

## Great Ming 991

### Chapter 991: No Skipping Class!

Gao Jie's punch landed, yet it was he who let out a muffled grunt. He clutched his fist and staggered back several steps.

The crowd collectively gasped.

"Whoa!"

Gao Jie lowered his head and stared at his hand. His knuckles were bright red, the skin swollen in a large patch.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

"I punched his stomach. That's the softest part of the human body. How did it feel like I hit bone? And not just bone, but something absurdly hard?"

What he did not know was that the mass produced avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun had iron storage compartments embedded in both the chest and abdomen. Each contained a miniature reconnaissance unit. Gao Jie's punch had slammed straight into one of those iron boxes, which was covered by a layer of silicone skin.

Without that cushioning, his fist would have been injured far more severely.

Gao Jie, believing that his opponent had mastered Iron Body kung fu to an unbelievable level, such that even his abdomen was harder than steel, felt a wave of unease rise in his heart. He rubbed his injured right hand with his left, his expression awkward and stiff.

"What terrifying Iron Body kung fu," he muttered.

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "Nothing special. Third best in the world."

Cao Wenzhao immediately asked, "If you are only third, then who are the top two?"

Cao Bianjiao groaned. "Uncle, focus. Is that really the important part? He said 'third' because it sounds good."

Cao Wenzhao paused, then nodded. "Ah. That makes sense."

Gao Jie continued rubbing his fist and said, "Earlier, I aimed for your abdomen because I was afraid of killing you by accident. But since your Iron Shirt kung fu is so strong, I will strike your vital points next."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "Alright. Aim properly. Hit the vital points."

The crowd burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! How arrogant!"

"Do you really think you can beat Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

Gao Jie clenched his teeth and threw another punch, this time straight at Li Daoxuan's chest.

Thwack!

Pain exploded through his hand.

He jerked his fist back and stumbled backward again, retreating three full steps.

This time, his fist felt almost numb.

A deep sense of fear crept into Gao Jie's heart.

"What kind of monster is this?" he thought. "Two punches, and he is completely fine. Meanwhile my fists are already useless. Should I really aim for his temple next?"

His eyes slowly lifted, settling on Li Daoxuan's temple.

Just then, someone gently tugged on his arm.

Gao Jie turned his head and saw Xing Shi standing behind him.

She did not speak. She only shook her head.

Gao Jie knew this woman well. His wife, whom he had taken from the Dashing General, was intelligent and perceptive, far sharper than he was.

The moment he saw her expression, he understood.

If he stubbornly continued, he would truly suffer.

His gaze shifted away from Li Daoxuan's temple. He clasped his hands together in a respectful salute.

"Two punches are enough," he said. "This Gao admits defeat."

The crowd let out disappointed murmurs.

"Huh? That's it?"

"It ended so fast."

They had not had enough of the show.

Li Daoxuan, meanwhile, thought to himself that a wise wife truly was a man's greatest support. Historically, after Gao Jie's death, this woman would take her son to seek refuge with Shi Kefa. That had been a very clever decision.

Li Daoxuan spoke aloud. "Since General Gao has conceded, please proceed to class."

Gao Jie saluted once more, then turned and left, too embarrassed to stay any longer.

As he walked away, however, a sly thought crept into his mind.

"I can just skip class, right?"

The thought had barely formed when Li Daoxuan's voice rang out from behind him.

"General Gao, no skipping class."

Gao Jie froze.

Li Daoxuan added, "If I catch you skipping, you will be confined for a week."

Those words instantly ignited Gao Jie's rebellious temper. He spun around in anger.

"I am an official appointed by the imperial court," he shouted. "You think you can confine me whenever you want? By what authority?"

"By this," Li Daoxuan replied.

The moment the words left his mouth, an enormous black teacup appeared in the sky. With a thunderous boom, it fell straight down, swallowing Gao Jie whole.

In an instant, Gao Jie was plunged into complete darkness. No light penetrated the teacup at all.

He reached out and touched the wall. It was smooth, hard, and unbelievably thick. No matter how he struck it, there was no way to break free.

Terrified, he screamed and shouted inside.

Outside, Xing Shi and Gao Jie's guards were completely stunned. One moment they had been walking normally. The next, a massive teacup had fallen from the sky and trapped Gao Jie inside. The violent gust of wind from its descent nearly knocked people off their feet.

When they finally recovered, they stood around the teacup in confusion, at a total loss.

Xing Shi turned toward Li Daoxuan and immediately dropped to her knees.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, please show mercy," she pleaded. "Please spare my foolish husband."

"Do not worry," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "I have no intention of killing him. If I wanted him dead, he would already be gone. There would be no need for this."

As soon as he finished speaking, the teacup shot back into the sky and disappeared into the clouds.

The crowd stood there in silence.

When Gao Jie finally reappeared, he was completely shaken.

Only now did he truly believe that Li Daoxuan was a divine being.

He dropped to his knees with a heavy thud.

"This humble general will attend class properly," he said hastily.

Li Daoxuan waved his hand. "Go. Study well and be a decent man. Otherwise, your life will not last long."

Gao Jie scrambled up and ran as fast as he could, as though his life truly depended on it.

Only then did Li Daoxuan turn his gaze toward the Cao uncle and nephew.

His intention was obvious.

Cao Wenzhao looked utterly dazed, still struggling to recover from what he had just witnessed.

After several seconds, he suddenly asked, "That teacup was so big. How many catties of tea leaves would it take to brew a proper cup?"

Cao Bianjiao broke out in a cold sweat.

"Uncle, is that really what you are thinking about? A deity is standing right in front of us, and you are thinking about tea leaves?"

Cao Wenzhao blinked. "Ah. You're right."

He looked at Li Daoxuan, who was also watching him.

Cao Wenzhao glanced left, then right, then pointed at his own nose.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, are you looking at me because you want me to attend class too?"

"Yes," Li Daoxuan replied. "Both of you must attend."

Cao Wenzhao straightened up proudly. "This Cao is not some surrendered bandit. I am well educated and known for loyalty and courage."

"I do not deny that," Li Daoxuan said. "However, what you learned before is not what I intend to teach. You still need to attend."

The uncle and nephew exchanged a look. In each other's eyes, they saw the same thought.

Neither of them wanted to go.

But after witnessing the teacup descend from the heavens, neither dared to openly resist.

Li Daoxuan continued, "I know you are thinking about skipping class as well. Let me be clear. If you skip, you will still be confined. However, given your loyalty and courage, I will not use a teacup."

"I will use something brighter."

As he spoke, a transparent glass cup descended from the sky and landed heavily in front of them, not trapping them, but clearly serving as a warning.

Chapter 992: Trouble Brews Anew

The Cao family uncle and nephew stared at the enormous glass cup before them, both wearing rather strange expressions.

"What a gigantic glass cup," Cao Wenzhao muttered. "Could this be the Jade Lamp that Sha Wujing smashed in Journey to the West? The Jade Lamps of the heavens are truly something else."

"Uncle!" Cao Bianjiao cried out. "Can you please focus on what actually matters? Is this really the time to be thinking about Journey to the West? We're basically being held hostage here!"

Cao Wenzhao corrected him with a serious face. "No. You're the one missing the point. We aren't being threatened by people. We're being threatened by a god."

Cao Bianjiao could only gape at him.

It was an incredibly awkward moment. His uncle usually had a talent for missing the heart of any situation, yet this time he had somehow nailed it perfectly.

Cao Wenzhao went on, "If it were ordinary people threatening us, when have we ever been afraid? Hmph. But since it's a god holding us hostage, then we..."

Cao Bianjiao swallowed. "Uncle? Are we going to fight?"

"We surrender," Cao Wenzhao declared without hesitation.

Cao Bianjiao froze.

"Come on," Cao Wenzhao urged. "Let's go to class."

"Wait, what?" Cao Bianjiao blurted out.

The Cao family uncle and nephew immediately broke into a run, skirting around the massive glass cup and hurrying after Gao Jie.

Watching their rather undignified retreat, Gao Yiye could not help letting out a small laugh. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, you've scared them half to death."

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan replied calmly.

Gao Yiye smiled. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, you're usually so gentle with everyone and never bully us ordinary people. Why are you being so harsh with Gao Jie and the Cao uncle and nephew?"

Li Daoxuan let out a soft sigh. "Imperial officials and military generals must be handled firmly. Without discipline, they will not amount to anything. If they do not seriously attend their ideological lessons, then in the future they will not only be useless, they will become obstacles to building a new era. Forget about them. Go enjoy yourself."

"Alright!" Gao Yiye replied cheerfully.

She ran straight into a snack shop by the roadside. "Shopkeeper," she called out, "bring me one of everything tasty you have!"

"Coming right up!"

In the days that followed, Cao Wenzhao, Cao Bianjiao, and Gao Jie all obediently attended lessons at Fan Shangzheng's governor's yamen.

Their instructor was a military officer from the Gao Family Village Militia, holding the peculiar title of "Political Commissar."

None of the three had ever heard of such a position before, nor could they tell whether it was considered high-ranking or low-ranking. Still, judging by the man's confident bearing, he seemed quite important.

The content of the lessons was extremely dull. Most of the lectures revolved around concepts such as the nation, ethnic unity, justice, and good versus evil. Cao Wenzhao, Cao Bianjiao, and Gao Jie yawned endlessly through it all, yet none of them dared to skip a single session. No matter how tedious it was, they had to sit through it.

Time passed quickly.

Before they knew it, the ninth year of the Chongzhen Emperor's reign arrived.

From the very beginning, the year felt ominous.

Once again, the heavens withheld rain.

Spring rain was already as precious as oil, but when not a single drop fell, it became even more valuable than gold. In both Shanxi and Henan, there was not a trace of rainfall.

This left Li Daoxuan extremely busy.

He had no time to relax at all, constantly producing artificial rain inside the Diorama Box.

Although the size of the box had not been mentioned for quite some time, as the Salvation Index continued to rise, the Diorama Box had expanded twice more. It now measured ten meters long and six meters wide, filling the entire second floor of his large villa.

With the expanded space came expanded coverage.

Each rainfall now covered an enormous area, roughly two kilometers long and 1.2 kilometers wide. Li Daoxuan simply needed to place additional atomizers around the perimeter of the box, then use stands to extend hoses toward the center, spraying mist directly over the core of the miniature land.

As a result, the people inside the Diorama Box often witnessed a miraculous scene.

Countless dragon heads appeared in the sky, their mouths open wide as rain and mist poured down upon the earth.

The people below were filled with awe.

"How many Dragon Kings have been summoned this time?" they wondered.

Even the Four Dragon Kings surely would not be enough. It seemed that Dao Xuan Tianzun had summoned every Well Dragon King, Lake Dragon King, and obscure rain deity from every forgotten corner of the celestial realm to assist.

The villagers marveled not only at Dao Xuan Tianzun's boundless divine power, but also at his vast connections within the immortal realm. Or rather, his overwhelming divine network.

Yet even with Li Daoxuan working tirelessly, he could not save all of Shanxi and Henan.

His expanded field of vision still covered only half of Shanxi and a small portion of Henan. Beyond those areas, conditions remained dire.

The Governor of Shanxi quickly mobilized large amounts of silver and grain, desperately organizing disaster relief. Thanks to his efforts, the situation in Shanxi was alleviated somewhat. Taxes were waived, porridge kitchens were set up, and relief operations proceeded in an orderly fashion.

In Henan, Governor Fan Shangzheng was also doing everything he could to help the people. Unfortunately, his efforts could not cover the entire province.

The reason was simple.

Henan was not fully under his control.

Seventy-two bandit armies still roamed across Henan, Hubei, and Anhui, wreaking havoc wherever they went.

Fan Shangzheng's relief measures could only be carried out in regions firmly held by the imperial court. In areas where supply convoys could not safely reach, there was nothing he could do.

Large numbers of suffering civilians were once again swept up by the bandits, swelling the ranks of the rebel forces.

The bandit armies grew larger and stronger by the day.

January, ninth year of Chongzhen.

A fast rider galloped wildly toward the governor's yamen.

The rider leaped from his horse before it had fully stopped and rushed inside, shouting as he ran, "Military dispatch! Urgent military dispatch!"

At that moment, Fan Shangzheng, Cao Wenzhao, Cao Bianjiao, and Gao Jie were all seated in a classroom, enduring yet another ideological lecture from the Political Commissar.

Yes, even Governor Fan Shangzheng himself was attending.

The four were on the verge of nodding off when the messenger burst in, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Military dispatch! Urgent military dispatch!"

The Political Commissar immediately halted his lecture.

All four "students" turned their heads toward the messenger at the same time.

The messenger froze for a moment, utterly confused. Four high-ranking officials sitting obediently in a lecture hall?

He quickly shook off the distraction. This was no time to dwell on such things.

"The bandit armies, led by Chuang Wang and Chuang Jiang," he reported rapidly, "have marched east to besiege Luzhou. They have already captured Hanshan and Hezhou. Their camps stretch for ten li, with hundreds of thousands of men!"

All four men shot to their feet.

"What?" they exclaimed. "They dare to attack Luzhou?"

Luzhou, known in later times as Hefei, was an extremely important city.

For months, the bandits had remained in the mountains, engaging only in small-scale skirmishes. The imperial court had assumed they were incapable of mounting any major offensive. No one had expected them to suddenly gather hundreds of thousands of troops and strike directly at Luzhou.

Fan Shangzheng frowned. "Luzhou lies far beyond my Luoyang. As Governor of Henan, this matter is outside my jurisdiction."

The messenger nodded. "Indeed, Governor. This report is not meant for you, but for the generals. Supreme Commander Lu Xiangheng has issued orders. General Cao and General Gao are to depart immediately and join General He Renlong at the front. Together, they are to advance on Luzhou and encircle the bandit forces."

Cao Wenzhao, Cao Bianjiao, and Gao Jie all stepped forward at once. "Your humble generals accept the order!"

Without another word, the three turned and rushed toward the exit. The order had clearly stated "depart immediately." There was no room for delay. Even a moment's hesitation would be considered defiance.

But just as they reached the doorway, an unusual sound came from above.

Li Daoxuan, dressed in a swordsman's robe, descended from the sky and landed lightly before the entrance, blocking their path.

Chapter 993: Bringing the Xiaolangdi Militia

Li Daoxuan happened to be busy bringing rain to several neighboring counties at the time. When his stored water finally ran dry and he paused to replenish it, he casually shifted his field of vision toward Luoyang City.

He arrived just in time to hear the messenger deliver the urgent military report.

Seeing the three generals preparing to leave, Li Daoxuan did not hesitate. He instantly manifested a mass produced avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun and placed it squarely in their path, directly blocking the doorway.

This sudden descent from the heavens genuinely frightened the three generals.

Gao Jie reacted the most strongly. He stumbled backward three full steps, his fists unconsciously clenching as old memories surfaced, and he felt an ache begin to throb in his knuckles once again.

Cao Wenzhao, however, remained relatively calm.

He had not committed any major wrongdoing recently, so he did not feel particularly afraid of divine beings. He glanced up at the sky, then at the spot where Li Daoxuan had landed, and could not help asking, "You leaped down from the heavens, yet you did not even leave a pit in the ground?"

Cao Bianjiao hurriedly interrupted, "Uncle, is that really the important part right now? Shouldn't we be asking why Dao Xuan Tianzun has blocked our way?"

Cao Wenzhao blinked. "Ah. You are right."

He immediately clasped his fists and said respectfully, "May I ask what instructions Dao Xuan Tianzun has for us?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "I am not here to stop the two of you. You may depart as ordered. I am here for Gao Jie."

Gao Jie stiffened.

Li Daoxuan continued, "Gao Jie has not yet completed his ideological lessons. He is forbidden from leaving Luoyang for the time being."

Gao Jie blinked, utterly stunned. "Eh?"

Li Daoxuan knew very well that Gao Jie had not truly reformed yet.

He was still an unruly and unrepentant former rebel who had been pardoned and brought under imperial command. Such a person was extremely dangerous. If he were allowed to lead troops freely, it would be all too easy for him to stir up chaos once again.

Henan was already suffering greatly from disaster. The people were starving, desperate, and many were joining the rebel armies simply to survive. At a moment like this, releasing another poorly disciplined official force into the countryside would only make matters worse.

It would be nothing short of official oppression breeding popular rebellion.

Li Daoxuan spoke firmly, "Gao Jie must stay and continue his studies. Until your ideology is fully aligned, do not even think about leaving Luoyang by half a step."

Gao Jie was completely speechless.

This situation was unbearably awkward.

He did not dare resist. All he could do was plead miserably. "Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said carefully, "your humble general would never dare defy your command. However, I have already received a military order. If I do not immediately set out, Supreme Commander Lu Xiangheng will surely impeach me for disobeying orders. When that happens, I will be stripped of my rank and executed."

"Claim illness," Li Daoxuan replied. "Just say you are unwell."

Gao Jie became anxious. "This is truly dangerous. Your humble general is already a former rebel now serving the court. If I fail to seize this opportunity to prove my loyalty and instead disobey orders again, I will certainly be doomed."

Li Daoxuan fell silent for a moment, considering his words.

There was indeed some truth to what Gao Jie said.

"Very well," Li Daoxuan finally said. "I will allow you to go. However, a political commissar must accompany you and continue your ideological education along the way."

Gao Jie let out a strangled sound. "Pfft."

Li Daoxuan continued speaking as if nothing had happened. "Furthermore, your troops have not yet been transformed. They are still a band of unruly ruffians. I have no intention of letting them roam the countryside and prey upon the people."

He paused briefly.

"You may only bring a small personal retinue. Only those who truly obey you."

Gao Jie was stunned. "What?"

He hurriedly said, "Your humble general has a deep blood feud with the Dashing General over the matter of my stolen wife. The moment he sees me, he will attack with everything he has. If I bring only a small personal guard, I will surely die."

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "Bai Yuan will accompany you. He will bring the Xiaolangdi Militia. Their ideology has already been transformed."

Gao Jie fell completely silent.

This arrangement was utterly unacceptable.

He immediately understood that if he went to the battlefield like this, he could forget about commanding anything at all. The true commander would clearly be Bai Yuan. He himself would merely be a general in name, a figurehead who could not even give orders beyond his small group of personal guards.

Yet whether he liked it or not, he had no choice.

After being dealt with harshly the last time, Gao Jie no longer dared to defy Li Daoxuan in the slightest. Joining the campaign under these conditions was still better than being barred from it entirely.

He could only lower his head, slump his shoulders, and sigh. "As you command."

Not long after, Cao Wenzhao departed first, leading the Guanning Iron Cavalry.

Gao Jie, meanwhile, had no choice but to remain in Luoyang and wait obediently for Bai Yuan to arrive with the Xiaolangdi Militia.

An hour later, Bai Yuan entered Luoyang, leading five thousand militiamen.

At first, Gao Jie sneered inwardly. He assumed that a mere militia force would be nothing impressive.

That thought vanished the moment he laid eyes on them.

Every single militiaman was armed with a flintlock rifle.

Each soldier held a long, finely crafted flintlock, nothing like the crude hunting guns Gao Jie was used to seeing among local troops.

Yet the rifles were not even the most shocking part.

Behind the Xiaolangdi Militia rolled eight massive square armored vehicles, their bodies covered in thick iron plating. Gao Jie could not yet judge their actual combat effectiveness, but the eight enormous cannons mounted behind them were impossible to ignore.

"Eight cannons?" Gao Jie blurted out. "Are you really a militia?"

Bai Yuan calmly unfolded his fan and spoke with the bearing of a refined gentleman. "Why should a militia not have cannons? You are behind the times. Even scattered rebel bands can acquire a few cannons these days. If we arrive without artillery and the bandits dig in on high ground, bombarding us with their own guns, how could we ever take their positions? Naturally, we must bring cannons as well."

His reasoning was flawless.

Gao Jie sighed inwardly. "This militia is truly formidable. They are far stronger than my own rabble. Even if they refuse to listen to me, at least they can keep me alive. When facing a deity, what else can one do but bow one's head."

He ordered Xing Shi to remain behind in Luoyang to oversee his former troops. He himself set out with only a small personal guard, following Bai Yuan toward Luzhou.

By this time, thanks to Li Daoxuan's expanded field of view, the entire northwestern region of Henan had effectively become Dao Xuan Tianzun's domain.

The militia advanced in step with the expanding field of view, never pushing forward recklessly.

The reason was simple. Rebel forces were everywhere, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Li Daoxuan had no intention of allowing his people to stray beyond his sight and be surrounded and annihilated. He therefore repeatedly instructed them to advance slowly and cautiously.

Each time they moved forward a certain distance, the local population would be relocated in groups to factories near Luoyang. There, they were housed within the factory compounds, given dormitories, and provided with work.

As a result, a vast region southeast of Luoyang had become completely uninhabited.

Gao Jie and Bai Yuan led their forces straight through this enormous empty zone.

Years of unrelenting drought had drained every small lake, pond, and minor river dry. Occasionally, a deep well might yield a small trickle of water, but it was nowhere near enough to sustain five thousand men.

The militia had to carefully calculate their marching distance and timing, ensuring that they reached the next major river to replenish their onboard water supply before their reserves ran out.

As they marched, Gao Jie carefully observed the Xiaolangdi Militia.

He wanted to understand the true difference between these soldiers and his own men.

Why had Dao Xuan Tianzun declared these militiamen transformed, while his own troops were forbidden from leaving Luoyang, for fear that they would prey upon the common people?

Chapter 994: It Was Right Not to Let Them Out

The army passed through a small village.

The village was completely deserted, not a single living soul in sight.

Beneath the collapsed remains of a ruined house lay a skeleton, half reclined against the rubble. Its jaw gaped wide, as if frozen in a mocking laugh directed at the heavens themselves.

Gao Jie felt no fear at the sight.

He was not some pampered scholar who had spent ten peaceful years gutting fish in a bustling marketplace. His heart had long been colder than that of most men.

A militia soldier ran to the village well, leaned over to look inside, then straightened up and reported, "There's only a little water left. Just a thin trickle."

Bai Yuan nodded calmly. "As expected. We'll continue marching. If we keep our pace, we should reach a major river by evening."

The soldier turned to return to his unit, but as he spun around, his foot struck something solid with a dull thud.

He froze.

Lowering his head, he saw a human skull roll away across the ground.

The soldier sucked in a sharp breath, then hurriedly bent down and picked up the skull. He gently set it upright, pressed his palms together, bowed, and murmured softly, "My apologies. I did not mean to kick you. Please forgive me. As an apology, I will help you rest in peace."

Without hesitation, he grabbed a shovel and quickly dug a small grave. He carefully placed the skull inside, covered it with earth, and erected a simple wooden plank as a marker.

After bowing once more to the crude grave, he ran back to rejoin his unit.

The entire process took some time.

Yet Bai Yuan did not urge him on. Instead, he gave new orders, instructing the other soldiers to collect all the scattered bones throughout the village, bury them properly, and mark each grave with an unmarked wooden slab.

Only after this was done did the army resume its march.

Watching all of this, Gao Jie felt something quietly stir within him.

This army was truly different from his own.

If his former soldiers encountered a skeleton by the roadside, burying it would never even cross their minds. If they refrained from kicking it around like a ball, that alone would be considered good discipline.

They had no sense of respect for others, let alone for the dead.

That night, the five thousand militia members camped beside a river.

The river's water level had fallen drastically, nearly sixty percent lower than usual. The soldiers had to climb deep down into the exposed riverbed to draw water.

Five thousand cooking fires were lit along the bank, thin streams of smoke rising into the twilight.

As the camp bustled with activity, a sentry suddenly ran over and reported, "Instructor Bai, there are people watching us from the woods across the river."

Bai Yuan took out his telescope and looked toward the opposite bank.

The setting sun made it difficult to see clearly with the naked eye, but through the lens, he could distinctly make out a group of gaunt figures with hollow cheeks and pale faces.

"They are civilians," Bai Yuan said after a moment. "They are not armed. Only farm tools like hoes and spades. They are watching us cook and swallowing their saliva, but they do not dare come closer."

Gao Jie listened and gave a casual shrug.

Scenes like this had been extremely common during his previous campaigns. He had always ignored them.

However, Bai Yuan suddenly raised a tin megaphone. Pointing it toward the opposite bank, he shouted loudly, "Listen up, people across the river. We are not bandits. Not bandits. And we are not government troops here to rob you. We are the Xiaolangdi Militia. Militia. Do not be afraid. We are common folk just like you."

After his shout echoed across the river, several heads cautiously emerged from the trees on the far bank. Their eyes were fixed on Bai Yuan, filled with confusion and disbelief.

"Don't be afraid," Bai Yuan continued. "Come out. We have food here, and we can share it with you."

Gao Jie was startled.

Share food with civilians?

Tempted by the word food, the people across the river slowly gathered their courage. One man crept forward to the riverbank. If the river had not separated them, he would never have dared approach so closely.

Standing on the opposite shore, he called out weakly, "You will really share food with us?"

"Are there any former members of the Armored Grenadier Battalion here?" Bai Yuan shouted. "Throw them a package of food."

"Yes!" a soldier leapt to his feet. "I served in the second squad of the Gao Family Village Armored Grenadier Battalion, under Captain Zheng Daniu. The battalion has since been disbanded, and I am now the Fifth Battalion Commander of the Xiaolangdi Militia. Please entrust this glorious task to me!"

Bai Yuan nodded. "Good. Go. Just make sure you do not throw it into the river, or you will shame your Armored Grenadier Battalion."

"I guarantee success!" the soldier replied loudly.

He took a large package of crushed Divine Rice from Bai Yuan. The bundle was about the size of a human head and surprisingly heavy.

The elite grenadiers of the former Armored Grenadier Battalion were no ordinary soldiers. This man could throw a hand grenade seventy meters without difficulty.

Now returning to a familiar motion, he felt a flicker of excitement.

He gripped the rice bundle tightly, took a running start, twisted his waist, let out a fierce shout, and hurled it forward with all his strength.

The package arced gracefully through the air, cleared the river, and landed solidly on the opposite bank.

The man across the river rushed forward and picked it up. He tore the package open and immediately cried out in joy, though his voice was weak and hoarse. "Everyone, we have rice. The soldiers across the river gave us rice. Come quickly. Eat."

The civilians hiding in the woods poured out, fifty or sixty people in total, crowding around him.

A package of rice that size was obviously not enough for so many people.

Yet they were already calculating carefully in their minds. If they cooked it into porridge, each person could at least have half a bowl.

In their simple thinking, they did not even dare imagine asking for more.

But even if they did not ask, Gao Family Village would still provide.

Bai Yuan lifted the megaphone again. "Now you know we are not bad people, right? Wait a moment. We will prepare a boat and bring you across. Come over and eat together with us."

The civilians on the far bank stared across the river, stunned. Their faces were filled with disbelief.

Gao Jie was just as shocked.

Prepare a boat for them?

He quickly realized that Bai Yuan was completely serious.

The engineering battalion soldiers immediately set down their work and began preparing boats. They carried strange bags made from an unfamiliar material. Using blowers, they inflated the bags, which quickly took shape as soft, peculiar boats.

The engineers paddled these inflatable boats across the river, picking up the starving civilians one by one and ferrying them to the near bank.

Soldiers on guard duty stood watch with flintlock rifles in hand, maintaining order and ensuring everyone's safety.

Other soldiers enthusiastically approached, handing over plates of freshly cooked food. "Eat," they urged. "Eat slowly. Do not choke."

The moment the civilians took their first bites, tears streamed down their faces, unstoppable.

Gao Jie sat at a distance, silently watching the scene unfold.

After a long while, he raised his head and looked up at the sky, letting out a deep sigh. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, you were right. I have not been fully reformed. And my men, those scoundrels, are even further away from it. It truly was right not to let them come out."

He sighed again. "Now I finally understand what the Political Commissar was trying to teach me. I was once a commoner just like them. After taking up a blade and commanding men, how did I end up forgetting that?"

## Chapter 995: Zuo Liangyu's Forces Attack

After making sure the refugees had eaten their fill, Bai Yuan handed out dry rations for the road and pointed them toward Luoyang. There, factories dedicated to assisting displaced people were already prepared to receive them.

The refugees repeatedly bowed in thanks, clutching their provisions tightly as they set off toward Luoyang.

Bai Yuan then led his troops onward, continuing the march toward Luzhou.

Once they had moved beyond Dao Xuan Tianzun's domain, encounters with refugees became increasingly common. Sometimes it was just one or two people scattered along the roadside, kneeling and begging for food. Other times, entire villages had been reduced to desperation, their inhabitants scraping bark from trees and digging roots out of the soil to survive.

Each time the militia encountered such scenes, they never hesitated. They distributed food, pointed out the road to Luoyang, and carefully explained how to seek assistance once they arrived.

Watching this unfold day after day, Gao Jie felt deeply shaken.

People were not born evil.

It was the environment that shaped them. If a person grew up surrounded by cruelty, then cruelty would naturally take root in their heart. But if they were surrounded by kindness, they would unconsciously be guided toward goodness.

This was how regional customs were formed.

If everyone around you lived in a certain way, no matter how strange it might seem, you would naturally grow up following the same habits. It was that simple.

As Gao Jie marched alongside the Gao Family Village militia, he gradually began to reflect on his own past behavior, often without even realizing it.

However, after only a few days, he started to notice a problem.

"Master Bai," Gao Jie said one day, seeking Bai Yuan out directly, "aren't our rations being consumed too quickly? At this rate, you'll run out of supplies before even reaching Luzhou. And with the quality of your food, the prefectures and counties along the way simply cannot afford to resupply you."

When Ming armies marched, local officials were responsible for providing provisions. But those supplies were always crude and limited. They were nothing compared to the generous rations enjoyed by the Gao Family Village militia. Local treasuries could never support such standards.

Gao Jie could not help worrying. Once their food was gone, what would they do? Could they still help the common people as they were doing now? At that point, simply not looting the villages would already be considered mercy.

Bai Yuan smiled calmly. "General Gao, we prepared for this long ago. Just watch."

The next day at noon, while the militia rested and cooked in an abandoned village, a strange sound echoed from the road behind them. It was the distinct chugging roar of a steam engine.

Gao Jie rushed out of his tent and saw a convoy of massive iron vehicles approaching from the rear. Each vehicle carried a large cargo bed.

All of the cargo beds were filled with provisions.

Each vehicle transported several tons of grain, and as the convoy rolled in, it delivered tens of tons in total.

A man in militia uniform jumped down from the lead vehicle and shouted loudly, "Zhuge Wangchan of the logistics unit reporting. Instructor Bai, please inspect the supplies and sign for them."

Bai Yuan accepted the delivery and completed the verification. Zhuge Wangchan saluted, climbed back into the iron vehicle, and led the convoy back toward Luoyang.

Gao Jie stared at the scene, his mouth hanging open. "You... you resupply yourselves like this?"

Bai Yuan laughed. "Did you not notice? Our engineering corps has been repairing and clearing the official roads as we advance. That way, our transport vehicles can follow behind us without obstruction."

Only then did Gao Jie understand.

All along the route, the engineering corps had been leveling roads, cutting through terrain, and reinforcing bridges. It had all been for the sake of logistics.

He could not help exclaiming, "No wonder you dare to treat the common people so well. Your logistics are truly dependable."

Bai Yuan's expression brightened. "Exactly. Dao Xuan Tianzun once said that wanting to be a good person is not enough. You must also have strength. Without strength, you cannot help anyone, and your kindness becomes nothing more than empty words."

Gao Jie silently engraved those words into his heart.

Anqing Prefecture.

Shi Kefa was facing an immense threat.

Chuǎng Wang and the Dashing General were besieging Luzhou. The straight-line distance between Luzhou and Anqing was only two hundred li. For fast-moving bandit forces, that was merely a few days' march.

The rebel army's structure was loose and scattered. While Chuǎng Wang and the Dashing General led the main force at Luzhou, other rebel leaders spread their troops across a radius of over a hundred li. That meant the rebel vanguard was likely already less than a hundred li from Anqing.

Shi Kefa's available forces were painfully limited.

He had only five hundred Gao Family Village militiamen, three thousand local garrison soldiers of poor quality, and another three thousand newly recruited Anqing militia members.

Among them, the strongest were naturally the five hundred Gao Family Village soldiers. But five hundred was far too few.

As for the three thousand garrison troops, everyone knew the truth. On paper they numbered three thousand, but whether there were even fifteen hundred present was doubtful. The Jiangnan garrisons were famously lax. In real combat, they were already inferior to small bandit groups, let alone facing the Dashing General's feared Old Eighth Squad. Against those men, they would be slaughtered.

The three thousand new militia recruits were still undergoing ideological and political education. Until their thinking was properly corrected, they could only be trusted with cold weapons. Allowing them to use Gao Family Village firearms too early would be like raising a vicious dragon.

With such forces, Shi Kefa had no hope of marching to Luzhou to challenge the main rebel army.

He asked his attendant, "Where is Governor-General Lu now?"

The attendant replied, "Lu Xiangheng is leading forces from several circuits, including General Zu Kuan and Colonel Luo Dai, to provide relief. They are on the way and should arrive soon. Reinforcements have also been dispatched from Luoyang, led by Cao Wenzhao and Gao Jie."

"Troops from Luoyang as well?" Shi Kefa was delighted. "Are any of our people with them?"

"Luoyang is too far," the attendant replied. "Our messages have not reached them yet."

As soon as he finished speaking, a voice resonated from the emblem on Shi Kefa's chest. It was Dao Xuan Tianzun.

"Bai Yuan is leading five thousand men. He is traveling together with Gao Jie."

Shi Kefa's face lit up with joy. "Bai Yuan is coming. Excellent."

Confidence surged through him.

He immediately gave the order, "Issue the command. We move out at once and head north to rendezvous with the relief armies. Together, we will confront the main rebel force."

Meanwhile, in Yanling County, Henan Province.

Lao Huihui was leading his elite border cavalry through the county.

Recently, Lao Huihui's situation had become somewhat awkward.

Chuǎng Wang and the Dashing General had marched on Luzhou, ordering all seventy-two rebel factions to converge there for the siege.

Henan had been struck by severe drought, and even the rebel armies were short on food. They needed to seize a large city to secure enough provisions. Because of this, the other rebel factions responded immediately, all rushing toward Luzhou to loot it.

But Lao Huihui did not lack supplies.

Bai Yuan had been secretly providing him with food, helping him survive the crisis.

In return, Lao Huihui strictly kept his promise, ordering his men not to harm a single civilian.

The two sides maintained a delicate and unspoken cooperative relationship.

Lao Huihui did not want to leave Henan. If he left, Bai Yuan would stop supplying him, and his men would be forced to attack imperial cities again. That was something he did not wish to do.

As he pondered his next move, a border scout galloped over, panting heavily. "Report, Chief. Zuo Liangyu's forces are charging toward us."

Chapter 996: Time to Deal with Him

Lao Huihui was slightly startled when he heard the news.

"Zuo Liangyu?"

Zuo Liangyu was the imperial general responsible for suppression and relief operations in Henan. Recently, his name had spread widely, and his reputation had grown formidable throughout the region.

Through intelligence gathered from various rebel factions, Lao Huihui understood Zuo Liangyu far better than the imperial court ever could.

In the court's records, Zuo Liangyu commanded only three thousand troops. Many of those soldiers existed only on paper, mere ghost entries used to siphon military pay. In reality, his true fighting strength was probably no more than two thousand men. Yet with this limited force, he had repeatedly defeated roaming rebel bands, earning himself the image of a diligent and capable general.

From the rebels' perspective, however, Zuo Liangyu was something else entirely.

He was a ruthless predator.

Every time he crushed a rebel group, he would accept their surrender and absorb them into his own ranks. After bolstering his strength, he would move on to the next band, defeat them, and repeat the process. Step by step, his army grew larger and larger.

By now, Zuo Liangyu not only retained his three thousand official troops but also controlled nearly ten thousand former rebels who had been forcibly integrated into his command.

"That idiot Zuo Liangyu," Lao Huihui muttered under his breath, unable to hold back a curse. "Why is he coming after us? What does he think he's doing?"

"Perhaps he wants to absorb us as well," a subordinate said quietly. "After all, we are an elite frontier cavalry force."

Lao Huihui nodded, then waved his hand dismissively. "Ignore him. Once Mr. Bai's provisions arrive, we will leave immediately. There is no need to clash with Zuo Liangyu."

As he finished speaking, the long awaited supply convoy finally appeared in the distance.

The convoy from Gao Family Village emerged onto the main road outside Yanling County. They did not use the village's advanced vehicles. Lao Huihui was not yet aware of Gao Family Village's automotive secrets.

Instead, the supplies were transported in the traditional manner, using ox carts and horse drawn wagons loaded with grain.

Lao Huihui hurried forward and clasped his hands in greeting. "Many thanks, Mr. Bai. You have never once failed to deliver the promised provisions."

The captain of the transport team jumped down from his wagon with a broad smile and returned the bow. "And you, General, have also kept your word. We know very well that your forces have not harmed the common people during this time."

After the brief exchange of pleasantries, Lao Huihui quickly waved his hand. "Unload the grain at once. Zuo Liangyu may arrive at any moment."

"Oh?" the transport captain said in surprise. "Zuo Liangyu is coming?"

Lao Huihui nodded. "Yes. To be honest, we were not careful enough when escorting these supplies, and Zuo Liangyu's scouts detected our movements. Just now, I received confirmation that he is already marching here. We intended to load the supplies quickly and withdraw without engaging him."

The captain clicked his tongue softly. At first, he had no intention of saying anything more. However, at that moment, the embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest spoke.

"Ask him why he does not wish to fight Zuo Liangyu."

The captain's spirits immediately lifted.

Dao Xuan Tianzun was present.

He turned back to Lao Huihui and asked, "General, may I ask why you do not wish to fight Zuo Liangyu?"

Lao Huihui replied, "Since I have accepted your provisions, I naturally do not wish to become your enemy."

"Us?" The captain shook his head. "Zuo Liangyu is not on our side."

"Oh?" Lao Huihui frowned. "Are you not aligned with the imperial court?"

The captain laughed softly.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice lowered, sounding calm and deliberate. "Tell him this. He may spare other imperial officers, but Zuo Liangyu is different. Let him fight however he wishes, without restraint."

The captain chuckled again and faithfully relayed Dao Xuan Tianzun's exact words.

Understanding dawned on Lao Huihui's face. "So you gentlemen have a grudge against Zuo Liangyu?"

"With a grudge, perhaps not exactly," the captain replied. "But our supreme leader deeply despises Zuo Liangyu. He is the sort of corrupt warlord who commits every imaginable evil and never performs a single good deed. Such a man is detestable to both heaven and humanity."

That final phrase, "detestable to both heaven and humanity," was an embellishment added by the captain himself.

In his heart, it was no longer merely a description. It was an objective truth.

Dao Xuan Tianzun could not tolerate this man.

Therefore, Zuo Liangyu's wickedness was beyond question.

Lao Huihui laughed knowingly. "I see. If that is the case, things become simple. I have always benefited from your generosity, and as the saying goes, once you take a man's money, you must carry his troubles. Zuo Liangyu will be my repayment for your kindness."

After making his decision, Lao Huihui raised his voice and shouted, "Change of plans. We will no longer avoid Zuo Liangyu. All troops, prepare for battle. Let us give Zuo Liangyu an unforgettable New Year's gift."

The frontier cavalry burst into loud laughter. "As you command," they roared.

They moved with remarkable efficiency, unloading the grain from the wagons at astonishing speed. Each cavalryman secured a pack of supplies onto his horse.

Once the transport convoy from Gao Family Village withdrew, Lao Huihui waved his hand decisively, and the battle began.

Meanwhile, Lu Xiangheng was leading Generals Zu Kuan and Luo Dai as they advanced steadily toward Lu Prefecture. Along the way, he carefully tracked the movements of all allied forces through a constant stream of scouts and messengers.

"Report," a messenger called out. "General Cao Wenzhao has already reached the outskirts of Lu Prefecture ahead of us."

"He Renlong has also arrived."

"Gao Jie is advancing more slowly, but he should arrive within another day."

"Shi Kefa, leading the Anqing army northward, has successfully blocked the rebels' southern escape routes."

Lu Xiangheng was in high spirits. "Excellent. The encirclement is nearly complete. But wait, where is Zuo Liangyu? Where has that man gone now?"

Just hearing Zuo Liangyu's name gave Lu Xiangheng a pounding headache.

Zuo Liangyu always appeared capable, yet whenever a major campaign reached a critical moment, he was nowhere to be found. Was the man truly talented, or was he nothing more than an empty showpiece?

As these thoughts troubled him, a messenger came running over, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath.

"Report," the messenger shouted. "Zuo Liangyu is in serious trouble."

Lu Xiangheng froze.

The messenger explained, "Zuo Liangyu did not advance directly toward Lu Prefecture as ordered. Instead, he diverted to Yanling County and attacked Lao Huihui."

Lu Xiangheng's face darkened with rage. "Outrageous. He dared to disobey orders. Tell me, did he at least wipe out Lao Huihui? If he did, that might barely make up for it."

The messenger hesitated. "Not exactly. Lao Huihui led his cavalry in a retreat into Jia Mountain, with Zuo Liangyu in pursuit. However, the retreat was a feigned defeat. Lao Huihui had already set a trap within Jia Mountain using his Hui frontier cavalry."

Lu Xiangheng let out a hoarse sound from his throat.

"Zuo Liangyu chased them into Jia Mountain," the messenger continued, "and was surrounded on all sides. His forces suffered a crushing defeat. He is now trapped in the valley and managed to send a messenger to break through and request rescue from the Grand Coordinator."

For a long time, Lu Xiangheng was too furious to speak.

Zuo Liangyu's insubordination was already infuriating enough. Falling for a simple rebel ruse and getting himself surrounded was beyond absurd. What kind of useless general could not even handle a group of bandits?

The most unbelievable part was that Zuo Liangyu actually had the nerve to ask Lu Xiangheng for help.

Lu Xiangheng's priority was the relief of Lu Prefecture. He had no time to waste on rescuing Zuo Liangyu.

"Ignore him," Lu Xiangheng said coldly. "Let him save himself. I cannot spare a single soldier for his rescue."

Yet as soon as he spoke, hesitation crept into his heart.

After a long sigh, Lu Xiangheng finally relented. "Zu Kuan," he said, "take your troops and go rescue Zuo Liangyu."

Chapter 997: Zhougong Mountain

Jia Mountain, in an unnamed valley.

Listening to the sounds of battle echoing from all around, Zuo Liangyu felt a deep wave of despair.

He never imagined that someone like him, fierce and renowned, commanding elite troops and numerous capable generals, would actually be driven into such a miserable defeat by a mere rebel force.

What kind of rebels were these?

They understood strategy. Their tactics were ruthless and precise. Feigned retreats, luring the enemy deep, hidden ambushes, layered encirclement. Every step flowed smoothly into the next, as if rehearsed countless times.

Their use of Jia Mountain's terrain was flawless, straight out of a military manual.

How could these people be simple rebels?

They were more disciplined and organized than regular government troops.

From the moment Zuo Liangyu entered the mountains, his forces were relentlessly harassed and pinned down. After days of constant fighting and exhaustion, he still could not break free.

At every valley entrance and ravine mouth, his soldiers desperately searched for an escape route, only to find each one sealed shut. The rebels had laid ambushes along every possible path.

Each time Zuo Liangyu's men tried to force a breakthrough, they paid a heavy price in lives. Officers fell one after another, morale collapsed, and eventually the soldiers clustered together, no longer daring to charge again.

From all directions came deafening shouts. One voice in particular echoed repeatedly through the valley.

"Zuo Liangyu, come out and face your death."

"Zuo Liangyu, you slaughter innocents to claim merit, harm the common people, betray your comrades, hoard troops for your own power, and defy imperial orders. You are more like a bandit than we are. Why don't you just die already?"

"Zuo Liangyu, stop hiding. Come out and let your grandpa chop off your dog head."

Hearing these voices, Zuo Liangyu let out a long sigh.

"There is no way out," he murmured. "So be it. Today, this place will become my grave."

With a sharp motion, he drew the treasured sword from his waist and raised it to his throat.

Just as he was about to press down with force, the shouting outside suddenly stopped.

Zuo Liangyu was startled. His sword froze in midair, no longer pressing against his neck.

An eerie silence filled the valley.

After a long moment, voices suddenly boomed from the mountaintop, resounding in unison.

"Zuo Liangyu, where are you? Commander Zu Kuan has come to rescue you."

Zuo Liangyu was overjoyed. "Zu Kuan. It's Zu Kuan's voice."

His soldiers immediately shouted together, "General Zu, we are here."

Not long after, Zu Kuan's troops entered the valley.

Zuo Liangyu could hardly contain his excitement. "General Zu, how did you get in? Didn't the rebels stop you?"

Zu Kuan replied calmly, "As soon as I arrived, the rebels withdrew."

Zuo Liangyu was completely confused. "Why? They were so fierce when fighting me. But the moment you appeared, they retreated? They did not even fight you?"

Zu Kuan snorted. "Why are you asking me? Who am I supposed to ask? Never mind that. As long as you are alive, that is what matters. Let's move quickly. We must reinforce Luzhou."

Outside Luzhou City.

Luzhou was no ordinary city. It was a famed stronghold with a history spanning a thousand years.

Zhang Liao had once terrified enemies at Xiaoyao Ford here.

Yet now, Luzhou stood at the very center of the storm.

Seventy two rebel factions, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, surrounded the city. Their camps stretched for ten li in every direction, completely encircling Luzhou.

More than ten large cannons were deployed throughout the rebel camps, firing sporadically at the city walls.

Inside the city, both soldiers and civilians trembled as they clung desperately to their defenses, waiting for imperial reinforcements to arrive.

Chuang Wang Gao Yingxiang sat proudly within his main camp, watching as his artillerymen bombarded the city walls.

These artillerymen were not mere vagabonds. They were soldiers who had defected from various garrisons. Even so, their cannon skills were still crude, requiring long pauses between shots to reload.

Despite that, Gao Yingxiang felt deeply satisfied.

How weak the rebel forces had once been.

He remembered his youth, when he followed his elder brother Wang Jiayin to attack Hequ County in Shanxi. Back then, the Shanxi regional commander needed only two cannons to scatter them completely.

Now everything was different.

He commanded more than ten large cannons. He even had his own artillery battalion.

Looking at his army of hundreds of thousands, equipped with arquebusiers, artillery units, and all manner of strange siege devices, Gao Yingxiang felt an overwhelming sense of pride, as though the world itself was already within his grasp.

"Report."

A messenger rushed in. "Cao Wenzhao's Guanning Iron Cavalry is approaching."

Gao Yingxiang frowned. He disliked hearing those two names.

Standing behind him, the Dashing General spoke up. "Which route are they taking?"

The messenger replied, "They are coming from the west and will soon reach Zhougong Mountain."

"Zhougong Mountain?" the Dashing General said thoughtfully. "I remember leaving two brothers there."

"Yes," the messenger confirmed. "You stationed Commanders Meng Hu and Du Hu to guard Zhougong Mountain."

The Dashing General smiled. "Then there is nothing to worry about. Meng Hu and Du Hu have two large cannons, and they occupy the high ground. Even the Guanning Iron Cavalry may not be able to break through Zhougong Mountain."

In the past, rebels would soil themselves at the mere mention of the Guanning Iron Cavalry.

Back when Wang Jiayin proclaimed himself king in Hequ County, it was Cao Wenzhao who led the Guanning Iron Cavalry to breach the city walls.

But times had changed.

Now, hearing that the Guanning Iron Cavalry was coming no longer inspired the same fear.

The Dashing General gave his order. "Increase the pressure on the siege. Meng Hu and Du Hu will hold Cao Wenzhao at Zhougong Mountain."

Zhougong Mountain.

Cao Wenzhao had departed ahead of Gao Jie and Bai Yuan and reached the outskirts of Luzhou earlier. However, the looming presence of Zhougong Mountain forced him to halt his advance.

The rebels on the mountain made no attempt to hide. They openly raised their banners on the mountaintop, displaying two large characters for "Tiger."

When Cao Wenzhao's army reached the western foothills, the rebels neither fled nor concealed themselves. Instead, they sent hundreds of men to the peak, who shouted insults down the slopes.

"Cao Wenzhao, how did you like being showered with arrows last time? You finally healed, and now you are back looking for death."

Cao Wenzhao said calmly, "Those arrows last time were clearly fired by the Dashing General's men, not by you."

His nephew Cao Bianjiao said, "Uncle, is that really the point? They are insulting you on purpose."

"Oh?" Cao Wenzhao replied, genuinely surprised. "Is that what they are trying to do? They cannot even tell who shot me, and they think that will anger someone?"

Cao Bianjiao was left speechless.

The rebels screamed themselves hoarse, but Cao Wenzhao remained unmoved. They had not expected him to miss the point entirely.

"We must reach Luzhou, so this mountain has to be taken," Cao Wenzhao said after studying the map. "If we bypass Zhougong Mountain and go straight to Luzhou, these rebels could strike us from behind while we engage the main rebel army."

Cao Bianjiao nodded. "Uncle, you stay here. I will lead the assault."

Cao Bianjiao was a fierce general in his own right. He gathered his troops and prepared to charge up the mountain.

At that moment, the rebels on the mountaintop burst into loud laughter.

They rolled out two large cannons.

Along the slopes, numerous arquebusiers appeared, wielding a chaotic mix of firearms such as bird guns and Three Eyed Arquebuses. At the same time, large groups of rebels set up repeating crossbows in ambush positions.

Cao Bianjiao froze in place.

"Come on, come and get us," the rebels jeered, laughing wildly. "Before, you were the ones blasting us with cannons. But now things are different. Go on, if you dare, come and take us."

Cao Wenzhao frowned deeply. "These rebels," he muttered, "are becoming harder and harder to deal with."

Chapter 998: Cannot Afford the Loss

"This mountain cannot be attacked recklessly," Cao Wenzhao said, calling his nephew back. He stood before Zhougong Mountain, eyes fixed on the slopes as he weighed their options.

The mountain bristled with defenses. Two cannons sat on the heights, supported by arquebusiers and repeating crossbows layered across the terrain. If they had possessed overwhelming numbers, a frontal assault might have been possible. But the reality was the opposite. The bandits on the mountain outnumbered the Guanning Iron Cavalry by a wide margin.

Without numerical superiority, and with the enemy holding such commanding ground, even the famed Guanning Iron Cavalry would suffer horrific losses in a direct attack.

His force of three thousand had already taken heavy casualties in previous battles. They now numbered fewer than two thousand five hundred.

To throw them into another brutal assault like this would be devastating.

Frankly speaking, he could no longer afford such losses.

"What about a night raid?" Cao Bianjiao suggested.

"They will be prepared," Cao Wenzhao replied immediately. "They have far more men than we do. They will rotate their watches through the night. There will be no opening."

Cao Bianjiao fell silent.

This was a deadlock.

That very night, Cao Bianjiao personally crept to the foot of the mountain and looked upward. Sure enough, torches flickered along the slopes as patrols moved methodically back and forth.

Forget sneaking to the summit. They would be discovered before even reaching the halfway point.

Uncle and nephew were completely out of options.

Early the next morning, Cao Bianjiao stood outside the camp with dark circles under his eyes, staring bleakly at Zhougong Mountain.

"Uncle," he sighed, "we can only wait for Lu Xiangheng to arrive. He has more troops and heavy cannons. We can bombard the summit first, then overwhelm them with numbers."

Cao Wenzhao nodded slowly.

At that moment, a scout hurried over. "General, Gao Jie has arrived."

Cao Wenzhao waved it off. "Gao Jie's arrival changes nothing. He has no way to take Zhougong Mountain."

The scout hesitated, then clarified, "Gao Jie did not bring his own main forces. He brought Mister Bai Yuan's militia."

"What?" Cao Wenzhao exclaimed.

That was completely unexpected.

He turned around and saw a large force approaching the outskirts of his camp.

At the front rode Gao Jie, accompanied by only a small group of personal guards.

Behind him marched the Gao Family Village Militia.

Cao Wenzhao knew this force well. He remembered clearly that when he and his nephew had been gravely wounded by the Dashing General and nearly killed, it was this very militia that had rescued them.

He also had a clear understanding of their combat strength.

Delighted, Cao Wenzhao hurried forward to greet them.

"Mister Bai, you are here as well."

"I heard General Cao ran into some trouble," Bai Yuan said.

Cao Wenzhao nodded and gestured toward Zhougong Mountain. "The bandits have mounted two cannons on the summit," he explained. "They also have arquebusiers and crossbow units everywhere. Any assault would come at an unbearable cost."

Bai Yuan smiled. "Then leave it to us."

Cao Wenzhao frowned. "Your troops are all arquebusiers. Attacking a mountain like this is not ideal. The enemy can hide behind rocks, immune to your fire, while shooting down at you from above."

Gao Jie suddenly laughed. "General Cao, don't worry. Mister Bai has artillery."

Cao Wenzhao froze.

A massive question mark seemed to appear over his head.

On Zhougong Mountain, the bandits had already noticed the movements below. Government troops were shifting formations, large numbers gathering at the mountain's base in orderly ranks.

Bandit scouts rushed to report to Meng Hu and Du Hu.

The two tiger commanders hurried to the edge of the slope and peered down.

Their eyes immediately locked onto Bai Yuan, standing out unmistakably in his white robes.

His dramatic bearing and carefully cultivated, slightly unkempt beard made him impossible to miss.

"Hey, isn't that the guy we ran into in Luoyang?" Meng Hu shouted. "What was his name again? Bai... Bai something."

"Brother," Du Hu said, "his name is Bai Yuan."

"That's it," Meng Hu roared. "The one who ruined our grand plunder in Luoyang. Hah. I never thought he would show up again. Last time he was defending Luoyang. This time, we are defending Zhougong Mountain. Perfect. Today we settle the score."

Meng Hu arranged fifty taunters, who lined up and shouted down the mountain in unison.

"Bai Yuan. We know you. Last time you had the high ground. This time, we do. You will not leave this place alive."

Bai Yuan calmly raised a metal megaphone and shouted back, "Your words are quite rude. I, however, am a man of culture. Among the six arts of a gentleman, I place great importance on rites."

Meng Hu burst into laughter. "What does politeness have to do with war?"

"As the saying goes, civility comes before force," Bai Yuan replied. "I will give you one last chance. Lay down your weapons and come down the mountain to surrender. It will count as voluntary surrender, and your term of labor reform can be reduced by forty percent. Miss this chance, and it will not be offered again."

"Hahahaha," Meng Hu mocked. "What nonsense are you babbling?"

Bai Yuan shook his head. "Since civility has failed, then we proceed with force."

He raised his hand. "Launch the reconnaissance hot air balloon."

The bandits stared in disbelief as, at the distant foot of the mountain, a massive object began to swell. It gradually rounded out, rising into the air with a large basket suspended beneath it, a man seated inside.

"What in the world is that?" the bandits muttered.

The hot air balloon ascended steadily, soon rising above the bandit positions. The rebels were not stationed at the highest peak of Zhougong Mountain, but rather on a lower ridge along its slope.

The balloon climbed higher still, reaching a position far above them, looking down from the sky.

The mountain fell silent.

Inside the basket, the observer raised a spyglass and surveyed the entire mountain, left to right, front to back. After finishing, he set the spyglass aside, took out paper and brush, and carefully sketched the bandits' deployments, defensive works, and all critical positions.

When he was done, he rolled the paper into a bamboo tube, tied it to a rope hanging from the basket, and released it.

The tube slid swiftly down and landed on the ground below.

Bai Yuan picked it up, unfolded the map, and smiled faintly. "Interesting."

Cao Wenzhao, Cao Bianjiao, and Gao Jie all gathered around him.

"Let us see," they urged.

Bai Yuan spread the map out for them. "The two cannons are here. Along the slope, here, here, and here, large numbers of arquebusiers are lying in ambush. The repeating crossbows are positioned here."

Gao Jie leaned closer, eyes wide. "Incredible. To see the enemy's entire deployment so clearly before the battle even begins."

Cao Wenzhao was less shocked. Bai Yuan had lent him a hot air balloon before, so he already knew its value. He studied the map carefully, silently calculating their next move.

Bai Yuan straightened and gave his order.

"The enemy's key positions are now fully exposed. Artillery battalion, move out. Reduce their makeshift defenses to rubble."

Chapter 999: Not a Single Blow

Meng Hu quickly noticed something new happening at the foot of the mountain.

Eight bizarre machines rolled out from the government camp below. Each one was wrapped in heavy armor, squat and ugly, crawling forward like steel beasts. When they reached the base of Zhougong Mountain, the machines stopped in perfect unison. With a series of mechanical clanks, they pivoted as one, swinging the eight massive cannons mounted at their rears until every muzzle pointed straight at the mountain.

Meng Hu stared, stunned. "What in the hell is that thing? And how is it even moving?"

Du Hu shook his head slowly. "No idea."

Meng Hu turned to him in disbelief. "Brother, you're the smart one. Every strange thing I don't understand, you explain it to me. And now even you don't know? Then we're really done for."

Du Hu spread his hands helplessly. "I may not know what those things are, but I do know this. They're set up far too far away. Way too far. And they're down at the foot of the mountain, shooting upward. Their cannonballs can't possibly reach us."

Meng Hu's eyes lit up. "They can't reach? Damn. I was hoping to order our cannons to blast them to pieces."

"No point," Du Hu said firmly. "They're out of range. Don't waste the ammunition."

The rebel artillerymen had already come to the same conclusion. The moment they saw the cannons being deployed, they began judging the distance by eye, using trees, ridges, and familiar landmarks. No matter how they measured it, the result was the same.

Too far.

Even firing downhill from their elevated position, their own cannons would struggle to reach that distance. Shooting uphill from below should have been outright impossible.

The rebels burst into mocking laughter.

"Firing cannons from that far away?"

"Are the government troops insane?"

"It's like trying to hit the moon with a rock!"

Yet the unease was not limited to the bandits.

Even Cao Wenzhao, Cao Bianjiao, and Gao Jie felt their brows tighten as they watched.

From that distance, it really did look impossible.

So why were the Xiaolangdi militia adjusting their cannons so seriously, so carefully, as if every degree and fraction of a degree mattered?

Everyone was confused.

Everyone except the artillerymen.

For the artillerymen of Gao Family Village, moments like this were rare. Truly rare. Maybe once in a lifetime. Every time the cannons were deployed, it felt like a festival. Like New Year's Day had arrived early, complete with fireworks.

Their excitement was impossible to contain.

"Brothers, time to work!"

"Hahaha, it's finally my turn to shine again!"

"I've trained for a whole year for this moment!"

"Raise the muzzle ten degrees. No, no, too much. Lower it one degree."

"Load ammunition!"

"Prepare to fire!"

"Fire!"

BOOM!

The first cannon roared.

The shell shot skyward in a long, arcing trajectory, screaming toward the distant summit where the rebel artillery was positioned.

Every eye followed it.

Then the shell outran sight itself, leaving only a faint streak in the sky.

CRASH!

The explosion erupted roughly thirty meters from the rebel artillery camp. The shell detonated violently, spraying fragments in all directions.

Trees shuddered as shards tore into trunks and branches, filling the mountaintop with a chaotic chorus of cracking wood and flying debris.

The rebels froze.

Although it missed, there was no denying it.

The shell had reached the mountaintop.

Silence followed, heavy and stunned.

"What kind of demonic cannon is that?"

"How can it shoot that far?"

"And the shell exploded into fragments!"

"That's impossible!"

Of course, none of them understood rifled artillery, or why it vastly outperformed their crude smoothbore cannons. They only knew what they saw.

And what they saw terrified them.

The rebel artillerymen suddenly realized the truth. One shot missing meant nothing. Two shots meant nothing. Three, four, five. Eventually, one of those shells would land right on top of them.

Panic spread through the battery.

Below, the Gao Family Village artillerymen were already making adjustments.

"Traverse half a degree to the left. Elevate half a degree."

"Ready."

"Fire!"

**BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**

The remaining seven cannons fired almost simultaneously.

Shells streaked toward the mountaintop like falling stars.

The rebel artillerymen did not hesitate. They threw themselves flat onto the ground.

Explosions thundered across the summit. Shrapnel shells burst in rapid succession, tearing through the rebel ranks. Screams rang out as soldiers were cut down, blood splashing across rocks and earth.

"Still a little off," one artilleryman muttered cheerfully. "Didn't hit their guns directly."

"Fine tune again."

"Half a degree more to the left. Half a degree higher."

The Gao Family Village artillerymen were grinning ear to ear. They looked like children who had finally been allowed, after endless begging, to spend the whole night gaming at an internet café.

All the eagerness they had bottled up for a year poured out with every adjustment, every shot.

Morale +32%

Reload Speed +32%

Accuracy +32%

"Fire!"

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

The cannons roared again.

This time, fate was not kind to the rebels.

One shell landed squarely between two rebel cannons.

The explosion swallowed the position in fire and black smoke.

"Direct hit!"

Cheers erupted from the artillery line.

"We wiped out their artillery!"

Bai Yuan did not waste a single breath. He chopped his hand forward. "Advance."

The Gao Family Village Militia moved immediately.

With the rebel cannons destroyed, only arquebuses and repeating crossbows remained. But every one of those positions had already been mapped in detail by the reconnaissance hot air balloon.

From the day they were founded, the Gao Family Village Militia had trained in indirect fire. They knew the effective ranges of arquebuses and bows better than they knew their own hands.

They advanced with precision, stopping exactly at the distance where enemy fire could not reach them.

Then a voice rang out.

"Second Battalion Commander, bring out the small grenade mortars!"

Dozens of soldiers stepped forward, each carrying a thick, arm sized tube. With a heavy thud, they dropped to one knee and planted the small mortars firmly into the ground.

"Enemy arquebus squad hiding on the slope to the right, behind the crooked neck tree."

"Crossbowmen behind the big rock on the left."

"Adjust the angle."

One artilleryman surnamed Li raised his thumb, squinting as he measured the distance against the outline of a rock. Satisfied, he loaded a grenade into the tube with complete confidence.

"Fire!"

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Grenades arced into the air.

A moment later, the targeted positions exploded into violent, blooming fireballs.

Rebel soldiers screamed as they were blasted out of cover, bodies tumbling down the slopes like broken dolls.

At the summit, Meng Hu and Du Hu stood frozen.

Only now did they fully understand the horror of the situation.

Their cannons had not fired.

Their arquebuses had not fired.

Their repeating crossbows had not fired.

They had not landed a single blow.

Bai Yuan turned to Cao Wenzhao and spread his hands calmly. "General Cao, the enemy's key defensive positions are already broken. However, our troops are not trained for close combat. Charging up the mountain and fighting blade to blade is not our strength. The rest is up to you."

Cao Wenzhao threw his head back and laughed loudly. "Hahaha. From here on, leave it to the Guanning Iron Cavalry."

He looked at Cao Bianjiao.

Without a word, Cao Bianjiao drew his long spear. He let out a furious roar and charged uphill, leading the way. More than two thousand Guanning Iron Cavalry surged after him like a steel tide.

With their defenses shattered, the rebel arquebusiers and crossbowmen could only fire scattered, ineffective shots. Shields rose, arrows bounced away, and the Iron Cavalry stormed up the slope without slowing.

What followed was pure slaughter.

In close combat, the Guanning Iron Cavalry could crush an enemy ten times their number.

Within moments, the rebels broke. They fled in chaos, screaming and scrambling down the mountainside, utterly incapable of holding Zhougong Mountain.

Chapter 1000: The Battle of Luzhou

Meng Hu and Du Hu, the two brothers, were completely routed.

Leading what remained of their troops, they fled in panic down the opposite slope, scrambling away from Zhougong Mountain and retreating toward the main rebel army that was still besieging Luzhou.

On the other side, Cao Bianjiao returned victorious. As he looked at the Gao Family Village Militia, admiration surged uncontrollably in his chest.

This was terrifying.

This level of combat strength could no longer be called a militia. Even the Divine Engine Battalion, famed throughout the empire, was inferior by comparison.

He only thought this in his heart, but Gao Jie had no such restraint and blurted it out directly.

"Mr. Bai, this militia of yours is far too strong. Good heavens. Storming a mountain peak packed with cannons and making it look effortless."

Bai Yuan laughed. "Nothing special, really. Just about the third best in the world."

Cao Wenzhao raised an eyebrow. "That line sounds familiar."

Bai Yuan grinned. "Dao Xuan Tianzun said it. I picked it up from him. I don't know why, but saying it feels incredibly refreshing."

A strange silence descended.

No one dared say it out loud, but everyone thought the same thing.

Dao Xuan Tianzun is corrupting public morals.

Gao Jie continued, "Mr. Bai, is it because Dao Xuan Tianzun favors you that he assigned such a powerful militia to your command?"

Bai Yuan puffed out his chest slightly. "Naturally. I am well versed in the Six Arts of a Gentleman, and I am, without question, a gentleman myself. Dao Xuan Tianzun recognized my refined character and therefore bestowed his exceptional favor upon me."

Silence again.

For some inexplicable reason, every single person present felt an overwhelming urge to punch him.

Cao Bianjiao could not stand it anymore. "Enough nonsense. Move faster. Luzhou is still waiting to be saved. Does anyone here understand how urgent this is?"

At the same time, inside Luzhou City.

The rebel cannons finally smashed a massive breach into the city wall.

Dust filled the air as bricks collapsed inward. Rebel soldiers erupted in cheers.

"The wall is down!"

"The wall is down!"

Li Zicheng, the Dashing General, shouted loudly, "Prepare to storm the city through the breach!"

The Chuang King, Gao Yingxiang, did not issue a single command.

In truth, his leadership abilities had never been outstanding. As time passed, he spoke less and less during major decisions, his presence gradually fading into the background.

Li Zicheng, on the other hand, had grown increasingly prominent. Everyone acknowledged his rising authority on the battlefield.

Whenever a battle erupted, Li Zicheng naturally stepped forward to direct the fighting, while the Chuang King remained behind the lines like a decorative banner, serving mainly to boost morale.

Even so, Gao Yingxiang noticed nothing amiss. In his heart, he still believed himself invincible, convinced that the world already lay within his grasp.

Once he became emperor, he would return home in splendor, ennobling his relatives from Gao Family Village, making them marquises and ministers.

As he indulged in these pleasant daydreams, a thunder of panicked voices suddenly rose from the west.

Then Meng Hu and Du Hu appeared, leading their shattered remnants in desperate retreat. As they ran, they shouted at the top of their lungs.

"Cao Wenzhao is here!"

"And he brought an incredibly powerful, strange firearm unit with him!"

The entire rebel camp was shaken.

Cao Wenzhao.

That name alone stirred old hatred and fresh resentment in countless hearts.

Only Li Zicheng remained unmoved by the name itself. His focus locked onto the words "strange firearm unit."

He rushed forward and grabbed Meng Hu by the arm. "What did you say? A strange firearm unit?"

Meng Hu gasped for breath. "Yes. They're terrifying. They start firing from extremely far away, and their shots are fast and accurate. We didn't even get the chance to fight before we were defeated. Their commander's name was something Bai..."

Du Hu immediately added, "Bai Yuan."

"That's it," Meng Hu shouted. "Bai Yuan from Luoyang."

Li Zicheng's heart sank.

This is bad.

That firearm unit again.

He knew this unit well. It could not be confronted head on. It had to be dealt with through strategy.

But there was no time.

Should they retreat?

Just as he was considering withdrawal, Meng Hu added another piece of information.

"That strange firearm unit is following Gao... Gao what was his name?"

"Gao Jie," Du Hu said.

"Yes," Meng Hu confirmed. "Gao Jie is leading them."

The instant Li Zicheng heard Gao Jie's name, his eyes turned blood red.

The hatred of a slain father.

The humiliation of a stolen wife.

It was unbearable.

Only moments ago, he had been thinking about avoiding their edge and regrouping later. Now, rage completely overwhelmed his reason.

"Forget Luzhou," Li Zicheng roared. "Turn the entire army around. Prepare to meet Gao Jie. Whoever kills Gao Jie will be rewarded with one hundred catties of gold."

Who could resist such a reward?

In an age where most people struggled just to eat, even a scholar would throw down his brush and pick up a blade for that kind of bounty.

The rebel army erupted in thunderous cheers.

The massive force that had been besieging Luzhou instantly turned westward.

Li Zicheng was so impatient that he refused to wait for Gao Jie to come to him. He personally led the Old Eighth Squad, charging toward the approaching enemy.

Every moment of waiting felt like torture.

Fortunately for him, the Gao Family Village forces advanced quickly. He did not have to wait long.

Soon, the combined army of the Gao Family Village Militia and the Guanning Iron Cavalry appeared on the western plains.

The two sides were still several li apart, barely visible to the naked eye, yet Li Zicheng was already boiling with impatience.

"Who will bring me Gao Jie's head?" he roared.

Mantianxing stepped forward. "I'll engage them first."

"I'll go too," Waguanzi shouted.

The two men howled as they led their troops charging forward.

Such a reckless assault was no different from presenting live targets to the Gao Family Village Militia.

A dense volley of flintlock fire erupted.

In an instant, the armies of Mantianxing and Waguanzi collapsed, scattering and fleeing to the edges of the battlefield.

"Cannons," Li Zicheng roared. "Bring the cannons forward."

By now, the rebels possessed more than a dozen cannons, freshly used to breach Luzhou's walls. They hurriedly attempted to reposition them, preparing for a cannon duel.

But cannons were not so easily moved.

Men and horses strained desperately, yet the adjustments dragged on endlessly.

At that moment, war drums thundered from the north.

He Renlong charged out, leading the Qin army.

He Renlong was a complete madman. He never directed battles. Instead, he charged at the very front alone, spear in hand, leaving his troops scrambling to follow behind him.

His fighting style was utterly reckless. The fact that he was still alive was nothing short of a miracle.

The sudden attack startled the rebels.

Li Zicheng frowned. "Who will stop that madman He?"

He asked, but no one stepped forward.

The reason was simple.

Gao Jie was worth one hundred catties of gold.

What was He Renlong worth?

Anyone who volunteered to block He Renlong would be giving up their chance at that reward.

Only an idiot would do that.

The idiots glanced at one another, eyes shifting, all waiting for someone else to move.

No one did.

The battlefield shifted in an instant.

Seizing the opening, He Renlong tore into the rebel army's northern flank. Spear flashing, he killed without restraint, sending the outer rebel forces into screaming chaos.

After a long while, someone finally sighed and stepped forward.

Cao Cao said reluctantly, "Fine. I'll go."

Leading his troops north, Cao Cao moved to intercept. He commanded many soldiers and capable subordinates and was a formidable bandit leader in his own right.

His intervention finally halted He Renlong's rampage.

Fierce fighting erupted in the north. For the moment, neither side could gain the upper hand.