graduate student during the hot air balloon incident not long ago.

At this moment, she was surrounded by the women of Houjia Village, who laughed and teased her relentlessly.

"Xiao Lan," one of them said with a grin, "why are you applying to the textile factory too? The rest of us didn't marry well, so we have no choice but to work. But you married a graduate student from Gao Family Village. Are you really coming out to earn money?"

Hou Lan's cheeks flushed slightly. She smiled shyly and shook her head.

"My husband is a graduate student, yes," she said softly, "but our family is not exactly wealthy yet. He hasn't officially started working. He's still buried in his research. We'll only have money to spend once he invents something useful. Until then, I should also work and help support the household."

The women burst out laughing.

"What nonsense! How could a graduate student be poor?"

"He helped with the hot air balloon research. Surely he received a huge reward."

Hou Lan waved her hands anxiously. "How can you say that? My husband helped research the hot air balloon for the future of the village, to help the militia with reconnaissance. He didn't do it for money. His ambitions are far greater than that."

The women laughed even harder.

"Hahaha, look at how flustered she is."

Hou Lan pouted, then added earnestly, "Besides, even if my husband were rich, I would still want to work. Dao Xuan Tianzun has taught us that women should not depend entirely on men. They must have their own abilities and means of survival. This may not be possible elsewhere, but in Gao Family Village, it is."

Her words caused the teasing to slowly die down.

When they had first arrived in Gao Family Village with Zhuge Wangchan's logistics team, their only thought had been survival. Finding a husband had seemed like the only path forward.

But once they arrived, they quickly found work and earned their own wages. Many of them had not remarried at all. One woman was even raising a child entirely on her own while working.

They were not applying to the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory because they were unemployed. They simply wanted better pay.

"Xiao Lan is right," one woman said.

"What's wrong with having a graduate student husband?" another laughed. "His money is his. We can earn our own."

"That's right," someone added. "With our own money, we don't have to panic."

"If a husband treats us badly," another said cheerfully, "we can just divorce him."

"Hahahaha!"

Laughing and chatting, the group arrived at the gates of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory.

The factory, once small and inconspicuous, had undergone three rounds of expansion. It now covered a vast area, with clean factory buildings and orderly dormitories. The entire complex looked modern, spacious, and impressive.

The women could not help but marvel.

"This textile factory is amazing."

"It's so much better than the one we worked at before."

Hou Lan smiled. "A newly built factory is naturally better," she said. "But with this new one here, the managers of the old textile factory must be feeling pressure. They will have to reform sooner or later. After all, the old factory is almost eight years old."

The original textile factory in Gao Family Village had been founded in the early Chongzhen years. Back then, in Chengcheng County, Li Daoxuan had purchased four courtesans at a low price to serve as secretaries for Gao Yiye. Under the leadership of head secretary Chun Hong, the factory had slowly taken shape.

Years passed. The old factory aged. Management loosened. Buildings grew worn.

Without competition, it might have continued declining indefinitely.

Now, with the rise of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory, experienced female workers were leaving in droves. The old factory was suddenly under real pressure.

At the recruitment desk sat a middle-aged Mongolian woman.

Everyone in Gao Family Village knew her.

An Jile.

Her appearance was distinct from that of the Han people, and she had arrived in Gao Family Village as a "hostage," making her a frequent topic of gossip. Recently, she had been learning Chinese, though progress was slow.

She greeted them awkwardly. "You... come... apply-ing?"

"Yes, yes," the women replied warmly. "We're here to apply."

"Apply... ing..." An Jile struggled.

"Auntie," someone corrected gently, "this character is pronounced pin, pin."

"Apply," An Jile said slowly.

"That's right this time," the women laughed. "If the tone is wrong, it becomes a different word."

An Jile smiled proudly.

She believed firmly that the Han people were strong. Everything done by the strong was worth learning. Even the moon above the Han lands seemed rounder than the one over the Mongolian grasslands.

"I... want... see your hand... craft," she said.

"It's shou yi," they corrected again, then began explaining their work experience. How many years they had worked. What machines they operated. What skills they possessed.

Before long, every woman from Houjia Village passed the recruitment process.

Some were married and lived with their husbands.

Others were unmarried and still lived in the old factory's dormitories.

Since they had changed jobs, they returned to the old factory to pack their belongings.

They bundled their things into large packs and carried them toward the gate.

That was when they saw Chun Hong.

The old factory manager stood in the distance, watching them leave. Her face was dark with resentment.

The women felt a pang of guilt.

"What do we do?" someone whispered.

"She's watching us."

"My heart is pounding."

"I don't dare face her."

They became flustered and uneasy.

At the same time, Chun Hong was boiling inside.

Just then, the embroidered cotton Dao Xuan Tianzun on her chest opened its mouth and chuckled softly.

"Chun Hong," it said, "are you planning to walk over and scold them for being ungrateful?"

Chun Hong jumped. "Dao Xuan Tianzun! You saw through me."

"There is no need," Dao Xuan Tianzun said calmly. "As a manager, when you encounter difficulty, do not vent emotions like an ordinary person. Reflect instead. Why did they leave?"

"Find the problem. Solve the problem. That is the path of a true manager."

"If you only know how to curse and complain, you will never accomplish great things."

Chun Hong's eyes brightened.

"I understand," she said firmly. "I will raise funds to renovate the old factory. Clean it up. Improve working conditions. Tighten management. We will match the new factory's wages."

The cotton Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled.

"That's exactly right."

Chapter 893: Your Humble General Has Done His Best

In the eighth year of Chongzhen's reign, the winds of rebellion grew heavier by the day.

The Chuang King's forces and the Dashing General's army finally joined ranks. From Nanyang, their combined host surged forward, setting their sights on the Xianling Mausoleum.

Xianling was no ordinary tomb. It was the joint resting place of Emperor Jiajing's parents, Emperor Gongrui Xian Zhu Youyuan and Empress Cixiao Xian.

Fengyang's ancestral tombs had already been violated. If Xianling fell as well, then whatever dignity the Great Ming still possessed would be trampled into dust.

Lu Xiangheng, Supreme Commander of the Five Provinces, reacted at once. He led five thousand men south and ordered his deputy generals Li Chongzhen, Lei Shisheng, and Zhou Yuanru to merge their forces and suppress the rebels around Nanyang.

The Tianxiong Army was Lu Xiangheng's pride. Its discipline was iron, its morale fierce, and across the realm it was counted among the strongest of Ming's remaining forces.

Yet this battle was nothing like what they had expected.

From morning until deep into the night, the two sides clashed without pause. Spears broke. Blades dulled. Drums thundered until ears rang.

Still, neither side gained the upper hand.

Even the fearsome Tianxiong Army found itself unable to crush the rebels.

As night fully descended, reality forced both armies to halt. Night blindness set in. Torches flickered uselessly in the chaos. No one could see clearly enough to fight.

Gongs sounded on both sides. The troops withdrew, settling several li apart, staring at one another through the darkness like wary beasts.

Lu Xiangheng's five thousand men huddled within a cramped camp.

Across from them, the rebel encampment sprawled endlessly. More than a hundred thousand men filled the plains, their fires stretching for several li until they vanished into the black horizon.

Standing atop a watchtower, Lu Xiangheng frowned deeply.

"Something is wrong," he said. "The rebels grow stronger with every clash, and their numbers are terrifying. If this drags on, what are we supposed to do?"

Li Chongzhen stepped forward. "General, what if I take a unit of elite soldiers and launch a night raid?"

Lu Xiangheng shook his head at once.

"By day, our five thousand fought in rotation against seventy-two rebel camps. They can rest and rotate endlessly. Our men fought without pause. They are already exhausted to the bone."

He gestured toward the darkness. "If we deny them rest tonight, they will collapse. And look at the enemy camps. They stretch for several li. Even if you succeed at one point, you will only stir chaos in a corner. The rest will remain untouched."

He exhaled slowly. "Tomorrow morning, a fatigued army facing fresh rebels would be crushed."

Li Chongzhen could only sigh.

Lu Xiangheng stared into the sea of enemy campfires. Irritation churned in his chest.

In the past, these rebels scattered at the first clash. Now they dared to establish camps openly, stretching across the land, challenging imperial troops head-on.

And he had only five thousand men. Supplies were thin. Reinforcements were a distant dream.

It felt like Red Cliffs all over again, except this time, he was the one hopelessly outnumbered.

Just as despair crept in, Lei Shisheng rushed over, barely containing his excitement.

"Supreme Commander Lu! Our supplies have arrived!"

Lu Xiangheng froze. "Supplies? From where?"

The Great Ming had no proper logistics corps. The emperor himself wore patched undergarments beneath his dragon robe. Military stipends were already inadequate, let alone supply trains.

Lei Shisheng said quickly, "From your old subordinate back when you served as Pacification Commissioner of Yunyang. He paid for everything out of his own pocket."

Lu Xiangheng immediately understood.

Shangnan Guard Commander Luo Xi. His most reliable subordinate. Along with Zheng Gouzi and the mysterious, wealthy Mr. Li who always seemed to appear at critical moments.

Lu Xiangheng went out personally to greet them.

Under cover of night, a silent convoy of carts rolled toward the camp. At the front stood Luo Xi, dressed in plain civilian clothes. Zheng Gouzi and Flat Rabbit were nowhere to be seen, but Mr. Li was present.

Lu Xiangheng felt a genuine surge of joy. "Commander Luo. Mr. Li. It's been years. Why are you here?"

Luo Xi quickly whispered, "Quiet. I am still Shangnan Guard Commander. I must not be seen openly in Henan. I came in secret."

Lu Xiangheng stiffened and nodded at once.

Li Daoxuan clasped his hands calmly. "Lord Lu, congratulations on becoming Supreme Commander of the Five Provinces."

Lu Xiangheng gave a bitter smile. "The title grows heavier, not my abilities. Frankly, I am deeply uneasy. Five thousand against a hundred thousand. We are barely holding on."

He sighed. "Even a stalemate is fortunate. Tomorrow... I fear defeat. The men are fighting on empty stomachs."

Li Daoxuan replied evenly, "That is precisely why I came."

Behind him, carts rolled forward, each one piled high with grain and military provisions.

Lu Xiangheng's eyes lit up. "With these supplies, morale will return. We can defeat the rebels and stop them from pushing south."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "The main rebel force is in Nanyang. You block the south. Commander Luo holds Shangnan to block the west. Cao Wenzhao is stationed in Luoyang, sealing the north."

He paused. "That leaves only the east. I came to warn you about the east."

"The east?" Lu Xiangheng frowned. "Zuo Liangyu is stationed in Runing Prefecture. His strength is formidable. The rebels should not pass him."

Li Daoxuan said quietly, "It would be best not to trust Zuo Liangyu too much."

Lu Xiangheng was startled.

The words sounded dangerously like slander. Without evidence, such talk could only invite suspicion.

Seeing Lu Xiangheng's expression, Li Daoxuan said nothing further.

Not everyone could see the future.

When information was asymmetric, people naturally reached different conclusions.

Li Daoxuan clasped his hands again. "The supplies are delivered. I will take my leave. May Lord Lu achieve a swift victory."

Lu Xiangheng returned the salute. "My deepest thanks, Mr. Li."

That night, Lu Xiangheng ordered Zhu Wenjin, Chen Qimei, and others to distribute the supplies.

The soldiers ate their fill. Strength returned to their limbs. Morale surged.

By noon the next day, the Tianxiong Army launched a decisive attack.

The rebel forces collapsed.

Several hundred were beheaded. Zilai Hu, Yong Hu, Gongshan Hu, and Zhang Xiner were captured alive. Two cannons and countless weapons were seized.

As Lu Xiangheng stared at the captured cannons in thought, the rebels fled eastward in chaos, passing through Runing.

Zuo Liangyu immediately led his troops to intercept them.

Outside Runing City, the two sides fought what reports later described as "three hundred rounds." Zuo Liangyu claimed a great victory, presenting several hundred rebel heads, many belonging to women and children.

The main rebel force, however, slipped through Runing and escaped once more.

Later, Lu Xiangheng confronted Zuo Liangyu.

"Why did you allow the rebels to escape?"

Zuo Liangyu answered calmly, "Your humble general had only three thousand men. I could block thirty thousand at most. The remaining hundred thousand seized the chance to flee."

He bowed slightly.

"Your humble general has done his best."

Chapter 894: You've Been Promoted

Xi'an Prefecture, North Railway Station.

Zhu Cunji, heir to the Prince of Qin, stood at the station entrance with a smile so wide it nearly split his face.

Behind him, his guards unfurled a massive banner bearing bold characters:

"Warmly Celebrating the Full Opening of the West Yan Railway!"

This was Zhu Cunji's masterpiece.

For over a year, he had poured staggering amounts of silver into building this railway. It stretched from Xi'an in the south all the way to Yan'an in the north, linking two prefectural cities, passing through

countless counties, and spanning river after river. More than five hundred li of steel and stone. At last, the West Yan Railway was complete.

A radiant confidence shone from Zhu Cunji's face, something he had never possessed in his entire life.

He was already forty years old. An heir who had never inherited. In his own words, half buried in the earth. For decades, he had achieved nothing worth remembering. Nothing worth boasting about. Nothing that might ever be written into history.

He had long believed his fate was to be a useless prince in waiting, eating, drinking, and quietly waiting for death.

Yet now, at this late age, he finally had something.

Something he could hold his head high for.

Something that let him look down upon the world.

Before, he obsessed over inheriting the Prince of Qin's title.

But now?

What was that title worth, really?

A name. A seal. Empty air.

Officials still despised him. Civil and military alike looked down on him. The common people cursed him behind his back. He was nothing.

But today, everything had changed.

Zhu Cunji spread his arms wide toward the sea of people gathered below and burst into wild laughter.

"Hahahaha! Hahahahaha!"

His consort leaned closer and whispered sharply, "Stop laughing. You sound like an idiot."

Zhu Cunji shot back, "I will laugh! Hahahaha! Who dares call me an idiot now?"

He laughed for a long while until a guard finally leaned in and whispered, "Your Highness, the auspicious hour has arrived."

Only then did Zhu Cunji straighten himself.

He raised his voice and proclaimed, "I, the heir apparent, hereby announce the official opening of the West Yan Railway!"

Boom!

Boom!

Two massive firecrackers detonated.

At the same time, a storm of colorful paper rained down from the sky.

High above, several hot air balloons hovered. Zhu Cunji had paid dearly to rent them from Gao Family Village, timing the release of paper flowers perfectly for this moment.

White doves were released, wings flapping as they soared through the falling colors.

Zhu Cunji stood on the platform with arms outstretched, bathed in cheers.

"The Heir!"

"The Heir!"

The shouts were deafening.

These were the same people who once cursed him daily.

Zhu Cunji's pride surged to its absolute peak.

Being respected truly felt better than anything else in the world.

Suddenly, a guard pointed toward Xi'an City and shouted, "Your Highness, look! Look!"

Zhu Cunji frowned. "What is it now?"

The guard stammered, "The colossal golden Dao Xuan Tianzun statue!"

Zhu Cunji turned sharply.

Inside the newly built Dao Xuan Tianzun Grotto within the city stood a golden statue as tall as a seven-story pagoda. And at this very moment, it was raising its arm and waving toward the North Railway Station.

It was clearly offering congratulations for the opening of the West Yan Railway.

"Whoa!"

The crowd erupted again.

"Even the Dao Xuan Tianzun has blessed it!"

Zhu Cunji hurriedly bowed toward the statue, then grabbed a metal megaphone and shouted at the top of his lungs, "I feel like my life has reached its absolute peak!"

The crowd groaned in unison.

"Stop singing!"

"My ears!"

Just then, a sharp whistle echoed through the station.

The Cunji train, which had been waiting impatiently, released a long cry. The doors opened, the gates lifted, and boarding began.

Passengers rushed forward.

"We're going to Yan'an!"

"I heard the New Village Bookstore there is huge, elegant, and incredibly modern!"

"Traveling to Yan'an used to be such a pain. Now it's nothing! Hahahaha!"

As passengers poured into the carriages, activity surged at the rear of the train.

Two freight cars were being loaded.

Their cargo was no ordinary merchandise.

They were newly produced Light Armored Cars from the Chang'an Automobile Factory.

This batch would be transported to Yan'an, handed over to the Cavalry Battalion, and then driven by trained armored cavalry deep into northern Shaanxi.

Zhu Cunji stared at the armored vehicles with naked envy.

"I want them," he muttered. "I really, really want them."

His consort yanked his sleeve. "Absolutely not! If the Jinyiwei hears of this, they will accuse the Prince of Qin's Residence of hoarding strange weapons with intent to rebel."

Zhu Cunji whined, "But I want them! I don't care about the Jinyiwei!"

His consort rubbed her temples. "You are forty years old. Stop acting like a child. Do you think rebellion accusations are a joke? That means stripping your fief, revoking your title, and execution."

Zhu Cunji thought for a moment. "If it's just losing the title and fief, I might accept that. Hmph. I have the railway anyway. Whoever wants the Prince of Qin title can take it. I'll live off railway profits, drive a Kulinan across the world, and rent a hot air balloon to drift all the way to the ocean and fish giant kun!"

Cold sweat poured down his consort's back.

She truly wanted to kick him.

"Don't be stupid. Our family holds the most prominent fief in the realm. If we rebel, it will absolutely mean decapitation. Otherwise, how would they kill the chicken to scare the monkeys?"

Zhu Cunji froze. "Well... uh..."

Fine.

Some dreams were destined to remain dreams.

Meanwhile, in Wenshui County.

Chen Yuanbo, top graduate of Gao Family Village's first middle school class, sat in the county yamen hall, diligently handling official affairs.

A group of junior classmates acted as clerks, though in truth they were his disciples, assisting him with documents.

Suddenly, a messenger rushed in.

"Sir Chen! Great news!"

"Oh?" Chen Yuanbo looked up. "What news?"

The messenger announced excitedly, "The court praises Sir Chen's governance as exemplary. Your achievements are outstanding. You've been promoted from County Magistrate to Prefect!"

Chen Yuanbo blinked.

"Huh?"

What kind of nonsense was this?

His post in Wenshui had been personally assigned by Dao Xuan Tianzun. If the court transferred him elsewhere at will, how could he continue handling Dao Xuan Tianzun's arrangements?

Chen Yuanbo nearly overturned his desk. "Prefect of where?"

The messenger answered, "Daizhou."

Chen Yuanbo froze. "What did you say?"

"Daizhou."

Chen Yuanbo's expression instantly transformed from outrage to delight.

"Daizhou is excellent! Hahaha! Daizhou is truly excellent!"

Daizhou was Sun Chuanting's hometown.

During the last Manchu invasion, the previous Daizhou Prefect had leapt from a building to his death. The post had remained vacant ever since. No one wanted it.

And so, the high officials of the court remembered Chen Yuanbo once again.

They sent him exactly where no one else dared to go.

Chapter 895: Your Neighbor Is Yang Sichang

Daizhou lay right beside Yanmen Pass.

To the north, it bordered Xuanfu and Datong. To the south, it connected directly to Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi.

Anyone with eyes could see how critical that position was. Let alone an outstanding graduate from Gao Family Village's middle school.

Chen Yuanbo understood immediately. Being sent to Daizhou was not a coincidence.

From there, he could serve Dao Xuan Tianzun far more effectively.

He sprang to his feet and laughed at the group of strategists beside him. "Junior colleagues, I'm leaving. You're staying. The next official assigned to Wenshui County is still unknown, but no matter who it is, you must neutralize his authority. Wenshui County must remain firmly in Gao Family Village's hands."

His juniors burst out laughing. "Understood. Don't worry, Senior. The next magistrate will see nothing but perfectly cooked books."

Chen Yuanbo shook his head, smiling. "We sound rather wicked when we say it like that."

One of the juniors replied calmly, "Dao Xuan Tianzun once said that sometimes, to reach the right destination, one must take a few wrong turns. Our methods may not be upright, but the purpose is."

Chen Yuanbo nodded, then turned serious. "The situation across the Yellow River has been unstable lately. The bandits cannot cross it for now, and our navy has long been stationed there, but vigilance is still necessary. Watch every movement. If you detect any attempt to cross the river, immediately call for naval support."

The juniors laughed. "Senior, rest assured. We'll keep our eyes open."

"Good," Chen Yuanbo said with a sigh. "Wenshui County was the first place I truly governed after graduation. It feels like my own child. Leaving it hurts more than I expected."

His juniors teased him mercilessly. "Children are great. Isn't it better to have more? Go raise your second, third, and fourth 'children' in Daizhou. Hahahaha!"

Chen Yuanbo laughed, packed his belongings, and bid them farewell.

He first took a boat back to Puzhou, then transferred to a train heading north.

This journey crossed almost the entirety of Shanxi.

In the past, trains only reached Hejin County. Beyond that, one had to switch to boats. But now, Chen Yuanbo discovered that the railway had already extended directly to Pingyang Prefecture.

Gao Family Village's rail network had expanded again.

Beyond Pingyang, the railway was still under construction, but a concrete road had already been laid. Solar buses were running there, and Chen Yuanbo boarded one without hesitation.

The moment he sat down, nostalgia washed over him.

Back when he was a student, he rode Gao Family Village's solar bus to school every morning and home every afternoon.

The most thrilling ride was always the last one of the day. The driver would glance nervously at the sun and shout, "On and off quickly. Stop dawdling. Once the sun sets, you're walking home."

Smiling at the memories, Chen Yuanbo arrived in Taiyuan.

Twenty li before the city gates, a familiar scent reached him.

Factories.

Ironworks. Coal mines. Cement plants. Lime kilns.

They sprawled across the outskirts, vast and imposing. Every factory looked like a fortress, walls stretching for li in all directions.

Banners hung proudly at the gates.

"Dedicate wholeheartedly to production."

"Safety first, quality paramount."

"Innovation drives progress."

Chen Yuanbo's heart surged.

Taiyuan belongs to us now as well.

He entered the city, dismounted from the solar bus, and hurried toward the Governor's Yamen. At the gate, a special forces soldier stood guard.

"Xiao Wu?" Chen Yuanbo called out. "Is that you?"

The soldier's eyes widened. "Senior! What brings you here? I heard you were doing excellent work in Wenshui County."

"I've been transferred to Daizhou," Chen Yuanbo said with a chuckle. "How are you still guarding the gate after all this time?"

Xiao Wu scratched his head, embarrassed. "I didn't study hard enough. I couldn't keep up with you."

Chen Yuanbo patted his shoulder. "Later, I'll request a transfer for you to Daizhou. North of Daizhou is Xuanfu and Datong. There will be battles there sooner or later. Plenty of chances to earn merit."

Xiao Wu's face lit up. "Thank you, Senior!"

Xiao Wu rushed inside to announce him and soon returned, leading Chen Yuanbo into the hall.

Wu Shen was buried under documents, quietly discussing affairs with San Shier.

Chen Yuanbo saluted and explained his purpose.

San Shier smiled. "Yuanbo, your appointment came at exactly the right time. Sending you to Daizhou could not be more appropriate."

Chen Yuanbo nodded. "I would like to propose a road construction plan. Extend the highway from Taiyuan directly to Daizhou. That would greatly strengthen my confidence in developing the region."

San Shier considered it and looked toward Wu Shen.

Wu Shen nodded. "Daizhou is a strategic point. A highway is necessary."

The two exchanged a few words.

"Approved," San Shier said. "The road will be built."

Chen Yuanbo felt a surge of excitement.

"Oh, one more thing," Wu Shen added suddenly. "After you arrive in Daizhou, there is something you must pay attention to."

"What is it?" Chen Yuanbo asked.

Wu Shen said, "North of Daizhou lies the jurisdiction of the Xuan-Da Command. The previous Supreme Commander, Zhang Zongheng, was dismissed after the Manchu invasion. The new Supreme Commander is named Yang Sichang."

Chen Yuanbo frowned slightly. "Yang Sichang? I don't recall hearing that name."

Wu Shen explained, "He is extremely capable. As soon as he took office, he began pushing reforms aggressively. His first goal is to pacify the so-called rebel factions in Xuanfu and Datong."

"Rebel factions?" Chen Yuanbo asked.

Wu Shen nodded. "Xuanfu and Datong are rich in mineral resources. Coal, iron, everything. These areas were originally under court control, but repeated Manchu invasions disrupted administration. Now, private mines are everywhere. Officially illegal. The mine owners armed their workers, occupied mountains, and formed strongholds. The court labels them rebel factions."

Chen Yuanbo laughed. "That's simple. Legalize them, set reasonable taxes, offer appeasement. The problem solves itself."

Wu Shen nodded. "If we handled it, yes. But Yang Sichang..."

"He won't accept appeasement," Chen Yuanbo said quietly.

Wu Shen continued, "Yang Sichang's father was Yang He. He once served as Supreme Commander of three border regions and adopted an appeasement policy. It failed. The bandits expanded instead, and Yang He was dismissed and imprisoned."

Chen Yuanbo understood instantly.

Yang Sichang would never walk his father's path.

And that meant trouble.

Chapter 896: Rebels in Datong

Wu Shen nodded.

"Yes. Yang Sichang does not wish to walk the same road his father, Yang He, once walked. Appeasement was never even placed on the table. The moment he assumed office, he began mobilizing troops and pushing straight into the mountains to suppress the rebels."

When people face problems, they almost always draw solutions from their past experiences.

Take a simple example. If, as a child, you were tall and strong, then whenever trouble appeared, your first instinct would be to solve it with force. Over time, your body would grow even stronger, while your mind, rarely exercised, would become increasingly blunt. In the end, you would turn into nothing more than a big, thick-necked brute who only knew how to swing his fists.

On the other hand, if you were small and physically weak, and had to rely on your wits to survive, then your mind would naturally sharpen. Schemes, calculations, and observation would become your tools. But your limbs, seldom used, would grow feeble, until you became a skinny fellow whose strength lay entirely in his head.

Yang Sichang had personally witnessed his father's failure.

From that experience, he drew a single, firm conclusion.

"Bandits cannot be appeased."

As a result, whenever Yang Sichang encountered a problem, his instincts inevitably pushed him toward direct confrontation and suppression.

San Shier reached out and patted Chen Yuanbo on the shoulder.

"Having heard all this," he asked, "what do you think?"

Chen Yuanbo answered seriously, "Every situation must be judged on its own merits. One should devise solutions tailored to the specific circumstances. Past experience cannot be allowed to cloud one's judgment of new realities. Otherwise, you become trapped in old patterns."

San Shier smiled.

"Well said. Daizhou will be in your hands now."

As Chen Yuanbo walked out, he muttered to himself, "I feel like I've understood something, yet at the same time it feels completely useless."

San Shier laughed as he watched his back disappear.

"That," he said, "is called chicken soup for the soul."

A few days later, Chen Yuanbo arrived in Daizhou, accompanied by a special operations team.

Daizhou had yet to recover from the shadow of the Manchu invasion. Outside the prefectural city, the countryside remained scarred and desolate, still bearing the brutal marks of pillage and slaughter.

In many villages, every able-bodied man had been killed, while the women and children were dragged away. Only a handful of people had survived by hiding in the mountains or scrambling into muddy ditches at the moment of disaster.

After the Manchus withdrew, those survivors tried to return and rebuild their lives. Only then did they realize how impossible the task truly was.

Humans are social creatures. They can only survive within a community. If an entire village is wiped out and only one family remains, that family will not last long either.

With no other choice, they abandoned their ruined homes and fled toward Daizhou in search of a living.

When Chen Yuanbo arrived, the sight that greeted him was one of bleak emptiness.

For a long time, no prefect had been appointed here. Local affairs were entirely controlled by the gentry. The most prestigious among them, Sun Chuanting, had already been "abducted" by Gao Family Village and sent off to serve as headmaster of the Yellow Pole Military Academy. The remaining gentry lacked both authority and influence, and maintaining even basic order had been an exhausting struggle.

Fortunately, Tie Niaofei often passed through Daizhou while transporting supplies to the border armies. Each time, he brought large quantities of grain, which he sold cheaply to the common folk. Thanks to this, the refugees managed to cling to life.

Otherwise, Daizhou would have collapsed long ago.

The moment Chen Yuanbo entered the city, the local gentry swarmed around him.

These people were shrewd and well-connected. Through their channels at court, they had already learned exactly what kind of person this new prefect was.

One of them stepped forward and bowed deeply.

"Lord Chen, we have long heard of how you governed humble Wenshui County with outstanding results. You proved yourself to be a diligent and benevolent official who truly loves the people. Now that you have come, Daizhou places all its hopes upon you."

Chen Yuanbo did not bother with false modesty. He immediately launched into a familiar string of Gao Family Village policies, explaining them one by one.

These policies had already appeared countless times before. A hundred million words will be omitted here.

After the initial administrative chaos was finally brought under control, another member of the gentry stepped forward. He clasped his hands and said, "Prefect, my name is Xuan Yuan Ke. After Sun Chuanting left, I assumed the role of general instructor for Daizhou's militia."

Chen Yuanbo nodded. "Mr. Xuan Yuan, what can I do for you?"

Xuan Yuan Ke raised his hand and pointed north.

To the north of Daizhou stretched a mountain range running east to west. Its peaks were high, its forests dense, its paths dangerous, and its mineral resources abundant.

This mountain range separated Daizhou from Datong Prefecture. Yanmen Pass, famous throughout the realm, sat astride a vital artery within these mountains, guarding the gateway to the Central Plains.

"Recently," Xuan Yuan Ke continued, "on the far side of that northern mountain range, the Datong garrison has been sending troops into the mountains, aggressively suppressing the so-called rebels."

Chen Yuanbo nodded slowly. "I have heard about this."

"These 'rebels,'" Xuan Yuan Ke explained, "are in fact private mine owners and their workers. They hide in the mountains and dig for minerals. When the border troops attack, they have no choice but to flee south, cross the mountains, and come onto our side. Once here, they simply find another spot on the southern slopes and continue mining."

Chen Yuanbo chuckled inwardly.

Isn't this exactly what would inevitably happen?

Xuan Yuan Ke went on, "From time to time, these people descend from the mountains and clash with our villagers. The militia under my command has already fought several small engagements with them. I seek the Prefect's guidance."

Chen Yuanbo asked calmly, "Since you have fought them several times, you must have spoken with some of the mine owners, correct?"

"Yes," Xuan Yuan Ke replied at once. "I know the locations of their mine shafts."

"Good," Chen Yuanbo said. "Gather your militia and accompany me into the mountains. We will go and talk with these mine owners."

Xuan Yuan Ke froze.

"Prefect, you intend to go personally?"

Chen Yuanbo smiled faintly. "If I do not go myself and instead pass orders through subordinates, misunderstandings are bound to occur. It is better for me to handle this matter in person."

Xuan Yuan Ke bowed deeply. "You lead from the front, Prefect. You are truly a model for us all."

Soon after, Chen Yuanbo, his special operations team, Xuan Yuan Ke, and five hundred militia members formed a large expedition and marched into the mountains.

The terrain was harsh beyond expectation. The slopes were steep, the trails broken, and the forests thick enough to block out the sky.

Fortunately, several hunters among the militia were familiar with the terrain and guided the group along the safest paths. After a long and exhausting journey, they arrived at the edge of a dangerous ravine.

The lead hunter pointed ahead.

"This is Wayaogou. Many of the rebels are entrenched here."

Before his words had even finished echoing, angry shouts rang out from the hillside. Moments later, a large group of people surged out of the ravine.

They were ragged and filthy, their bodies coated in black dust, their faces smeared until only their eyes remained visible. They were unmistakably coal miners.

In their hands were all kinds of tools: hoes, chisels, hammers, shovels, and more. Several hundred of them gathered together, forming an unexpectedly imposing presence.

Behind the miners stood a man who was clearly their foreman. His clothes were somewhat cleaner, and his manner suggested that he was a small merchant type who had studied a little and could read a few characters.

He shouted arrogantly, "You Daizhou fools, was the last beating not enough? Have you come here again looking to die?"

Xuan Yuan Ke roared back, "You Datong idiot, watch your mouth! Open your dog eyes and see who has arrived this time!"

The man across from them stared hard, then noticed Chen Yuanbo's official robes.

His face went pale.

Inwardly, he cursed.

Damn it. The Prefect himself is here. It looks like we will not be able to stay in Daizhou anymore.

Chapter 897: We Shall See

The mine owner's name was Hu Teng, a native of Datong.

He was not a virtuous man by any measure. At best, he could be described as a small-time merchant with sharp instincts and flexible morals, the kind who always knew where profit hid and never cared too much about how clean his hands were afterward.

For generations, his family had survived by mining ore and selling it. It was the only trade they knew, and the only way they knew how to live.

Unfortunately, under the Ming Dynasty, private mining was strictly forbidden.

Anyone who wanted to mine legally had to weave their way into official circles, grease palms at every level, and maintain endless relationships with clerks, yamen runners, and minor officials. By the time all those mouths were fed, the profits left behind were laughable. Not only would the mine owner earn almost nothing, even the miners themselves would barely scrape together enough food to survive.

Hu Teng took one look at that road and abandoned it completely.

Instead, he chose the illegal path.

"The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away," he told himself. As long as he was not caught, who could say he was breaking the law?

At the beginning, his operation was small. A few dozen people, at most a hundred. They dug discreetly, extracted small amounts of ore, and sold it quietly. There was no noise, no trouble, no large gatherings. The local officials pretended not to see anything, and Hu Teng earned a modest but comfortable income.

Everything seemed stable.

Then, last year, the Manchu invasion swept through the region like a blade.

Villages were burned, homes destroyed, and countless upright civilians were forced to abandon everything they owned. They fled into the mountains, desperate, hungry, and terrified, eventually gathering around the areas near Hu Teng's mines.

Hu Teng found himself facing a dilemma.

On one hand, these people were labor. Cheap labor. If he took them in, he could expand production, dig more ore, and earn far more money than before.

On the other hand, when he looked at their hollow eyes and desperate pleas, he could not quite bring himself to drive them away.

In the end, greed and pity reached an uneasy compromise.

He took them in.

As a result, his mining operation ballooned at an alarming rate. What had once been a small illegal mine suddenly swelled to over a thousand people.

And once the number reached that scale, there was no hiding it anymore.

The authorities noticed.

Large-scale illegal mining was no minor crime. It was a serious offense.

Hu Teng understood very clearly that once the government intervened, things would not end with a simple fine. But by that point, there was no road left to retreat.

Unwilling to surrender without resistance, Hu Teng had no choice but to organize his miners and arm them for self-defense.

At that moment, the nature of everything changed.

What had once been an illegal mining operation instantly transformed into a rebel group.

The crime escalated accordingly.

What might have once been resolved with money became forced military service or exile. From there, it climbed further, until it reached the level of capital punishment. One step more, and it would even implicate his entire clan under the charge of treason.

Around that same time, Yang Sichang was newly appointed as Supreme Commander of the Three Borders.

The moment he took office, he began cracking down on instability. Hu Teng's group was swiftly marked as a target, and border troops were dispatched to suppress the bandits hiding in the mountains.

Against hardened frontier soldiers, Hu Teng's miners had no chance.

Their only option was to flee.

Fortunately, they were far more familiar with the terrain than the government troops. They scattered through forests, slipped through ravines, and used the mountains themselves as cover. After shaking off their pursuers, they crossed to the southern slopes and eventually found refuge in a secluded gully that contained a tile kiln.

There, they continued mining, not for profit anymore, but simply to survive.

Now, seeing Chen Yuanbo, the Prefect of Daizhou, standing before him in person, Hu Teng's heart sank violently.

His face darkened as he cursed inwardly.

"Damn it. I can't even stay in Daizhou now. Once an official of the Prefect's rank gets involved, I'll have to move again."

Just then, Chen Yuanbo spoke.

"Hey. Mine owner over there," he called out calmly. "I have a question for you. Answer me honestly. Are you simply a merchant trying to earn some money, or are you a rogue bandit intent on stirring up trouble?"

Hu Teng answered without hesitation.

"Is that even a question? Of course I just want to earn some money."

Chen Yuanbo smiled faintly.

"If it's just about money," he said, "then that's easy. I can give you an opportunity to make it."

Hu Teng froze.

Confusion spread across his face.

Chen Yuanbo continued, unhurried and composed.

"I plan to establish a government-run coal mine. However, I lack sufficient manpower, and more importantly, I lack people with real experience mining coal in the mountains. Therefore, I need someone to manage the mining operations on my behalf. I need an official. Are you willing to serve under me as a mining official?"

This was persuasion, pure and simple.

If Chen Yuanbo had merely said that he wanted to open a coal mine and hire a paid manager, Hu Teng, a man accustomed to wild freedom, would almost certainly have refused.

But the moment the word "official" was spoken, everything changed.

In the Great Ming, who had not dreamed of becoming an official?

Even an unranked position, even an office without formal status, was still an official post. It was something countless people longed for, something they chased desperately all their lives.

Hu Teng felt his heart stir.

Yet suspicion quickly followed.

He had dealt with officials before. He feared this might be a trick, a way to lure him out only to execute him publicly.

Chen Yuanbo seemed to see straight through his thoughts.

"I know what you are worried about," he said calmly. "I, Chen Yuanbo, will swear a public oath. I will grant you full pardon for your past crimes of illegal mining and organizing an armed group. All of it will be forgiven."

Hu Teng was stunned.

Then, joy burst out of him like a flood.

In that era, oaths still carried weight. Unlike later times, they were not empty words.

With the Prefect of Daizhou swearing publicly in his official capacity, there was nothing left to fear.

Hu Teng raised his voice and shouted, "Brothers, lay down your weapons. We're going out."

The miners collectively let out a breath they had been holding for far too long.

If they could return to being lawful commoners, who would want to continue living as fugitives? Since the authorities had offered them a way down, everyone was more than willing to take it.

Weapons were dropped one by one.

The miners walked out of the gully.

Thus, Chen Yuanbo created a new official post called Mining Administrator and appointed Hu Teng as the Mountain Mining Administrator, specifically responsible for managing mining affairs in Daizhou.

At first, Hu Teng planned to handle matters using his old methods.

But after working alongside Chen Yuanbo, he quickly realized just how narrow and crude his previous approach had been.

Chen Yuanbo raised miners' wages immediately. He introduced new machinery to improve efficiency. He even dispatched educated men to give the miners civic lectures and morale talks, teaching them discipline, unity, and purpose. They were taught to sing "We Workers Have Strength," their voices echoing through the mountains.

At the same time, Chen Yuanbo mobilized the people of Daizhou to build roads connecting the city directly to the tile kiln gully.

Almost overnight, those who had once been labeled members of a rebel party were transformed into proud coal miners.

However.

Only a few days after order had been established in the tile kiln gully, just as Chen Yuanbo was preparing to turn his attention elsewhere, Hu Teng rushed in with urgent news.

"My Lord Prefect, something bad has happened," he reported. "Another group of miners from Datong has arrived. They have occupied Chai Tree Forest and started digging an iron mine there."

Chen Yuanbo laughed softly.

"What is there to be surprised about?" he said. "Think back to how I convinced you. Go approach them and recruit their leader. Make him your deputy mining administrator."

Hu Teng was overjoyed.

"Your subordinate has that much authority?"

"Of course," Chen Yuanbo replied. "Go."

After a brief pause, Hu Teng added, "However, My Lord Prefect, counting us and these newcomers, two groups have already arrived. If Yang Sichang continues suppressing bandits in Datong, more private mine owners and miners will inevitably flee here. That could create further complications. I ask that you be aware of this."

Chen Yuanbo nodded slowly.

"That is indeed a problem. It seems I must discuss this matter with Supreme Commander Yang."

He picked up his brush and began writing a letter.

In it, he clearly distinguished private mine owners from genuine rebel forces, arguing that they required different methods of handling. He described the excellent results his own pacification policies had achieved and expressed his hope that Supreme Commander Yang would abandon wholesale extermination in favor of appeasement and integration.

Once the letter was complete, he dispatched a rider at full speed toward Datong.

Two days later, the letter arrived on Yang Sichang's desk.

Yang Sichang read it carefully from beginning to end.

Then he slowly shook his head, pushed the letter aside, and picked up his own brush.

In his reply, he wrote:

"Prefect Chen, while your current policy of appeasement appears to have achieved some success, these results are merely superficial. These miners will inevitably rebel again. They will never obediently work for the authorities. Once you relax your vigilance, they will gather strength, stir up trouble, and ravage the countryside. In the end, they will grow beyond control. My own father was dismissed from office because of this very issue. If you do not believe me, then just wait and see."

Chapter 898: Yang Sichang's Bandit Suppression Campaign

Yang Sichang's own father, Yang He, was at this very moment exiled to Yuanzhou.

That exile was the bitter price paid for one thing: appeasement.

Back then, Yang He had chosen to placate wandering rebel groups rather than crush them outright. The result was not gratitude, but accusations, impeachment, and exile. That lesson was carved deep into Yang Sichang's bones.

Because of this, he would never be easily persuaded.

In his mind, there was only one correct response to rebellion: continued and uncompromising military suppression.

"Report!"

An aide burst into the hall, breathless.

"Governor-General, urgent news. General Zhang led his troops to suppress a rebel force in the mountains. They encountered a sudden landslide. Losses were severe, and General Zhang himself has been injured."

Yang Sichang let out a heavy grunt.

"Send reinforcements immediately," he ordered. "Bring General Zhang back safely, and ensure the wounded are properly treated."

The aide acknowledged the command and withdrew.

Before Yang Sichang could even finish sorting the paperwork on his desk, the aide rushed back in again.

"Report. General Li encountered fierce resistance from two thousand rebels at Sunjiayao. Although he secured a victory, over fifty soldiers were killed. He requests funds to handle the funerals."

Yang Sichang waved his hand impatiently.

"Approved."

The aide bowed and retreated, only to return yet again, his expression increasingly stiff.

"Report. General Chen was ambushed by rebels at Siyuanliang. The rebels rolled massive chunks of iron ore down from the mountains. General Chen was injured, along with many of his men."

Yang Sichang slammed his palm against the table.

"A dignified border army, ambushed by a mere band of rebels?" he barked. "What kind of warfare have they been taught?"

The aide hesitated, then answered awkwardly.

"The terrain in the mountains is extremely treacherous, sir. Our border troops are unfamiliar with it. Only the miners who have lived there for many years truly understand the paths and slopes."

Yang Sichang's brows drew together tightly.

Before he could respond, another report arrived.

"Report. Rebels whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed by the Manchu invasion have also risen up. They have gathered more than five thousand strong at Huoshiling."

Yang Sichang's patience finally snapped.

"Send General Qian," he roared. "Have him deal with them at once."

The aide bowed deeply and turned to leave, but paused, then added carefully, "Report. Our forces are stretched extremely thin. Supplies are being consumed at an alarming rate. Arrow reserves are running low. We have provisions for barely half a month, and enough arrows for only two more engagements. We must await resupply."

Yang Sichang leaned back in his chair.

His temples throbbed.

Listening to these endless reports, he felt a profound sense of confusion and exhaustion wash over him.

There was an old saying: those who do not hold the office do not worry about its burdens.

Before taking this post, he had never truly understood how difficult the word "suppression" was. Only now, sitting in this seat, did he finally grasp the weight his father had once carried.

At that moment, another shout echoed outside.

"Report!"

The aide rushed in again.

Before he could open his mouth, Yang Sichang exploded.

"What is it now? Reports, reports, reports. Is that all I do every day?"

The aide flinched, but still delivered the message.

"The Jin merchant, Tie Niaofei, has arrived. He has brought a large shipment of supplies."

Yang Sichang froze.

Then his face lit up instantly.

"Squire Tie has arrived?" he exclaimed, laughing loudly. "Excellent. Truly excellent. Bring him in at once."

Moments later, Tie Niaofei entered the hall.

At the sight of him, Yang Sichang's expression softened considerably.

Although he had only recently assumed the post of Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da, he was already tormented by supply shortages. The imperial court was perpetually bogged down by bureaucracy and infighting. Support for the border army was always slow and insufficient.

Sometimes there was no grain. Sometimes there was no pay.

They expected horses to run without feeding them grass.

Yang Sichang worried about provisions day and night.

Fortunately, there was Tie Niaofei.

Tie Niaofei had become the true lifeline of the Xuan-Da border army. Each time he traveled north, he brought massive quantities of grain, cloth, and weapons. Whenever hunger gnawed at the soldiers, they would climb the city walls, gaze southward, and mutter prayers.

"Squire Tie, please arrive soon."

This time was no different.

As soon as Tie Niaofei stepped into the hall, he clasped his hands and laughed.

"Governor-General, I trust you have been well. I am pleased to report that I did not fail in my task. I have brought another two months' worth of military provisions."

Yang Sichang was overjoyed.

"You could not have arrived at a better time, Master Tie," he said sincerely. "Our rations had dwindled to barely half a month."

Tie Niaofei put on a puzzled expression.

"Only half a month?" he asked. "That is strange. The grain I delivered last time was quite substantial. It should have lasted at least another month and a half."

Yang Sichang coughed lightly, a trace of embarrassment flickering across his face.

"Ahem. Recently, I have been vigorously suppressing rebels. The army has been in constant motion, fighting across mountains and forests. Naturally, provisions are consumed much faster than usual."

"Oh, so that is the case," Tie Niaofei said thoughtfully. "On my way here, I passed through Daizhou and heard some discussion about this. It seems that after the Manchu invasion, the number of rebels in Datong Prefecture has suddenly increased. Many of them are common folk whose homes were destroyed, and some are even private mine owners. The people of Daizhou also said these rebels crossed the mountains and caused disturbances there."

Yang Sichang nodded heavily.

"Indeed. These unruly elements are stirring chaos everywhere. Uprisings keep erupting throughout Datong Prefecture, leaving the border army constantly on the run."

He paused, then asked, "Squire Tie, you must have passed through Daizhou yourself. Was your journey obstructed by rebels?"

Tie Niaofei laughed inwardly, but outwardly maintained a look of mild confusion.

"That is the strange part," he replied. "Although I heard people mention rebel activity, I did not encounter any myself. And when the locals spoke of these rebels, their tone was surprisingly relaxed. Some were even smiling. Clearly, these so-called rebels have not troubled them much and pose no real threat."

Yang Sichang murmured softly, "Oh?"

The words struck deep.

A surge of irritation rose in his chest.

He commanded a powerful border army. The border army. Yet even with such forces, he was being worn down, endlessly chasing rebels through mountains and valleys. Meanwhile, a newly appointed prefect in Daizhou, lacking a real army and relying only on household retainers and local militia, had somehow managed to keep things calm?

"Appeasement..."

Yang Sichang recalled a letter he had received earlier.

In that letter, the Prefect of Daizhou claimed he had resolved Hu Teng's rebel group through appeasement and had even absorbed several other groups.

At the time, Yang Sichang had written back firmly, insisting that appeasement was useless and that these rebels would inevitably rise again.

But now, so much time had passed.

Had those rebels truly caused no further trouble?

The thought made Yang Sichang restless.

He reviewed the reports piled before him. Endless pursuits, constant losses, miserable results. And yet, in Daizhou, where rebels driven out by his own campaigns had gone, the situation had been handled cleanly.

Comparison was truly the thief of contentment.

"I am the Supreme Commander," he thought bitterly. "A jinshi of the thirty-eighth year of Wanli. I have served as Professor of Hangzhou Prefecture, Erudite of the Nanjing Imperial Academy, Director in the Ministry of Revenue, Vice Commissioner for Military Preparedness, and Vice Minister of War, concurrently serving as Censor-in-Chief overseeing military affairs in Xuan-Da and Shanxi. How can I be inferior to a mere, obscure prefect?"

Unable to endure the irritation any longer, Yang Sichang rose abruptly.

"Someone," he commanded. "Prepare my carriage and horses. I will go to Daizhou and see for myself."

According to ancient law, officials were forbidden from leaving their jurisdiction without permission. Violators faced a hundred lashes.

However, Yang Sichang's authority was exceptional.

As Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da, he not only governed Xuan-Da but also concurrently oversaw military affairs in Shanxi. In theory, all of Shanxi lay within his jurisdiction. Traveling to Daizhou was entirely permissible.

Watching this unfold, Tie Niaofei could not help but gloat inwardly.

"Governor-General," he said aloud, "if you would permit me a moment, I need to hand over these supplies before heading south. I would be honored to accompany you for part of the journey."

Yang Sichang nodded decisively.

"Very well. We shall travel together. Let us go and see exactly how things are being handled in Daizhou."

Chapter 899: Yang Sichang Visits Daizhou

Yang Sichang and Tie Niaofei departed from Datong Prefecture and headed south toward Daizhou.

Datong was still in turmoil. Rebel groups roamed everywhere, and travel was extremely dangerous. Yang Sichang therefore brought along his household guards and a small detachment of soldiers. Tie Niaofei, for his part, traveled with a well-armed merchant caravan.

Once the two parties merged, the combined procession became imposing enough that no small band of rebels dared to approach.

They moved steadily southward, passed through Yanmen Pass, and officially entered the territory of Daizhou.

The moment they crossed the pass, Yang Sichang sensed something was wrong.

Outside Yanmen Pass, roads were being built.

Not repaired. Not patched.

Built.

"Road construction?" Yang Sichang muttered, his brows knitting together. "Here of all places?"

Tie Niaofei nodded calmly. "Yes. Now that you mention it, they were already working on these roads when I passed through on my way north."

Yang Sichang was about to call over a laborer to ask what was going on when one of the workers suddenly looked up, saw him clearly, and sucked in a sharp breath.

"It's Yang Sichang of the Xuan-Da Command!"

The shout spread instantly.

The other workers raised their heads one by one. When they recognized him, their faces turned pale.

"Damn it. It really is Yang Sichang."

"Yang Sichang is here to kill us again."

"Run. Everyone, run."

Chaos erupted.

Tools were dropped. Baskets overturned. The entire road crew scattered in all directions like frightened birds.

Yang Sichang was furious.

"I am not some murderous villain," he snapped. "Why would I slaughter road workers for no reason? Why are they fleeing like this?"

A military officer from his escort rode forward and saluted.

"Commander, I recognize these men. They are rebels who caused disturbances in Datantou Village not long ago. I personally led troops to pursue them and drove them into the mountains. I never expected them to cross over into Daizhou and begin building roads here. Allow me to pursue them immediately and bring them to justice."

Yang Sichang's eyes widened.

"What? Datong rebels?"

"Yes, Commander," the officer said firmly. "There is no mistake. I recognized their leader at once. He is wearing proper clothes and pretending to be a foreman. I will capture him immediately."

He tugged at the reins, ready to give chase.

"Wait."

Yang Sichang raised his hand.

The officer halted at once.

Yang Sichang stared in the direction the workers had fled, then spoke slowly.

"He is already engaged in road construction. If you arrest him now and word spreads, what will the world say about me? That I arrest men even while they labor for the people? Let this matter rest for now. Once we understand what is truly happening, we can deal with him properly."

The officer hesitated, then bowed and reined in his horse, falling back into formation.

Tie Niaofei put on a look of astonishment.

"How strange," he said. "Datong rebels, building roads in Daizhou. This is truly baffling. I am quite curious to know the reason as well."

"So am I," Yang Sichang replied grimly. "Let us go to Daizhou city and find out."

They continued forward.

Along the way, Yang Sichang saw road construction everywhere. On the open land beside the main roads, people were erecting strange gray-white structures that looked like stone but were clearly newly made.

Yang Sichang studied the scene in silence.

Daizhou was in the midst of massive construction. How many laborers must have been mobilized for this?

"Such a scale of labor," Yang Sichang finally said. "If this were corvée service, the people would have revolted long ago. Yet they look... content. And now even Datong's rebels are coming here to work."

The more he observed, the more confused he became.

Tie Niaofei leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"On the way here, I heard villagers say that workers receive three catties of flour per day."

Yang Sichang stiffened.

"What?" he exclaimed. "They are being paid? So this is not corvée labor at all."

Suddenly, everything made sense.

"No wonder," he muttered. "No wonder even Datong's rebels are willing to build roads."

A faint sense of realization began to take shape in his mind.

They pressed on.

After traveling for some time, Daizhou city came into view. From afar, the Bianjing Tower stood tall, the highest structure in the city.

It was said that the previous prefect had thrown himself from that very tower, his head striking the ground, his soul plunging straight into the underworld.

Yet now, the same tower was draped in red silk and colorful banners, radiating vitality. Below it, countless laborers moved busily, laughing and working as they repaired the city walls, reinforced the towers, and strengthened Daizhou's defenses against future Manchu incursions.

Chen Yuanbo was already standing atop the tower.

When he spotted Yang Sichang's entourage approaching, he immediately came down to greet him.

"Commander," Chen Yuanbo said with a bow, "your subordinate failed to welcome you sooner. Please forgive me."

Yang Sichang waved away formalities.

"Prefect Chen," he said, "your governance of Daizhou is impressive. Along the entire journey, I saw activity everywhere."

Chen Yuanbo smiled faintly. "It is simply the goodwill of the people."

"You are building roads, repairing walls, reinforcing towers," Yang Sichang pressed. "Is this not excessive? With me overseeing the Xuan-Da Command, it is highly unlikely the Manchus will trouble Daizhou again anytime soon. Why rush to strengthen defenses?"

Chen Yuanbo answered calmly.

"Your subordinate knows the Manchus will not return soon. Reinforcing the walls is not urgently necessary. However, idle people are dangerous people. If the common folk have work, they earn wages. If they earn wages, they will not rebel."

Yang Sichang froze.

This was the first time he had encountered such reasoning.

After a long pause, his eyes slowly widened.

"That... makes sense," he said quietly.

Then he asked sharply, "On the road near Yanmen Pass, I saw Datong rebels building roads. Was that your doing?"

"Yes, Commander," Chen Yuanbo replied. "They came from Datong with rebellious intentions. Your subordinate offered them three catties of flour per day. They immediately dropped their weapons and became diligent laborers."

Yang Sichang felt his entire body stiffen.

After several breaths, he finally asked, his voice heavy, "And Hu Teng? He was among the first rebels you pacified. Has he rebelled again?"

Chen Yuanbo laughed.

"Hu Teng? He is doing very well. If the Commander wishes, you may accompany me to inspect the Daimei Number One Factory."

"The Daimei Number One Mine?" Yang Sichang repeated, startled.

"Yes," Chen Yuanbo said. "Short for the Daizhou First Coal Mine Factory. Hu Teng manages it now, and he performs admirably."

Yang Sichang felt a sharp itch of curiosity claw at his heart.

"To the mine," he said decisively. "I must see for myself what has become of this so-called vicious bandit."

When Yang Sichang arrived at the Daimei Number One Mine, the scene before him stunned him.

The "ferocious" Hu Teng was not dressed like a bandit at all. He wore clean, neat clothes and a spotless white hat. Standing at the mine entrance, he was loudly lecturing a group of miners.

"You there," Hu Teng barked. "Have you already forgotten the safety rules? Yellow Hats are mandatory before entering the shaft."

"It's too hot inside," one miner complained.

"Too hot?" Hu Teng snapped, slapping his own hat. "Look at me. I'm wearing mine. I'm drenched in sweat and I haven't taken it off. I set the example. What excuse do you still have?"

The miners exchanged glances.

Seeing that even their boss obeyed the rules, they dared not resist. One by one, they put on their Yellow Hats and entered the mine shaft.

Watching this, Yang Sichang inhaled sharply.

"This is not the Hu Teng I once faced," he murmured. "The last time I saw him, he held a pot lid in one hand and a mining pick in the other, his face twisted with ferocity, as if he might devour someone alive."

Chapter 900: Crowned as Imperial Merchant

Ever since Yang Sichang received Chen Yuanbo's letter, a certain subtle and rather unflattering thought had quietly taken root in his heart.

How should it be described?

Something like a petty, mean little schadenfreude.

"Those rebels you pacified will definitely rise again. I already warned you, but you refused to listen. Fine then. I'll just sit back and wait to see you fail."

To be honest, this kind of thinking was hardly rare. It was human nature. Anyone who claimed they had never harbored such thoughts was either lying to others or lying to themselves.

Yang Sichang waited.

He waited for news.

He waited for the day Chen Yuanbo would finally send a frantic message, admitting that Hu Teng had rebelled once more, begging the Governor General to dispatch troops to put out the fire.

But that day never came.

Instead, what appeared before him was Hu Teng himself.

Hu Teng arrived dressed neatly and impeccably, his expression bright, his posture upright. He looked radiant, almost glowing, with an air of integrity that made him seem like a model citizen plucked straight from a morality textbook.

He did not look like a rebel at all.

Faced with this scene, Yang Sichang felt a storm of emotions churning inside him. He did not know how to face Chen Yuanbo.

On one hand, there was guilt. He felt ashamed of the cynical thoughts he had secretly harbored.

On the other hand, there was genuine relief and even joy. These rebels truly seemed to have turned over a new leaf.

At that moment, one of his officers leaned in again and pointed discreetly at someone in the distance.

"Governor General, that man over there was also a rebel leader."

"And the one over there too."

"And this one as well."

The officer hesitated for a moment, then added with quiet amazement, "It seems the rebel leaders are wearing different colored hats."

He had noticed that the former rebel leaders were easy to identify. They wore either white hats or blue hats, standing out clearly among the crowd.

Chen Yuanbo smiled faintly when he heard this.

"They became rebel leaders back then because they had some education. They could read and write, or they had technical knowledge about mining. Naturally, after joining us, they were assigned to management roles. Those wearing white hats are responsible for decision making. Those wearing blue hats handle technical work."

Yang Sichang asked, "Then the yellow hats just dig. Dig and dig?"

Chen Yuanbo nodded without hesitation. "Exactly."

Yang Sichang nodded along as well, silently engraving this system into his mind.

Noted.

Of course, he would never openly admit such a thing to a mere sixth rank prefect.

"I understand now," Yang Sichang said aloud, his tone steady. "I shall take my leave."

Clinging stubbornly to the last scraps of his dignity, Yang Sichang maintained a composed expression as he prepared to depart. Chen Yuanbo escorted him for five li. Only after Chen Yuanbo turned back and disappeared from sight did Yang Sichang finally allow his stiff posture to relax.

He let out a long breath.

"Ah. I barely managed to hold myself together in front of Chen Yuanbo," he said with a sigh. "He really has done something extraordinary with Daizhou."

Tie Niaofei glanced sideways at the truck nearby. The camera mounted on it was still recording.

Excellent.

Yang Sichang's every expression, every sigh, every flicker of emotion had been faithfully captured.

Tie Niaofei turned to him and said, "Governor General, in my humble opinion, Daizhou's success can actually be summed up in one word."

Yang Sichang raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Tie Niaofei shrugged casually. "Money."

"It is nothing more than throwing money at problems. Disobedient bandits become obedient once you give them money. Stubborn commoners become compliant once you give them money. As long as you are willing to pay, who in this world would refuse?"

Yang Sichang fell silent, pondering this seriously. After a moment, he nodded. "You are not wrong."

Tie Niaofei pressed on. "We can do the same."

Yang Sichang shook his head immediately. "Impossible. I do not have that kind of money. Even if I wanted to, the imperial court would never approve such spending. I truly do not understand where Chen Yuanbo found such enormous funds."

Tie Niaofei chuckled softly. "All of his money comes from the local gentry of Daizhou."

"Daizhou has wealthy families like Sun Chuanting's, as well as many rich gentry and landowners. They were thoroughly frightened by the last Manchu raid. Now they are pouring silver into Daizhou's development, hoping to protect their own estates."

Yang Sichang exclaimed, "So that is how it is."

He sighed deeply. "Alas. I... no, I cannot do the same. Xuanfu and Datong are border garrisons. Their economies are weak. There are barely any wealthy gentry or landowners here. There is simply no way to raise that much money."

At that moment, Tie Niaofei straightened his back and said proudly, "I have money."

Yang Sichang froze.

Then his eyes lit up. "Merchant Tie. You... you are willing to fund me? To support this Governor General?"

Tie Niaofei nodded calmly. "I have always done business with the Xuan Da border armies. The Xuan Da Command is practically my second home. Now that my home is in trouble, how could I simply stand by?"

He continued, "Besides, if the Xuan Da Command collapses, my future business will suffer as well. Helping the Governor General is the same as helping myself."

Yang Sichang was overjoyed. "Merchant Tie. You truly are my lucky star."

Tie Niaofei laughed. "A small matter. Truly nothing worth mentioning. I only hope that the Governor General will remember my contribution in the future and lend me a hand after your promotion."

Yang Sichang replied solemnly, "If Merchant Tie assists this Governor General in suppressing these rebels, then when rewards are distributed, your merits will be substantial. How could I possibly fail to promote you?"

Tie Niaofei chuckled again. "Then it is settled. I will immediately return south and transport more funds and provisions. We will simply copy Daizhou's methods and follow their example."

"Chen Yuanbo may have money," he said with a snort. "But do I, Tie Niaofei, lack it? My funds will not be less than his."

Yang Sichang said, "Then I leave everything in your capable hands."

The two parted ways on the official road.

Yang Sichang headed north, returning to the Datong garrison.

Tie Niaofei turned south, toward the Central Plains.

Almost the moment they separated, Tie Niaofei reached out and pressed the camera's power switch. Click. The recording stopped.

He clutched the camera tightly and burst into loud laughter.

"That Yang Sichang is killing me. Hahahaha. Absolutely killing me."

"When I bring this back and show it to the insiders, everyone will laugh themselves sick."

A few days later.

Tie Niaofei returned to Pingyang Prefecture and handed the camera's memory card to Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan gave the footage a quick edit, trimming it down to the most entertaining highlights, then distributed it to various locations.

This kind of material would never be broadcast on Gaojia News. However, all management personnel within Gao Family Village were allowed to view it privately.

Yang Sichang's carefully maintained dignity in front of Chen Yuanbo was completely shattered.

Several days later, a massive shipment of grain and silver, transported by Tie Niaofei, arrived in Datong.

With abundant supplies on hand, Yang Sichang's confidence surged.

Following Daizhou's model, he began recruiting workers on a large scale through work relief programs, opening mines, and building roads.

The so called rebel faction members of the Xuan Da Command immediately threw down their hoes and rushed to apply for jobs.

Three months later.

The unrest in the Xuan Da Command was fully quelled.

Yang Sichang meticulously recorded how the Jin merchant Tie Niaofei had provided funding, opened mines, recruited laborers, and dismantled rebel factions. He compiled everything into a memorial and submitted it to the imperial court.

After reading it, the Chongzhen Emperor Zhu Youjian issued a decree.

"Yang Sichang is a man of outstanding talent and can be put to good use."

Then he added another line.

"Jin merchant Tie Niaofei, for funding the nation's efforts to suppress unrest and for his exceptional contributions, is hereby granted the title of Imperial Merchant."

From that day on, Tie Niaofei enjoyed unrestricted trade rights across the vast territories of the Ming dynasty.

He even gained the privilege of supplying goods to the imperial family.

Of course, he had no intention of going to the capital.

In his opinion, the imperial court was best left alone.