

Great Ming 901

Chapter 901: Dorgon Arrives

An hour later, everyone reached Xiaoxiwa in Xin'an County.

Xiaoxiwa was the easternmost stretch of land in Xin'an County, lying closest to Mengjin County.

When the Yellow River burst its banks at Mengjin that year, Xiaoxiwa became the area of Xin'an County that suffered the worst devastation.

The entire region was submerged. At its deepest, the floodwaters were several meters high.

After the water finally receded, it left behind a thick layer of yellow mud and sand. The sediment piled up to more than half a meter deep.

Immediately afterward came a drought.

The scorching sun baked the mud day after day until it hardened into a crust as solid as stone.

How could disaster victims possibly have the strength to dig through such a thick and rock hard layer?

Jiang Cheng knelt down, drew his waist knife, and stabbed it fiercely into the ground. The blade pierced the surface of the mud crust, but that was as far as it went. No matter how hard he pushed, it would not sink any deeper.

"It's incredibly hard," Jiang Cheng exclaimed.

The Magistrate of Xin'an County had been badly frightened earlier and still had not fully recovered. He nodded absentmindedly, his voice slightly dull. "Yes, it's very hard. Human strength cannot dig through it."

"Hmm. Then I shall handle it."

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly. "Spectators, step back."

The instant he spoke, Jiang Cheng and the militia soldiers turned and ran without hesitation. In the blink of an eye, they had cleared the entire mud crust area.

The Magistrate of Xin'an County and his yamen runners, however, were still standing there blankly, not moving at all.

Jiang Cheng shouted, "What are you standing around for? Hurry over here and join us. Don't just stand there blocking Dao Xuan Tianzun's divine work."

The Magistrate froze. "Ah? Ah? Right, right."

Only then did he react. He hastily waved his hands and led the yamen runners away.

Just as they stepped clear of the mud crust, the clouds overhead suddenly parted.

From within the clouds, a colossal golden hand emerged and descended slowly toward the earth.

The Magistrate of Xin'an County froze for a brief moment. Then overwhelming excitement surged through him.

"This is exactly the scene from The Heavenly Lord Dao Xuan's Demon-Slaying Saga. The great hand descending from the heavens to save the world. I never imagined that I, an official of the court, would witness it with my own eyes."

The golden colossal hand descended, curled its fingers slightly, and tapped gently on the hardened mud crust.

Boom.

With a deafening roar, the ground trembled violently. The miles long mud crust shattered instantly under the impact. Cracks spread rapidly across the yellow earth, racing outward in every direction. It was a breathtaking sight.

Then the golden hand reached down and carefully lifted a massive slab of the broken mud crust.

To ordinary people, this layer of earth was thick and unyielding. Before the golden colossal hand, however, it was no more than a thin, brittle sheet. It looked as though applying even a little more force would cause it to crumble apart completely.

If it shattered into fragments, clearing it away would become troublesome.

Controlling strength while wearing gloves was difficult.

Li Daoxuan withdrew the golden colossal hand, removed his glove, and extended his bare hand back into the box. With slow and careful movements, he lifted the broken pieces of mud crust out one by one.

To the people below, what they saw was Dao Xuan Tianzun using supreme divine power to shatter the mud crust, followed by an invisible force gathering the massive fragments and drawing them up into the clouds.

Everyone watched in a daze.

After a long time, all the large pieces of mud crust had disappeared, leaving behind only scattered fragments. These were small enough for the people to handle themselves. Li Daoxuan decided there was no need to intervene further.

He went to the bathroom to wash his hands, scrubbing thoroughly with fragrant soap. Only after his hands smelled clean did he return.

Inside the box, the people were still staring blankly, unable to recover from the shock.

The Magistrate of Xin'an County spoke with a trembling voice. "This official... a problem that has troubled this official for several years... miles upon miles of mud crust... Dao Xuan Tianzun solved it in the blink of an eye?"

Jiang Cheng laughed loudly. "That was a divine feat from Dao Xuan Tianzun. Of course it was resolved quickly. I still remember when the Yellow River overflowed its banks. I was sailing on it, and my boat was about to capsize. Dao Xuan Tianzun reached down and lifted both me and my boat into the sky, saving my life. What a spectacle. It's a pity you didn't witness it yourself, Your Honor."

The Magistrate sighed deeply and looked up at the sky. "If I had known it was this simple, what was I worrying about all these years? I should have sought Dao Xuan Tianzun's help long ago."

Jiang Cheng burst into laughter. "A few years ago, you hadn't watched The Heavenly Lord Dao Xuan's Demon-Slaying Saga, had you?"

"Er... that's true..."

Jiang Cheng patted him on the shoulder. "It's not too late to become a devout follower of the Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect now."

That same evening.

Bai Yuan returned to Xiaolangdi from Luoyang. After hearing Jiang Cheng recount what had happened, he learned that Dao Xuan Tianzun had revealed his true form in Xin'an County. He was immediately filled with excitement.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has finally come to Henan. This is wonderful. I have an idea I've wanted to suggest for a long time."

"Oh?" Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice sounded from the device on his chest. "What idea?"

Bai Yuan said, "Ever since Wu Shen took office, the entire province of Shanxi can be considered territory of the Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect. Xiaolangdi is separated from Shanxi by only one river. Relying on boats for transport is extremely inconvenient. If Dao Xuan Tianzun could bestow another bridge across the river..."

"So that's your request," Li Daoxuan laughed. "Very well. Granted."

Bai Yuan was overjoyed.

The next day, at the Yellow River Three Gorges not far west of Xiaolangdi, a massive bridge descended from the heavens, linking the two banks of the Yellow River. Land transportation between Xiaolangdi and Shanxi was finally opened.

Just as Dao Xuan Tianzun's attention remained focused on the area around Luoyang...

Far to the northeast.

A young man was leading an army of ten thousand southward.

His name was Dorgon.

That year, Dorgon was twenty three years old, at the height of youthful ambition.

Not long before, Dorgon had proposed a strategy to Huang Taiji. Each year, they would gather their forces and wait for the grain to ripen. Then they would invade Ming territory, besiege Beijing, cut off its reinforcements, destroy its fortresses, and steadily drain the strength of the Ming state. Once the Ming Dynasty was sufficiently weakened, they would seize Beijing in a single decisive strike and claim the empire.

Huang Taiji found the proposal highly reasonable. However, the Ming Dynasty had stationed heavy forces in Liaodong and controlled key passes such as Shanhaiguan, making a direct breakthrough extremely difficult.

In the end, Huang Taiji chose to bypass them through Mongolian territory.

At that time, more than half of the Mongol tribes had already submitted to Huang Taiji. Only the Chahar tribe still refused to surrender.

Thus, Dorgon arrived.

As night fell, ten thousand Jin troops were encamped on the grasslands. Scouts were dispatched in all directions. The surroundings were utterly quiet. The Mongols did not even dare attempt sneak attacks or raids. They had been completely cowed by the Jin forces.

Dorgon felt a surge of pride. "Yue Tuo, this time when we go there, the Chahar tribe will definitely not dare resist. They will surrender immediately."

Yue Tuo coughed several times before nodding. "The Chahar tribe has indeed been intimidated and is no longer a serious threat. Cough, cough. However, recently I've heard of a small tribe in the Hetao region called the Wushen Tribe. For some reason, they have risen rapidly. Cough. They have already unified the Ordos Tribe. This may affect our efforts to pacify the Chahar tribe."

Dorgon, only twenty three and full of arrogance, believed himself invincible. What enemy could possibly withstand his iron fist? He burst into laughter.

"Yue Tuo, you're worrying too much. We've already conquered nearly the entire grassland. What is there to fear from a tiny Wushen Tribe?"

Yue Tuo tried to speak. "Do not underesti... cough... mate... cough, cough..."

Dorgon waved him off. "You've grown timid because of your illness. Just watch me deal with this Wushen Tribe."

As they spoke, a soldier entered the tent to report. "General, Mongols from the Tumed tribe have come with news. They say that Ombo, the chief of the Western Tumed tribe, is in contact with an envoy from the Great Ming."

Yue Tuo's eyes narrowed. "Hm? The Western Tumed still dare to stir up trouble? Send a cavalry unit to intercept them. See if you can capture that envoy."

Chapter 902: Don't Blame Me

On the Mongolian steppes, at Guhuacheng, present day Hohhot, lay the territory of the Western Tumed tribe.

The Tumed had once been one of the most renowned Mongolian tribes on the grasslands. At their peak, they were divided into twelve major sections, collectively known as the Twelve Tumed. Their name alone once carried enough weight to make neighboring tribes think twice before provoking them.

The Wushen tribe had originally belonged to the Uguxin branch of those Twelve Tumed. In that sense, they could be considered a subordinate tribe, once firmly under the Tumed's banner.

But that glory was long gone.

Later, the Tumed tribe fractured. Half of its people migrated eastward beyond Jizhou and became known as the Eastern Tumed. The branch that remained behind in Guhuacheng could only call itself the Western Tumed, and its strength had dwindled to less than half of its former peak.

The leader of the Western Tumed, Omubu, was a man thoroughly broken by reality.

He had suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the Jin state. Each loss had left him humiliated, beaten down, and powerless. Now, just hearing the word "Jin" was enough to make his heart tighten and his hands tremble.

Yet recently, hope had quietly crept back into his chest.

The Great Ming had secretly sent an envoy to contact him, proposing cooperation and a joint attack against the Jin state.

That single message had reignited Omubu's long-suppressed ambition.

If he could ally with the Ming army, then perhaps there was still a chance. Perhaps the Western Tumed could rise again.

With that thought in mind, Omubu sent Mao Han to make contact with the Ming envoy. Mao Han was the husband of his wet nurse, an elder he trusted deeply, someone close enough to be considered family. He tasked Mao Han with discussing trade matters and the details of a potential alliance.

But before Mao Han could even return...

A personal guard rushed into the tent, panic written all over his face.

"Terrible news!" the guard shouted. "The Jin state set an ambush along the road. They killed Mao Han. And now, General Yue Tuo of the Jin has sent an envoy who wishes to speak with you."

"What?!" Omubu froze in place.

His eyes widened in disbelief.

"Uncle Mao Han has been killed?!"

For a brief moment, raw grief flashed across his face. His lips trembled. His fists clenched.

But Omubu forced it down.

In front of outsiders, especially enemies, a Mongolian leader could not afford to show weakness.

He ground his teeth together and said coldly, "Bring in the Jin envoy."

Soon, a Jin envoy strode in, his posture arrogant, his gaze filled with contempt.

"I am the envoy of Aisin Gioro Yue Tuo," he said loudly. "Are you Omubu?"

Omubu stared at him, his face dark, anger simmering beneath the surface.

"I am."

The envoy laughed.

"Your secret collusion with the Great Ming, plotting to harm our Jin state, has already been exposed. General Yue Tuo sends you a gift."

With a flick of his wrist, the envoy tossed a wooden box forward.

It hit the ground with a dull thud, burst open, and a human head rolled out across the floor.

It was Mao Han.

Omubu's heart screamed.

But his face remained stiff.

He raised his chin and said hoarsely, "Say what you came to say."

The envoy sneered.

"General Yue Tuo commands the Tumed tribe to surrender immediately. From this day onward, you will submit to the Jin state and provide three thousand able-bodied young men to join the Jin army."

The envoy paused, then smiled coldly.

"If you refuse, our forces will breach Guhuacheng and Suiyuan City and wipe your Tumed tribe from the grasslands."

Omubu burned with rage inside, but he did not dare let it show.

This was not the first time the Jin had humiliated him.

Every time he resisted, he was crushed without mercy. The Jin's Eight Banners army was simply too strong. On the Mongolian steppes, strength was everything. When facing a power far greater than one's own, the instinct to kneel and sing a song of submission was carved into the bones.

Sweat rolled down Omubu's forehead.

He thought and thought.

In the end, there was only one answer.

Surrender.

He could not win. He truly could not stand against the Jin.

Just then, hurried footsteps sounded outside.

A guard burst in, shouting, "Khan! The Wushen tribe, leading various Ordos tribes, has arrived outside Guhuacheng and is loudly demanding the city gates be opened!"

"What?!" Omubu was shocked.

The Jin envoy heard this and let out a mocking laugh.

"So the Wushen and the Ordos have arrived? Excellent. I will accept their surrender as well and save myself the trouble of riding farther west. Come. Let us go to the city wall and take a look."

Soon, Omubu and the Jin envoy stood side by side atop the city wall.

Outside Guhuacheng's southern gate were dozens of mounted horsemen.

At the front sat the leader of the Wushen tribe. Beside him was Bo'erzhijin Elinchen of the Ordos. Behind them were several dozen riders, all clearly tribal leaders.

With just these few dozen men gathered, the weight they carried was immense.

Nearly all the major figures of the Western Mongolian region were present.

The Wushen leader raised his head and called out loudly, his voice ringing across the plains.

"Omubu of the Tumed! I am the leader of the Wushen tribe, and now also the leader of the Ordos. I have come to persuade you."

Omubu leaned forward from the city wall.

"What do you want to say?"

The Wushen leader answered without hesitation.

"Come with us. I will lead you to a life where you can eat your fill. Together, we will beat the Jin barbarians!"

Omubu's face flushed red.

The Jin envoy was standing right beside him.

For someone below to say such words in front of a Jin envoy was an open slap to the face.

As expected, the Jin envoy exploded in rage.

"Wushen tribesman! Watch your mouth!"

The Wushen leader burst into laughter.

"What's wrong? Don't you like being called Manchu dogs? I quite like it."

The Jin envoy was furious.

"This is outrageous! Our Great Jin has not dealt with you in a long time, and you have forgotten our might!"

The Wushen leader snorted.

"Hmph. Just Jurchen savages."

The Jin envoy sneered.

"Our Great Jin's generals, Dorgon and Yue Tuo, are leading a massive army nearby. If you dare to act so arrogantly here, the moment our army arrives, every one of you will be slaughtered."

At those words, Omubu trembled visibly, fear flickering in his eyes.

But the Wushen leader, Bo'erzhijin Elinchen, and the gathered Ordos leaders all burst out laughing.

"Oh, we're terrified," they mocked.

The Jin envoy continued coldly, "The Tumed tribe has already decided to surrender to us. You should surrender as well. Submit to our Great Jin, and perhaps your lives will be spared."

The Wushen leader shouted up at the wall.

"Omubu! Have you surrendered to him?"

Cold sweat poured down Omubu's face.

"Uh... well..."

He did not dare say no.

But he also could not bring himself to say yes.

He was completely trapped.

The Wushen leader pressed again.

"Just draw a knife and chop down this Jin savage. Wouldn't that solve everything?"

Omubu fell silent.

He did not dare.

Seeing his hesitation, the Jin envoy laughed loudly.

"Omubu, these people outside dare to resist our Great Jin. You only need to stand firm against them. Our army will arrive shortly and slaughter every one of these fools."

Hearing this, Omubu grew even more frightened.

After long consideration, he still believed the Jin were stronger.

Those Wushen, Ordos, and others outside had all been crushed by the Jin in the past. Even gathered together now, how could they possibly win? In the end, they would still be defeated.

In secret, he might have dared to contact them.

But with a Jin envoy standing beside him, he did not dare gamble.

Omubu let out a long sigh.

"Don't blame me," he said quietly. "I cannot join you."

On the grasslands, the rule was simple.

If ambitions did not align, then only battle could decide the outcome.

Without another word, the Wushen leader turned his horse around.

"Since persuasion has failed, then let battle decide," he said coldly. "Omubu, don't blame us either."

Chapter 903: Stunned in a Single Encounter

Omubu began to organize his defenses.

To be honest, he was not truly afraid of the Wushen tribe or the Ordos tribe.

Because he had a city.

Guhuacheng and Suiyuan City stood side by side on the vast prairie, like two stubborn nails driven deep into the earth. These were not flimsy camps that cavalry could trample with a single charge. Thick walls, solid gates, and years of reinforcement made them formidable defensive positions.

Cavalry was strong in the open plains, but charging city walls was another matter entirely.

Moreover, Omubu still commanded a considerable number of cavalry of his own. If the enemy overextended or showed weakness, he could launch a counter-charge at any moment.

Let the east wind blow, let the war drums thunder. In this world, who feared whom?

No, that was not quite true.

There was one exception.

He feared only the Later Jin.

As for everyone else, he feared nothing.

Inside Guhuacheng, the Tumed tribal cavalry began gathering rapidly. The sound of hooves, shouted orders, and clanking armor echoed through the city. Soldiers ran back and forth, some carrying weapons, others hauling supplies.

The Later Jin envoy watched the preparations with obvious satisfaction.

He cackled triumphantly, reached out, and gave Omubu a heavy slap on the shoulder.

"You're obedient," he said with a grin. "A good man. I will report this to General Yue Tuo. When the time comes, you will be handsomely rewarded."

Omubu forced a stiff smile, but his heart felt as if it were being squeezed by an invisible hand.

Before long, movement appeared outside the South Gate.

The Wushen tribe's cavalry had arrived.

Thunderous hoofbeats rolled across the prairie like distant thunder. Tribe after tribe gathered, banners fluttering in the wind. An alliance formed from dozens of tribes assembled on the southern grasslands.

More than ten thousand riders.

They spread out in formation, orderly and disciplined, their presence pressing heavily against the city walls.

The Wushen chieftain sent out dozens of men. Riding forward together, they raised their voices and shouted toward Guhuacheng.

"Omubu! This is your last chance!"

Before Omubu could respond, the Later Jin envoy leaned over the city wall and burst out laughing.

"A bunch of cavalry trying to storm a city?" he shouted mockingly. "Come on, come kill me!"

The Wushen chieftain turned his head slightly and said calmly, "He wants us to kill him."

Behind him, the mass of cavalry erupted as one.

"Grant his wish!"

"Satisfy him!"

The Later Jin envoy laughed even harder.

"Hahaha! Who are you trying to scare? With these city walls, you will never..."

Before his words had fully faded, a strange sound suddenly echoed across the prairie.

It was not the thunder of hooves.

It was not the roar of war cries.

It was a sharp, piercing wail, mechanical and unfamiliar.

From behind the Wushen cavalry, ten bizarre vehicles emerged.

They belched thick black smoke as they advanced, forcing the cavalry ranks to part before them. The ground trembled beneath their wheels as they drove straight to the front of the formation.

Then the ten vehicles stopped.

In a coordinated movement, each one split apart. The front iron-box section detached from the rear trailer. Soldiers leapt down, grabbed the rear sections, and rotated them a full one hundred eighty degrees, aiming them directly at Guhuacheng.

Only then did the people on the city walls finally understand what they were looking at.

Ten massive cannons.

For a brief moment, it felt as if invisible question marks popped into existence above the Later Jin envoy's head, spinning wildly.

"Impossible!" he shouted. "How can there be vehicles like this? This is impossible!"

Omubu was equally shaken.

"They actually have cannons?" he muttered. "How much iron would it take to make even one? The Mongolian steppes do not have that much iron!"

In that instant, understanding struck him like a bolt of lightning.

Support.

Han support.

The Great Ming.

It had to be the Great Ming.

"Fire!"

Zao Ying's command rang out clearly.

Ten cannons erupted at the same time.

Flames burst from their mouths, followed by deafening explosions. Ten solid iron cannonballs screamed through the air and smashed into Guhuacheng's city walls.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The walls shook violently. Dust and debris cascaded down as the stone groaned under the impact.

The Later Jin envoy cursed loudly.

"Damn it all! How could cannons be brought to a place as remote as Guhuacheng? What in the world are those giant iron vehicles?"

He turned toward Omubu and shouted, "Don't be afraid! General Yue Tuo's army is already on its way. Our reinforcements will arrive soon. You just need to hold the city!"

Sweat poured down Omubu's face.

His heart felt as heavy as a mountain pressing on his chest.

But now, there was no retreat.

He could only grit his teeth and endure.

Inside the city, soldiers ran frantically behind the walls. Some hauled stones, others dragged rubble, piling everything they could behind the walls and gates.

If the piles were thick enough, surely the cannons could not break through.

At least, that was what they desperately hoped.

Outside the city, the enemy cannons fired intermittently. There was no urgency in their rhythm. It almost felt lazy.

Omubu immediately saw through it.

They were trying to bait him.

If he sent his cavalry charging out to attack the artillery, they would be swallowed whole by the allied forces outside. Dozens of tribes, more than ten thousand riders, and among them the elite heavy cavalry of the Ordos.

With his limited numbers, leaving the city would be suicide.

So he stayed.

The thunder of cannon fire continued.

Time passed, though no one could say how long.

Suddenly, the Later Jin envoy burst out laughing again.

"They're here! They're here!" he shouted excitedly. "Yue Tuo's grand army has arrived!"

On the eastern prairie, banners appeared.

Later Jin cavalry surged into view, forming a massive force around the command banners of Dorgon and Yue Tuo.

Dorgon rode at the very front.

At twenty-three years old, he was in the prime of his life. His armor gleamed, his posture was straight, his horse spirited. Youthful arrogance radiated from him like heat.

On his face, there was only confidence. Not a trace of fear.

"Cowardly Han men!" Dorgon cracked his horsewhip and laughed loudly. "Your enemies are here!"

"They're here. Dorgon is here."

A smile appeared on Zao Ying's face.

"It's time to let these Jiannu barbarians see Gao Family Village's secret weapon."

"Light Armored Cars, advance!"

"Cavalry Battalion, advance!"

"It's battle time. A real battle!"

"Kill the Jiannu!"

Every member of the cavalry battalion had watched A Small Soldier of the Dalinghe Border Army. Their hatred for the Jiannu had long since burned deep into their bones.

Many had dreamed of this moment.

Now, the opportunity was finally before them.

"Doo doo doo..."

The sharp, distinctive bugle of Gao Family Village sounded across the battlefield.

Ten Light Armored Cars surged forward.

Behind them came two thousand musket-armed cavalry, charging straight toward Dorgon.

The Wushen chieftain roared, "Follow them! Follow our Han friends!"

Bo'erzhijin Elinchen shouted, "Ordos tribe, charge!"

The armored cars led the way. Behind them, an ocean of Mongolian cavalry surged forward, sweeping across the prairie like a hurricane.

Predictably, question marks once again seemed to pop up above Dorgon's head.

"What in the world are these vehicles?" he muttered. "Han people always come up with such bizarre contraptions."

He snorted.

"It doesn't matter. No matter what they are, they cannot stand against me. I am Dorgon. I am invincible."

He waved his arm forward.

"Crush them!"

The two great armies collided head-on.

As always in battles involving Gao Family Village, the first sound was not steel clashing.

It was gunfire.

Bang bang bang bang!

Dense musket fire erupted.

In that moment, Dorgon felt the same helpless shock that so many Mongols had felt before him. After firing a volley, the enemy cavalry unexpectedly wheeled around and galloped away, retreating with astonishing discipline.

Then the ten iron vehicles kept charging forward.

They did not slow down.

They did not stop.

The Jiannu cavalry finally realized something was wrong.

"They aren't stopping!"

"They're going to hit us!"

"CRASH!"

The impact was terrifying.

The foremost riders were sent flying. Men and horses were knocked aside like toys. Massive wheels rolled over bodies, crushing bone and flesh alike. One side of a vehicle lifted high into the air, tilting dangerously, while the other remained planted on the ground.

For a moment, it seemed as if it would overturn.

But it did not.

The vehicle slammed back down, steady and relentless.

Behind it, the ground was stained with a long trail of blood and broken bodies.

"What is that thing?!"

In just a single encounter, the Jiannu suffered a catastrophic blow to their morale.

Fear of the unknown seized them instantly. Their minds went blank. Their courage shattered.

Before they could even regroup, the Mongolian cavalry arrived.

Mongolian cavalry were the fastest cavalry in the world.

With a deafening roar, they swept into the Jiannu ranks, smashing through them like a flood breaking a dam. Men and horses were scattered in every direction.

The proud Dorgon stood frozen in shock.

Stunned.

Completely overwhelmed by a single encounter.

Chapter 904: The Yuan Dynasty Is Destined to Fall Here

Inside Guhuacheng, Omubu and the Later Jin envoy stood frozen, staring at the battlefield outside the walls.

No one spoke.

The silence was stiff, heavy, almost choking. Even the air seemed to have solidified.

After several long moments, the Later Jin envoy suddenly snapped out of his daze. His face twisted with panic as he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Open the city gates! Charge out! Hurry and go help us!"

Omubu looked at him.

He answered with a single word.

"Oh."

The sound was calm. Too calm.

The instant that word left his mouth, Omubu's right hand moved. His saber was drawn in a flash, so fast the motion was almost invisible. Cold light flickered, then vanished.

The Later Jin envoy's head flew up into the air.

Blood sprayed.

Before the body even collapsed, Omubu's left hand shot out and caught the severed head midair. He rushed toward the city wall, climbed onto the parapet, and raised the head high for all to see.

His roar echoed across the battlefield.

"I've killed the Later Jin envoy! I've killed the Later Jin envoy!"

He did not pause.

"Stop firing on us! I'm coming out to help my Mongol brothers!"

The gates of Guhuacheng swung open.

The Tumed tribal warriors surged out in a flood, shouting as they ran.

"Mongols! We are Mongols!"

"Do not attack your own people!"

With those words spoken openly, there was no reason for anyone to strike them down.

After all, was it not better to unite and fight the Manchu together?

"Charge!"

"Charge!"

Another thunderous crash rang out.

An armored car slammed straight into a Manchu soldier, sending him flying through the air like a rag doll.

The vehicle twisted its rear, its front gun barrel snapping into position. A sharp bang rang out, and a Manchu soldier in the distance dropped instantly to the ground.

Arrows poured down onto the armored car like rain, clanging loudly as they struck its iron shell.

Their attack failed to pierce your armor.

Manchu cavalry rushed forward, lances lowered, stabbing viciously at the vehicle.

Their attack failed to pierce your armor.

One furious Manchu soldier leapt forward, drew his saber, and hacked wildly at the armored car.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

Their attack failed to pierce your armor.

Then came a single gunshot.

Bang.

A Manchu soldier staggered, a gaping hole torn through his chest. He collapsed on the spot, dead before he hit the ground.

The armored car surged forward again.

Bang.

Another Manchu soldier was crushed beneath it, his head shattered as iron wheels rolled over him.

Their attacks on the enemy side were instantly lethal.

But every attack against the armored car failed.

How was this battle even supposed to be fought?

Dorgon raised his saber, his mind in chaos. For the first time, he genuinely did not know what to do.

Yue Tuo reacted faster.

"Retreat!" he shouted hoarsely. "Retreat! Fall back first! We need to figure out how to deal with this thing before we fight again! Go back! Go back now!"

Only then did Dorgon snap out of it.

Yes.

When facing strange and incomprehensible weapons, retreating first was the wisest choice.

"Retreat! Retreat!"

Gongs rang out across the battlefield as the Manchu forces began to withdraw. Yue Tuo and Dorgon were the first to turn their horses and flee.

Since ancient times, anyone who accomplished great things first learned how to run.

The Manchu revered Romance of the Three Kingdoms as a military manual. Liu Bei fled. Cao Cao fled. None of them considered fleeing shameful.

What was truly shameful was failing to escape.

The two commanders ran faster than anyone else.

Yue Tuo, though sick and coughing incessantly, now ran just as fast as the young and vigorous Dorgon.

Their main forces rapidly pulled back several hundred meters.

The armored cars were not fast enough to pursue.

The Gao Family Village Cavalry Battalion lacked the horsemanship to catch them.

However, several Mongol light cavalrymen chased after them.

The Mongols were born on horseback. Their speed was terrifying.

Unfortunately, while their riding skills were unmatched, their combat techniques were crude.

One Mongol cavalryman fired an arrow at Dorgon's back.

Dorgon twisted his body and dodged it cleanly, then immediately fired back.

His arrow struck true.

The Mongol rider fell straight off his horse.

"Damn it," someone muttered. "This guy actually has some skill."

Another Mongol rider rushed in, saber raised.

Dorgon sidestepped effortlessly, then swung his saber backward in one smooth motion.

The Mongol cavalryman was cut down and thrown from his horse.

The surrounding warriors stared in shock.

For a moment, no one dared to chase further.

Dorgon and Yue Tuo, leading the shattered remnants of their army, galloped madly toward the northeast and disappeared into the endless plains.

The leaders had escaped.

But the battle was already decided.

The Mongols erupted in cheers.

"We won!"

"We actually won!"

"We finally defeated the Later Jin!"

The people of Gao Family Village were just as excited.

"The Manchu aren't that terrifying!"

"We avenged Instructor He!"

"We avenged the people who died at Daling River!"

Amid the chaos, Omubu slowly dismounted and approached the Wushen tribe leader.

He lowered his head, dropped to one knee, and spoke loudly.

"From this day onward, my Tumed tribe pledges allegiance to the Wushen tribe. We will ally with the Great Ming and strike down the Manchu together!"

Cheers erupted again.

"Wushen!"

"Wushen!"

But the Wushen tribe leader knew very well why they had won this battle.

He walked toward Zao Ying, clasped his fists in the Han salute, and spoke solemnly.

"From now on, everyone must fight alongside our Han friends to defeat the Manchu!"

"Defeat the Manchu!"

"Defeat the Manchu!"

The roar swept across the grasslands like thunder.

Zao Ying turned her gaze to Omubu.

"Where are Ligdan Khan's wives and son?" she asked. "And the Khan's seal passed down from Genghis Khan?"

Omubu answered immediately.

"They are with the Chahar tribe, far to the east."

"Excellent," Zao Ying said. "Lead the way. We must secure the Khan's seal."

As a surrendered general, Omubu was eager to prove his loyalty.

He led them east.

After some time, they reached the Chahar tribe's encampment.

The once-glorious Golden Family had long since faded. Years of war against disobedient tribes and the Later Jin had drained the Chahar tribe to the brink of collapse.

Faced with the combined forces of the Han, Wushen, Ordos, and Tumed tribes, they surrendered immediately, without even nocking an arrow.

Ligdan Khan's wives, Nangnang Fujin and Sutai Fujin, along with his son E'zhe, were brought before Zao Ying.

Zao Ying did not waste words.

She extended her hand.

"Hand it over."

With trembling hands, Nangnang Fujin presented an imperial seal.

This was the Imperial Seal of the Yuan Dynasty, engraved with four large characters.

Zhigao Zhi Bao.

By all rights, this seal should have been handed to Wushen, who would then claim the title of Great Khan.

But Zao Ying had no intention of doing that.

She took out a wooden box prepared in advance, lined with soft silk. She carefully placed the imperial seal inside, closed the lid, and slipped the box into her pouch.

Then she smiled.

"Nangnang Fujin, Sutai Fujin, E'zhe. The three of you will come with us."

None of them dared object.

Only then did Zao Ying turn back to Wushen.

"From now on," she said, "the steppe is yours to manage."

Wushen did not yet realize that he had become a Mongol traitor, or perhaps a historical sinner to the Yuan Dynasty.

Or perhaps he understood perfectly, but chose to ignore it.

Either way, the Yuan Dynasty was destined to fall here and now.

The only question was whether it fell into the hands of the Manchu, or the Han.

The Wushen tribe leader clasped his hands and spoke loudly.

"My Han friend, thank you for helping me pacify the steppe. From this day forward, I will govern the grasslands well, trade freely with the Han, and together we will deal with those Jurchen barbarians!"

Chapter 905: Three New Arrivals

Zao Ying personally escorted Nangnang Fujin, Sutai Fujin, and E'zhe back to Gao Family Village.

Travel in those days was never fast.

The three hostages rode with the cavalry battalion, their hearts pounding nonstop. Every step of the journey filled them with the same uncontrollable dread that An Jile and Zhebu had once felt when they were first brought here.

Fear gnawed at them day and night.

Alongside that fear was a deeper anxiety, one that crushed down on their chests and refused to lift. No one knew what fate awaited them.

The two women had already prepared themselves mentally.

They had resolved that no matter what the Han people demanded, they would endure it. Humiliation, submission, compromise. All of it was acceptable, as long as E'zhe was spared.

Just name your demands, they told themselves.

We will do anything. As long as my son lives.

Among them, Sutai Fujin burned with the fiercest resolve. As E'zhe's birth mother, she was prepared to throw herself into any abyss if it meant protecting him.

By the time they reached Gao Family Village, she had braced herself to witness hell itself.

Yet the scene that greeted them was not torture, nor cruelty, nor chains.

Instead, standing at the village entrance were two figures dressed in Mongolian clothing, smiling and waving.

They spoke in fluent Mongolian.

"Nangnang. Sutai. E'zhe. Welcome."

The three newcomers froze.

Their minds went blank.

Who are these Mongolians?

An Jile stepped forward and introduced herself with a gentle smile.

"I am An Jile, wife of the Wushen tribe leader. This is my son, Zhebu."

In that instant, everything clicked.

The three immediately understood.

So even the Wushen leader's wife and son are here.

No wonder Wushen showed no reaction when the Han took the Imperial Seal.

The Wushen Tribe is nothing more than a puppet army controlled by the Han.

Only now did the puzzle finally make sense.

Why the Wushen Tribe had risen so quickly.

Why the Ordos had been subdued.

Why the Tumed had surrendered.

Why Chahar had fallen so easily.

And yet, strangely, there was no resentment.

The three had personally seen those strange iron vehicles on the steppe. Once they began moving, they were unstoppable. Resistance was meaningless.

Sutai Fujin's expression dimmed slightly.

She asked quietly, "An Jile... Zhebu... have you been living among the Han people for a long time? Is life here... alright?"

Even as she asked, she did not expect a good answer.

What kind of good life could hostages possibly have?

Surely they are worked like animals during the day, then humiliated at night...

An Jile laughed.

Her laughter was light and unrestrained.

"It's wonderful," she said cheerfully. "Life here is absolutely fantastic."

Sutai blinked.

"Huh?"

An Jile's smile grew even wider.

"It's even better than when I lived with the Wushen Tribe."

Sutai froze.

"What... what... what?"

An Jile gestured forward.

"Come. I'll show you."

An Jile and Zhebu walked ahead, relaxed and familiar, while the three newcomers followed behind with cautious, fearful steps.

Soon, the bustling commercial district of Gao Family Village unfolded before them.

The sight was overwhelming.

Streets packed with people. Shops lined up one after another. Goods of every kind displayed openly, glittering in the sunlight. The three Mongolians felt dizzy just looking around.

There were markets on the Mongolian steppe, where Han merchants, Mongolians, and even traders from the Western Regions exchanged goods.

But compared to this place, those markets were laughable.

A firefly trying to rival the sun and moon.

Nangnang Fujin suddenly pointed ahead and gasped.

"Look! That shop is selling iron pots. So many iron pots. Big ones, small ones, all laid out like this. I have never seen so many iron pots in my entire life!"

An Jile glanced over and chuckled.

"That is a shop run by the Gao Family Village Committee. You can think of it as an official workshop. Their goods are cheaper than what private merchants sell."

She led Nangnang Fujin closer.

Speaking awkward but earnest Han Chinese, she asked the shop assistant, "This... iron pot... how much... one?"

The assistant smiled warmly.

"Two hundred cash."

An Jile immediately translated into Mongolian.

"Two hundred cash."

Nangnang Fujin stared at the pot as if it were a miracle.

"Only... only two hundred cash?" she exclaimed. "Something this good would cost at least one tael of silver where we come from. After the border trade was cut off, you could not even buy one with a tael of silver. We had to trade a whole sheep for one."

An Jile felt a quiet, undeniable satisfaction.

Seeing her fellow tribesmen shocked by Gao Family Village's abundance made her feel oddly proud. Perhaps living here for so long had changed her in ways she herself had not noticed.

With the air of someone teaching newcomers, she said slowly, "Don't worry. Now that you're here, you can buy as many iron pots as you want. Enough to last a lifetime. Even the air here smells sweeter than on the steppe."

As they continued walking, Sutai's gaze was suddenly captured by a shop selling rouge, powder, gold, and silver jewelry.

Her steps slowed almost against her will.

She was still young enough to love beauty.

But she was a hostage, brought here with nothing. Even if she wanted such things, she could not afford them.

She could only look longingly from a distance.

An Jile noticed.

With a playful turn, she deliberately spun around.

Only then did Sutai realize that An Jile was wearing gold and silver jewelry, and her face was carefully adorned with rouge and powder.

Sutai could not help blurting out, "An Jile, how do you have so much money to buy all of this?"

In her understanding, hostages were no different from livestock. How could they possibly have money?

An Jile beamed proudly.

"My son is very capable," she said. "He opened a wool textile factory here. My husband sends wool from the steppe, and my son processes it into fabric for sale. It earns a great deal of money."

Nangnang and Sutai exchanged glances.

Hostages can do this?

The Han people are unexpectedly lenient with hostages.

While the women talked and wandered awkwardly from shop to shop, the two boys were deep in their own world.

E'zhe was very young, only seven.

Zhebu was older, already ten.

Their perspective was entirely different from that of the adults.

E'zhe pointed excitedly ahead.

"Brother Zhebu, look! That shop sells fine blades. Those swords look amazing."

Zhebu straightened his chest slightly and said proudly, "Do you like them? I'll buy one for you."

E'zhe panicked.

"Ah? How can I accept that?"

Zhebu laughed.

"Before, I was the only Mongolian child here. I always felt lonely. Now that you're here, I finally have a companion. I'm happy. A sword is nothing."

E'zhe lowered his voice.

"But... we are hostages. Prisoners. Are we allowed to carry swords?"

Zhebu waved his hand casually.

"Of course. Swords mean nothing here. The Han people's real weapons are firearms. With one bang, they can kill someone from hundreds of meters away. They don't care if we buy swords."

E'zhe's eyes widened.

Just then, Zhebu suddenly spotted someone ahead.

"Ah! My sworn brother is here!"

He waved excitedly and shouted in Han Chinese, "Brother Maopao!"

Liu Maopao walked over with a smile.

He had already been informed that Mongolian hostages from the Golden Family would arrive today. Still, he pretended not to know, scratching his head and acting confused.

"Brother Zhebu," he said, "this person beside you looks Mongolian too. Why don't you introduce him to me?"

Chapter 906: Do I Have to Pay for Noodles?

Zhebu was still just a child. Naturally, he could not give any particularly meaningful introduction. After a brief and rather perfunctory round of greetings, the three boys were considered acquainted.

The moment that was done, Liu Maopao unleashed his signature charm.

He reached out and gave E'zhe a friendly pat on the shoulder, his expression full of warmth and confidence.

"Little E'zhe, you've traveled a long way to get here. You probably don't understand much yet. But don't worry," Liu Maopao said cheerfully. "Big Brother Maopao is here. If there's anything you don't understand, just come ask me. I might not have much else, but I do have plenty of pocket money. If there's anything you want, you can come find your big brother too."

E'zhe had just arrived and was already nervous and uneasy in this unfamiliar place. Hearing Liu Maopao speak with such apparent sincerity, his defenses collapsed almost instantly. His eyes turned red, and tears welled up, exactly like what had happened to Zhebu earlier. Without realizing it, he had already fallen straight into the same trap.

"Oh?" E'zhe said, voice trembling with emotion. "Big Brother Maopao, you're really such a good person."

Liu Maopao was delighted. Just like that, he had gained yet another sworn younger brother.

He grabbed both boys by the hand, grinning broadly. "Come on. Big Brother will treat you to good food and good drinks. Today, we're going to have a great time."

Meanwhile, Zao Ying walked straight into the main hall of Gao Family Village and went to see Gao Yiye.

At this moment, Gao Yiye was busy writing something at her desk. It was not an ordinary document, but a draft script for the news.

These days, she had to lay the groundwork every single day for the evening broadcast of Gaojia News. After memorizing the script, she would deliver it on camera with an air as solemn and dignified as a national leader giving an address.

This was not something she could afford to take lightly. If she accidentally misunderstood or distorted Dao Xuan Tianzun's intentions during a crucial news segment, it could lead to a complete misinterpretation of political or economic matters. The consequences would be extremely serious.

When she saw Zao Ying enter, Gao Yiye immediately put down her pen. Her face lit up with genuine happiness.

"Sister Zao Ying, it's been a long time," she said warmly.

Zao Ying smiled in response. She reached into her sleeve and took out a small bag. From the bag, she produced a box. When she opened it, a beautifully crafted jade seal lay inside.

Gao Yiye gasped softly. "Ah? The Yuan Dynasty's Imperial Seal?"

Zao Ying nodded calmly. "That's right. This item can be considered the Yuan Dynasty itself. As long as the Mongols hold it, the Yuan Dynasty still exists. Once it falls into someone else's hands, the Yuan Dynasty can be considered finished."

Hearing this, Gao Yiye's expression turned serious. "Then how should we deal with this item?"

Zao Ying shook her head. "That's not for me to decide."

Gao Yiye smiled faintly, clearly understanding the implication. "You're right. This is something we'll need to ask Dao Xuan Tianzun about."

Zao Ying asked, "Is Dao Xuan Tianzun here right now?"

Gao Yiye raised her hand and pointed toward the corner of the room.

There, a Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun sat quietly, perfectly still, with a gentle smile fixed on its face.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun isn't here at the moment," Gao Yiye said. "He's currently experiencing mortal life in Luoyang."

At the same time, on a snack street in Luoyang.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun was holding a piece of sweet sesame cake. It carefully stuffed the cake into its silicone mouth, chewed as if tasting the flavor, then discreetly spat it out when no one was paying attention.

Its movements were secretive and awkward. No matter how one looked at it, it did not resemble a respectable person in the slightest.

Since Dao Xuan Tianzun himself was not present, there was no need to rush a decision regarding the Imperial Seal. Gao Yiye respectfully placed it in front of the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, arranging it neatly as if making an offering to Li Daoxuan. The placement was orderly and visually pleasing.

In the eighth year of Chongzhen, during the transition from spring to summer, bandit forces led by Ma Guangyu rose up in Shangzhou and Luoyang. They launched raids on the outskirts of Luoyang, causing chaos everywhere they went.

He Renlong led Gao Jie to intercept them. Gao Jie deliberately held back his strength, while He Renlong charged forward recklessly on his own. The result was disastrous. The imperial forces suffered a crushing defeat.

Fortunately, they were not far from Luoyang. Bai Yuan arrived in time with the Gao Family Village militia. Ma Guangyu was defeated and fled into the mountains.

Not long after that, the Chuang King and the Eight Great Kings looted Nanyang and Tanghe.

He Renlong, together with Gao Jie and Zhang Quanchang, went out to confront them. After a fierce battle, the imperial army was defeated once again. Generals such as Tian Yinglong died in combat. He Renlong and Gao Jie were forced to retreat in haste.

Only when Cao Wenzhao arrived with reinforcements was the bandit army finally driven back.

Fighting throughout Henan Province was brutal beyond words.

Summer had arrived.

The weather was steadily growing hotter.

On a small street in Luoyang, Li Daoxuan sat by the roadside, eating a bowl of duck blood vermicelli soup.

The number of refugees on the street was clearly increasing by the day.

This year was another year of severe drought.

Henan had suffered disaster after disaster for consecutive years. Life for ordinary people was becoming harder and harder. Villagers were either forcibly absorbed into bandit armies or fled to large cities like Luoyang in search of survival.

Two children stood some distance away. They were thin, pale, and clearly malnourished. Their eyes kept drifting toward Li Daoxuan's bowl, and from time to time, they swallowed unconsciously.

Li Daoxuan let out a quiet sigh. He waved at them and tried his best to make his expression gentle.

"Children, come here. Come over."

The two children hesitated for a moment, then timidly walked closer.

Li Daoxuan pushed his bowl toward them.

Their faces lit up with joy. They did not bother with chopsticks. Using their hands, they grabbed the duck blood vermicelli and stuffed it into their mouths. In the blink of an eye, the bowl was empty.

Li Daoxuan turned his head toward the shop owner. "Another bowl."

The owner immediately understood. He quickly prepared another bowl and brought it over.

The moment the bowl was set down, the children pounced again. Once more, it was gone almost instantly.

Li Daoxuan spread his hands helplessly. "Shop owner, make five more bowls."

As he cooked, the owner said, "Sir, you truly have a kind heart. But the number of refugees grows every day. You can't help all of them."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Can't help them all? That might not necessarily be true."

He fell into thought. His field of vision had already expanded to include Luoyang. Just like what he had done in Xi'an, it was time to make a move here as well. However, developing the area around Luoyang was more difficult. Bandits were everywhere. Bai Yuan and the militia were constantly fighting, yet they could not wipe them out completely.

If factories were to be built near Luoyang, the only safe option was the northwest, which was already within his field of view and relatively free of bandit activity. The eastern areas, however, were still troublesome.

While he was thinking, the owner finished the third bowl and placed it in front of the children.

The two children began to share the noodles quietly.

At that moment, a group of men walked down the street.

They looked rough and unpleasant. Each one was tall and burly, dressed like martial artists, weapons hanging at their sides. They looked exactly like wandering toughs from the jianghu.

There were ten of them in total.

They sat down heavily and slapped the table. "Shop owner, duck blood vermicelli soup. One bowl each."

"Coming right up," the owner replied.

However, he did not start cooking immediately. Instead, he added, "That will be ten copper coins per bowl."

Li Daoxuan was taken aback. When he had ordered earlier, the owner had started cooking right away without asking for payment. Yet these jianghu men had just sat down, and the owner was already demanding money upfront.

Li Daoxuan thought to himself, "Huh? Could it be because I'm handsome and obviously a good person?"

"Aha. That must be it. I'm just too good looking," he mused smugly.

The men shot the owner unhappy looks. "What do you mean by that?"

The owner said carefully, "Honored sirs, you didn't pay for the duck blood vermicelli soup last time. If you don't pay first today, this humble shop owner really doesn't dare cook for you again."

Li Daoxuan's thoughts immediately shifted.

"So that's how it is," he thought. "It's not because I'm handsome. It's because these guys have a bad record."

The men sneered coldly. "Are you tired of doing business, shop owner? Don't you know who we are? We were hired by the Prince of Fu's residence with a large sum of silver to protect you useless people. And you still dare to ask us for money?"

Chapter 907: This Is My Law

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly.

Something felt off.

These people claimed they were hired by the Prince of Fu's residence. That did not make sense. Had the Prince of Fu not already funded Bai Yuan's militia? Why would he then spend more money hiring a group of wandering toughs like this? What exactly was he planning to do?

Was he not afraid of being accused by the civil officials of secretly raising private troops and plotting rebellion?

Li Daoxuan immediately activated Co-sensing.

In an instant, his consciousness projected into the golden Dao Xuan Tianzun emblem on Bai Yuan's chest.

"Bai Yuan," Li Daoxuan asked directly, "do you know anything about the Prince of Fu's residence hiring private soldiers again?"

At this moment, Bai Yuan was training the militia. When he heard Dao Xuan Tianzun's inquiry, he answered without delay.

"I know about it," Bai Yuan replied quickly. "Although the Prince of Fu provided funding for our militia, the troops are still under my command and are deployed together with the Governor to suppress bandits. Whenever I lead the troops out of the city, the Prince of Fu feels uneasy about his own safety. So he dug into his own pocket and hired another group of mercenary bodyguards."

He continued, "These men do not follow me around. They stay in the city all year long. That way, the Prince of Fu feels more at ease."

Li Daoxuan was still puzzled. "Isn't he afraid of being impeached?"

Bai Yuan shook his head. "As long as the number stays under a thousand, it is not considered a serious issue. He can claim they are for self-defense against bandits. The civil officials will not have solid grounds to impeach him. Even if the Emperor hears about it, nothing major will happen. At most, a few verbal reprimands."

That made sense.

In a flash, Li Daoxuan withdrew his consciousness and returned to the body of the mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The moment he switched back, he saw the situation had escalated.

All ten mercenary toughs had already stood up. Their hands rested on the hilts of their sabers as they glared fiercely at the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper's face had gone pale. His legs trembled, but he still did not retreat. He took a few steps back and shouted loudly, "This is Luoyang, the center of the world. There are laws here."

The mercenary toughs burst into mocking laughter.

"Laws?" one of them sneered. "The Prince of Fu's residence is the law."

The shopkeeper became even more flustered. His lips trembled, and for a moment he could not even form a complete sentence.

At that moment, Li Daoxuan stood up.

He reached out, grabbed the shopkeeper by the shoulder, and pulled him behind himself, shielding him completely. Then he turned to face the group of mercenary toughs.

A strange and somewhat wicked smile appeared on his silicon face.

"Eating noodles and refusing to pay?" he asked calmly.

The mercenary toughs immediately realized that someone was deliberately looking for trouble.

They began to size Li Daoxuan up from head to toe. If he were dressed in luxurious silks, wearing fine jade and precious ornaments, they would have backed off at once.

But after a careful look, they felt reassured.

Li Daoxuan wore plain warrior clothing. There was no jade at his waist, no gold or silver on his body. He did not even carry a saber.

Clearly, he was not a wealthy noble.

Someone like this was well within their range to provoke.

The leader of the mercenary toughs sneered. "I have never paid for noodles. Not once."

Li Daoxuan spread his hands casually. He turned his head and asked the shopkeeper, "How many times has he eaten your noodles without paying? I will make him compensate you."

The shopkeeper whispered nervously, "Twice."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

He turned back toward the mercenary toughs. "Not paying twice means you owe twenty cash. Add a late fee, double it. Pay forty cash and I will consider the matter settled."

The mercenary tough instantly exploded in fury.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he shouted. "Who do you think you are, sticking your nose where it does not belong? Believe it or not, I will smash your head in."

Li Daoxuan remained completely calm, as if he had not heard the threat at all.

"Eating noodles without paying is originally a civil dispute," he said evenly. "Compensation would resolve it. However, resorting to threats or violence escalates the matter into the crime of provoking trouble. That carries penalties such as fixed-term imprisonment, detention, or surveillance, along with a fine."

All ten mercenary toughs stared at him in confusion.

"What nonsense is this?" one of them shouted. "Where did you get these rules? Is this written in the Great Ming Code?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly. "Not the Great Ming Code. This is the law I follow. Wherever I am, things are handled according to this law."

The mercenary toughs burst into laughter.

"So he's a lunatic," someone said mockingly.

Li Daoxuan corrected them seriously. "Calling me a lunatic is disrespectful. Please call me Xiao Qiushui, the Marvelous Hero of the Divine Land."

By now, the shopkeeper understood that things had gone completely out of control.

From behind Li Daoxuan, he whispered anxiously, "Young master, thank you for your righteous help. But the situation is dangerous now. These people really intend to use force. A wise man avoids immediate loss. Young master, you should leave quickly."

The two children had stopped eating their noodles. Their small fists were clenched tightly, their faces filled with anger.

There were two or three other tables of customers in the shop. All of them were silently furious, but none dared to speak.

Suddenly, one of the mercenary toughs lunged forward.

He swung his fist straight toward Li Daoxuan's face.

Li Daoxuan did not dodge.

To be precise, his reaction speed simply was not fast enough, and he could not dodge in time.

There was a dull thud.

The mercenary tough let out a scream. He grabbed his own punching hand with his other hand and collapsed into a crouch.

"My hand," he wailed. "It hurts so much."

Li Daoxuan seized the opening. He lifted his foot and kicked forward with force.

Thump.

The mercenary tough was sent flying backward. He hit the ground hard and lay there, unable to get up for a long time.

Li Daoxuan announced calmly, "You have already thrown a punch. The crime of provoking trouble is established. Sentence: half a year of Labor Reform."

The remaining nine mercenary toughs erupted in rage.

They charged at Li Daoxuan all at once, fists and feet flying in a chaotic storm of attacks.

The shopkeeper and the two children were terrified. The other customers could not bear to watch and covered their faces.

Only screams could be heard.

After a while, the screams gradually died down.

When the sounds finally stopped, everyone cautiously looked again.

What they saw left them stunned.

Li Daoxuan was still standing there, unscathed.

The ten mercenary toughs were all sprawled on the ground. Each one was curled up like a shrimp, clutching different parts of their bodies, howling in pain in a variety of miserable ways.

Li Daoxuan spoke again. "All of you. Half a year of Labor Reform."

One of the mercenary toughs lying on the ground shouted hoarsely, "Do not get too arrogant. The Prince of Fu will never let you off."

Li Daoxuan nodded thoughtfully. "Oh? Your words remind me of something."

He continued, "I cannot simply teach you a lesson and leave it at that. I should also teach the Prince of Fu a lesson."

The moment he said this, everyone was stunned.

Even the mercenary toughs on the ground forgot to cry out in pain. They stared blankly at Li Daoxuan.

The shopkeeper, the customers, and the two children were all terrified beyond measure.

Li Daoxuan said calmly, "Common sense tells me that the Prince of Fu probably did not personally order you to eat ten-cash bowls of noodles without paying. A man of his status would not concern himself with such things. However, he still bears responsibility. He failed to properly discipline his subordinates, allowed riffraff to run rampant, and was negligent in control. Therefore, he must bear the consequences of your actions. I am going to settle accounts with him right now."

You really dare to go?

The thought almost burst out of everyone's minds at the same time.

Li Daoxuan lifted his foot and kicked one of the mercenary toughs again.

Thump.

"Get up," he ordered. "All of you. Get up. We are going to the Prince of Fu's residence together."

The ten mercenary toughs had been completely beaten into submission. None of them dared resist. They struggled to their feet one by one, heads lowered, clutching their injuries, and began limping forward, leading the way.

As they stepped onto the street, a large crowd quickly gathered.

In particular, the snack stall owners along the street were overjoyed. Many of them had suffered from these mercenary toughs eating without paying. Seeing them now humbled and obedient, their hearts finally felt relieved.

Chapter 908: Even the King of Heaven Himself Wouldn't Pass

The street was packed.

Ordinary townsfolk, shopkeepers, peddlers. A solid wall of people followed behind, watching the procession with wide eyes.

But... something felt off.

Li Daoxuan suddenly froze.

Wait a second.

He slapped his thigh. "Hey, everyone! I say, shouldn't you be throwing something by now? Rotten eggs, spoiled vegetables, cabbage leaves, anything! That's how righteous indignation works. You have to throw things at the villains. That's called positive energy."

The crowd collectively broke into cold sweat.

"Great hero," someone cried, close to tears, "there's a drought! We don't even have eggs to eat. Where are we supposed to get rotten ones?"

"Exactly! We barely survive on wild greens. Who has spare cabbages to throw at people?"

Li Daoxuan fell silent.

This was... awkward.

He could only sigh deeply. "Fine. The atmosphere is completely ruined. As for the problem of you having nothing to throw, I'll solve that very soon. Please look forward to it."

Before long, they arrived at the Prince of Fu's Residence.

The Prince of Fu's Residence glittered with gold and jade. Its scale was only slightly inferior to that of the Prince of Qin's Residence, the greatest princely estate in the realm. If ranked across the entire empire, it was easily second place.

Under normal circumstances, only a small squad of guards stood watch at the gates.

But recently, bandit forces had run rampant throughout Henan. Luoyang was flooded with refugees, and the Prince of Fu was terrified. He had spent a large sum of silver hiring nearly a thousand martial artists and vagrants, rotating them in shifts to guard the residence.

So now, in addition to the regular guards, there stood a dense cluster of martial artists. At a glance, nearly a hundred of them.

They were bored out of their minds.

Then suddenly, noise erupted from the main street.

They looked over and saw Li Daoxuan escorting ten battered men, with a massive crowd of curious onlookers flooding the entire road behind him.

The genuine palace guards recognized Li Daoxuan immediately.

"Eh? Isn't that Xiao Qiushui, the Divine Hero of the Central Plains?"

"He's always seen together with Lord Bai."

"He's a favorite of the Governor. Why is he dragging ten martial artists here like prisoners?"

These guards had served the Prince of Fu for many years. They had seen enough political struggles to understand one rule very clearly.

When big shots fight, it's always the small fry who get crushed.

Without saying a word, the real guards quietly withdrew. Two of them slipped into the residence at once to report the situation.

The hired martial artists, however, were a different story.

They glanced over and instantly erupted in fury.

"Those are our people!"

"They've been beaten!"

"Who dares cause trouble right outside the Prince of Fu's gates?"

Nearly a hundred martial artists surged forward like a tide.

As they advanced, the common people behind Li Daoxuan scattered in panic, retreating far away with gasps and cries.

Li Daoxuan sighed helplessly. "Such crude thug behavior. What skill is there in frightening ordinary civilians?"

One of the martial artists shouted, "Where did you crawl out from, kid? What trouble are you stirring up here?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "These ten ate duck blood vermicelli soup without paying and threatened the shop owner. That constitutes disorderly conduct. I've come to speak with the Prince of Fu regarding your lack of discipline."

"Hahaha!" The martial artists burst into laughter. "So it's just duck blood vermicelli soup. When have we ever paid for that stuff?"

Li Daoxuan's expression hardened. "I can't pretend I didn't hear that. If you've also been eating without paying, I'll need to deal with you as well. Civil compensation where required, criminal punishment where applicable—"

Before he could finish speaking, one martial artist threw a punch with a sharp whoosh. "Enough nonsense! Get down here!"

Thump.

The punch landed.

Li Daoxuan did not move an inch.

The martial artist screamed, clutching his arm, and collapsed to the ground.

Li Daoxuan announced, "Alright. You've confirmed your criminal liability. Sentence: six months of Labor Reform."

The remaining martial artists were stunned.

He hadn't even moved, yet their companion was already screaming on the ground?

Something was very wrong.

"It's the Thirteen Grand Protectors' Iron Body!"

"The Golden Bell Shield and Iron Cloth Shirt!"

"No way! Aren't those just street performance tricks?"

"Fake or real, who cares? There are almost a hundred of us! Charge!"

They all rushed him at once.

The crowd of onlookers was treated to quite the spectacle.

All they heard were continuous thumping sounds. No one could tell how many people were striking Li Daoxuan, but the result was always the same. Screams, hands flung back, feet hopping in pain.

Li Daoxuan remained completely calm throughout.

He knocked one person down with a left punch, kicked another aside with his right foot, and muttered to himself as he worked.

"Six months of Labor Reform. Another six months. And another. Mm. Excellent. Very productive. I've collected dozens of Labor Reform candidates today. All high-quality labor. Delightful."

In the blink of an eye, the ground before the Prince of Fu's Residence was covered in groaning bodies.

Only around two dozen martial artists remained standing.

These were the ones who had not rushed in. They had watched the entire fight from the sidelines and thus were still able to stand upright and speak clearly.

Seeing Li Daoxuan's absurdly simple and brutal efficiency, they all sucked in sharp breaths of cold air.

One of them stepped forward and clasped his fists respectfully. "Young hero, your skill is extraordinary."

Li Daoxuan waved his hand. "Average. Just average. Third best in the world."

The martial artist continued, "We are not like them. They ate without paying. We did no such thing."

"That's good," Li Daoxuan replied.

The man then said solemnly, "However, we accepted the Prince of Fu's payment and promised to guard his residence. Having taken money, we must fulfill our duty. Since you've come to the gates, we are

obligated to block you. Whether you are right or wrong, whether you are powerful or not, today, even if the King of Heaven himself comes, we must stand in the way."

After speaking, the remaining two dozen martial artists spread out, forming a defensive line before the gates. They knew full well that they were no match, yet they still prepared to fight to the end.

It was a tragic kind of loyalty.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Rules. If everyone in the jianghu followed rules, how wonderful the world would be. Unfortunately, by doing this, you make me look like the unreasonable one."

The martial artist spoke earnestly, "Young hero, it's best not to trespass into a place like the Prince of Fu's Residence. Even if you defeat us and force your way in, that would be a capital crime. When the imperial army surrounds you later, no matter how strong you are, numbers will eventually overwhelm you."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Relax. I won't force my way in."

The martial artist blinked. "Then...?"

"The Prince of Fu is coming out," Li Daoxuan said calmly.

"?"

By now, Luoyang had fully entered the scope of Li Daoxuan's diorama box.

With a simple focus, his vision passed through dozens of walls.

He clearly saw a three-hundred-catty, bloated figure.

The Prince of Fu, Zhu Changxun, was waddling forward, panting heavily as he hurried out.

Chapter 909: The Locusts Have Arrived

Zhu Changxun cursed nonstop under his breath as he hurried out of the residence.

On the way, his guards had already briefed him on the situation. The person outside was a friend of Bai Yuan, someone favored by Fan Shangzheng, the Governor of Henan, and a well known Jianghu figure bearing the title of Divine Hero, Xiao Qiuxia.

Zhu Changxun was never a reasonable man to begin with. For someone to stir up such chaos right at the gates of his own estate felt like a slap across his face. It was humiliating.

As for the so called discipline of the Jianghu riffraff under his command, he had never truly cared. He did not know what sort of trash they were, nor what dirty things they did outside. He had never bothered to find out.

To be blunt, why should he personally concern himself with the behavior of a bunch of hired brutes?

Such trivial matters should have been handled by stewards, eunuchs, or any low ranking servant. Was it really something that required a prince to step forward himself?

Yet here he was, forced to come out and wipe someone else's mess.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

As he strode forward, he turned his head and snapped at the eunuch beside him.

"Little Zheng, you were the one who brought those Jianghu men into my estate, weren't you?"

Eunuch Zheng's face instantly flushed.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Zhu Changxun snorted coldly.

"Good. Just wait. I will deal with you later."

Eunuch Zheng felt wronged to the extreme, but he did not dare argue. He lowered his head and swallowed his grievances.

Soon, the group reached the main entrance.

Dozens of Jianghu men were still stationed stubbornly at the gates of the Prince of Fu's residence.

Zhu Changxun, a mountain of flesh weighing over three hundred catties, charged out in one go. With two heavy thuds, he knocked over three of his own guards without even noticing.

Then he finally came face to face with Li Daoxuan.

He forced out a smile.

"Oh? Isn't this the famous Hero Xiao Qiuxia?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly,

"I am not here to exchange pleasantries."

Zhu Changxun nodded as if he understood everything already.

"On my way out, my guards informed me that these Jianghu men under my employ behaved disgracefully. Eating without paying, intimidating merchants, even invoking my name. Truly outrageous behavior."

Then his tone shifted.

"But..."

He waved his hand dismissively.

"It was just ten copper coins for a bowl of duck blood vermicelli soup. Such a tiny matter. Is it really worth a figure like Hero Xiao Qiuxia creating such a spectacle at my residence gates?"

Li Daoxuan's expression darkened immediately.

"So in your eyes, this is not worth caring about?"

Zhu Changxun snorted.

"It was never a big issue in the first place. Your actions made it known throughout the city, and that is what turned it into a problem."

His face hardened.

"For Master Bai's sake, and out of respect for Governor Fan, I do not wish to quarrel with you. Let us end this matter here."

In Zhu Changxun's mind, this was already supreme magnanimity. Someone had caused trouble at his estate, and he was graciously letting it go. What greater kindness could a prince display?

Surely the common folk should be praising his virtue.

Li Daoxuan had no intention of backing down.

"Ending it here is not possible. If this is left unresolved, these men will simply repeat their offenses."

Zhu Changxun felt his anger surge.

He had already lowered himself and made concessions. Yet this man still would not relent.

Li Daoxuan continued steadily,

"These Jianghu ruffians must be taken away for labor reform and taught how to behave as proper people. As for the Prince of Fu's estate, at the very least, you must send representatives to formally apologize to the common people of Luoyang. After that, you must go door to door, count every instance of unpaid consumption, and compensate each merchant in full."

Zhu Changxun roared,

"You are truly determined to push this to the end, aren't you?"

Li Daoxuan slowly clenched his fist.

A crisp metallic sound rang out as his knuckles tightened.

The atmosphere instantly grew tense.

Just then, a lone rider galloped wildly toward them from afar, screaming even before he arrived.

"Locusts! Locusts are coming from the east! A massive swarm!"

The shout froze everyone in place.

All heads turned toward the eastern sky.

There, a dense black cloud rolled forward, swallowing the horizon as it advanced.

The onlookers who had gathered to watch the drama erupted into panic. They screamed and scattered, rushing back toward their homes.

Zhu Changxun's face changed color.

"Oh no! Quickly, return inside! Shut all doors and windows!"

The Jianghu men who had been beaten down moments earlier crawled desperately toward nearby houses.

Under normal circumstances, locusts did not attack humans.

But during a true locust plague, the insects covered the sky, stripped the land bare, and entered a frenzied state from hunger. Vegetation disappeared in moments. In such desperation, locusts could and would bite people.

Just imagining being swarmed was enough to make one's scalp go numb.

No one dared stay outside.

In an instant, the area around Li Daoxuan was completely emptied.

As Zhu Changxun fled, he shouted back angrily,

"Hero Xiao Qiuxia, aren't you supposed to stand up for the common people? Go then. Drive away the locusts. After you finish that, we can continue our discussion!"

Li Daoxuan shrugged lightly.

"You are being sarcastic, but you are not wrong. Compared to the locust plague, your estate's wrongdoing is insignificant. To put it plainly, you are not even as harmful as the locusts."

Zhu Changxun nearly exploded on the spot, but his guards seized him and dragged him inside.

A moment later, all the doors and windows of the Prince of Fu's residence slammed shut one after another.

Li Daoxuan did not bother moving his avatar.

He left the silicone figure standing motionless before the gates, ended his shared perception, and instantly returned to his true body outside the diorama box.

Looking down into the box, he saw Luoyang thrown into chaos.

People everywhere were scrambling indoors.

Bai Yuan was shouting hoarsely as he herded militia members toward the barracks.

"Everyone retreat! Seal the doors and windows! No one stays outside!"

At the Governor's yamen, Fan Shangzheng stood in the open courtyard, pointing at the sky and cursing loudly.

"Floods, droughts, and now locusts? Is there no justice left in this world at all?"

Two guards rushed out and grabbed him.

"Master, stop yelling and get inside! If locusts swarm you, you will swell and die. It is terrifying!"

Startled, Fan Shangzheng clutched his head and hurried indoors.

Those with homes found shelter.

The refugees, however, had nowhere to go.

Large groups rushed toward temples, begging for protection. Monks and Daoist priests did their best to take in as many as possible.

Some shopkeepers opened their doors and shouted,

"Quick, come inside! Hurry!"

Ordinary citizens also opened their homes, but even so, many refugees were left wandering the streets, panicked and helpless.

Li Daoxuan watched the scene and felt a tightness in his chest.

He had to help them.

As he hesitated, his gaze suddenly fell on the glass cup beside his hand.

His eyes lit up.

He grabbed it and gently placed it down over a small group of refugees.

As they ran, they suddenly felt something strange. A powerful rush of air pressed down from above.

They looked up in terror and saw a massive transparent cup slam down around them.

The refugees froze in place, too frightened to even breathe.

Chapter 910: Cowardly and Yet Loving Horror Films

Li Daoxuan had no time at all to explain anything to the refugees who were already in a state of panic.

He moved at top speed, tearing through his kitchen in search of anything transparent that could be used. Glass cups, glass bowls, plastic storage boxes. He dragged them all out without hesitation.

With a quick glance of his left eye, he spotted a group of refugees scrambling across a deserted street, desperately looking for shelter. He grabbed a glass cup and brought it down with a decisive thump. In an instant, that small group was safely covered.

His gaze swept westward.

There, a large cluster of refugees huddled together, crying and trembling, completely lost and not knowing where to go.

Li Daoxuan seized a clear acrylic toy box and slammed it down with a heavy thud, enclosing the entire bewildered crowd.

After repeating this again and again, he began to feel that individually covering people was too slow.

At that moment, he suddenly remembered the bottomless fish tanks he had bought long ago to protect his farmlands.

Without delay, he began dragging them over.

These fish tanks were enormous, capable of covering huge areas.

Li Daoxuan lifted the largest bottomless fish tank and lowered it over an entire city block. With a loud crash, the whole street and all the shops along it were enclosed. However, since the tank had no bottom, it also had no top, leaving it open to the sky and allowing locusts to still pour in.

He rushed back to the kitchen and grabbed a roll of microwave cling film.

He spread it across the open top of the fish tank, pulled it tight, and with a swift swish, sealed it perfectly.

In a very short time, refugees across the city found themselves protected beneath a strange collection of transparent vessels.

If this had happened in Chengcheng, Puzhou, or even Xi'an, the common people would have immediately recognized it as a miracle of Dao Xuan Tianzun and would not have been afraid.

But in Luoyang, such a scene was truly shocking. To people who did not understand, it felt almost blasphemous.

Those trapped beneath the strange transparent covers screamed in terror, completely confused by what was happening. One person was more frightened than the next.

Meanwhile, citizens hiding inside their homes, peeking through cracks in doors and windows, felt an even deeper fear.

"What are those things?"

"They look like huge transparent cups."

"And enormous transparent bowls."

"How did they appear?"

"They fell from the sky."

"They trapped the people outside. What are they trying to do?"

"Are demons being released to capture people?"

"Ahhh!"

Cries of panic echoed throughout the entire city of Luoyang.

The Prince of Fu, who had just been dragged into his mansion by his guards, did not dare retreat too far. He was hiding in the gate tower near the main entrance. The massive prince, weighing several hundred catties, squeezed his face up to a narrow window crack, his huge body nearly filling the opening.

He, too, was terrified by the massive transparent covers falling from the sky.

"Good heavens, what is happening out there? Monsters are capturing people. They are throwing transparent covers from the sky and trapping them inside. Such enormous transparent cups. Such massive transparent bowls."

As he muttered in fear, he suddenly noticed something strange.

That eccentric hero, Xiao Qixui, was still standing outside the mansion gates. He stood there, head tilted upward, staring at the sky, completely motionless, without even blinking.

The Prince of Fu was stunned.

"Hm? That Xiao fellow did not hide? He is still standing right at my gate."

Eunuch Zheng also stretched his neck to look.

"Why is he not hiding? Could he be completely frightened stiff?"

The Prince of Fu guessed,

"Those transparent covers are trapping everyone outside. Soon, that Xiao fellow will be covered as well, and then dragged away by monsters."

But reality quickly proved him wrong.

The transparent covers fell everywhere across the city, yet they strangely avoided Xiao Qixui.

He stood alone on the deserted street before the Prince of Fu's mansion, standing out conspicuously, yet not a single transparent dome descended upon him.

The Prince of Fu cried out in disbelief.

"This is too strange. Why is this happening? Such a big man standing right there. Can the sky monsters not see him? They covered everyone else, even those hiding in corners. Why is he being ignored?"

No one could answer him.

Just then, Eunuch Zheng suddenly shouted,

"Your Highness, the locusts have arrived. They have entered the city."

The Prince of Fu let out a startled cry and only then remembered the true threat. He had been so captivated by the bizarre transparent covers that he had completely forgotten about the locust plague.

"They are here. They are here."

"The locusts have arrived."

The entire city snapped out of its shock at the transparent covers and was once again gripped by terror.

The sky darkened as the massive locust swarm descended upon Luoyang in a horrifying wave.

Although the city did not contain large farmlands, it still had trees, grass, flowers in front of houses, and even green onions growing on some balconies.

These few scraps of greenery became the locusts' only targets.

They devoured everything without mercy.

Windows rattled violently as countless locusts slammed into them, producing a dense, continuous buzzing and thumping.

Inside their homes, people trembled.

Those with gaps in their houses hurried to block them with wooden boards and anything else they could find.

Whenever a locust broke through, the terrified residents would desperately grab something and smash it flat.

All across Luoyang, a desperate struggle between humans and locusts unfolded.

Those beneath the transparent covers soon realized something important.

The locusts could not get in.

These transparent domes offered perfect protection. They were far superior to their fragile, crumbling houses.

Locusts could squeeze through cracks in walls and doors, but they could not penetrate these massive transparent shields.

People could even clearly see locusts clinging to the outside of the covers, their bodies and legs visible through the clear material.

Only then did the more perceptive among them finally understand.

"These big transparent covers are not demons sent to capture us. They are sent to protect us."

"The divine beings in the sky are protecting us."

"These are heavenly cups, heavenly bowls, heavenly boxes."

"Divine beings are using celestial vessels to protect us."

The thinking of ordinary people in the great Celestial Empire was very simple. If something from the heavens harmed them, it was a demon. If it helped them, it was a god. Their logic was direct, uncomplicated, and sincere.

Meanwhile, the Prince of Fu continued peeking from his gate tower. From a distance, he could clearly see that the covers were protecting people, not capturing them.

Then he thought of something else.

What about Xiao Qixui, who had no protection at all?

The Prince of Fu hurriedly shifted his gaze to the open ground before his mansion.

And sure enough, the troublesome Xiao fellow was now completely engulfed by locusts.

Countless locusts covered him. They clung to his head, shoulders, chest, back, and arms, forming a dense, writhing mass.

The Prince of Fu felt his scalp go numb.

"That Xiao fellow is going to be eaten alive by locusts."

Even if the Xiao fellow was not likable, watching a person be buried alive under locusts was something no one could easily bear.

The Prince of Fu felt as if locusts were crawling all over his own body. His skin itched, his heart pounded, and his whole body felt uncomfortable. It was unbearable.

Yet, even so, he could not look away.

Cowardly and yet loving horror films.