

Great Ming 441

Chapter 441 This Grudge Must Be Avenged

Liang Shixian, scholar of ten thousand scrolls and survivor of ten thousand bureaucrats, immediately entered full analytical mode.

In his mind, the Tianzun decree, the Saintess's motives, Gao Family Village's politics, and the entire web of human nature branched and coiled like a living map of the cosmos—each path spiraling toward a single conclusion.

Then, with an almost audible click, his thoughts locked in place.

Ah. Tianzun would never meddle in mortal intrigue. Therefore...

It must be the Saintess's fabrication! She must have invoked divine authority to secure military placements for her childhood companions—those earnest young men of Gao Family Village—to help them earn merit and, one day, official titles.

Yes. That was the only logical explanation.

Liang Shixian sighed through his nose, a bureaucrat's sigh that contained both pity and resignation.

He had served too long in the Ming administration to be shocked. The empire was a vast stage of whispering factions, self-promotion, and moral theater. Saints and sinners differed only in presentation.

He had once believed Gao Family Village to be a sanctuary from such games. But now... alas. Human nature was a beast that prowled everywhere, even beneath divine banners.

He looked at Gao Yiye—earnest, luminous, and entirely sincere—and decided not to expose her "fabrication."

So what if she's arranging positions for friends? That's practically a filial duty in officialdom.

He even chuckled inwardly. If the Tianzun truly favors her, she's untouchable anyway. When I burn incense, I'll quietly inform Him. But this is a small matter. Even the gods must have their favorites. If Heaven had no bias, how else did all those odd spirits in Journey to the West receive promotions?

Satisfied with this world-weary logic, he composed himself and returned to his yamen, waiting.

That evening, a courier thundered into Chengcheng County on horseback. Dust swirled as he dismounted and bowed.

"I come on behalf of the Shaanxi Grand General, Wang Cheng'en. We humbly request a loan of grain."

Liang Shixian's expression barely flickered. "Ah, of course. General Wang is a loyal commander. We are always glad to assist. However—" he smiled with practiced subtlety—"there are a few promising young men here who wish to serve under him, to gain real battle experience. I wonder if General Wang might be... accommodating?"

The envoy didn't even blink. "No problem!"

He knew the unspoken rules. In exchange for food, one must leave a few empty chairs for the lender's men. Otherwise, who would lend anything?

"Excellent," Liang said, rising with the serene dignity of a man who had just performed a moral transaction. "We'll organize the delivery to Han City immediately. Tell General Wang to await our grain."

The envoy thanked him profusely and galloped off, dust trailing like a comet.

Meanwhile, in Gao Family Village's hidden barracks, two masked men sat across from one another in flickering lamplight.

Cheng Xu spoke first. "Tianzun order is clear. We must plant our own within Wang Cheng'en's army—men loyal to us, who can turn the Shaanxi General into one of our own from within."

He gestured to his mask. "I can't go. And you, Wang Er, aren't exactly suited either."

Wang Er shrugged. "Agreed. I'm too recognizable."

Cheng Xu exhaled. "So far, I've only chosen Shi Jian. Do you have anyone else in mind? They must be brave, incorruptible, sharp-tongued, and capable of inspiring soldiers with the Tiqzun doctrine."

Wang Er smirked. "A riot of colors isn't always beautiful. I do have one man—Bai Mao. He's unbreakable. No bribe could sway him."

Cheng Xu tilted his head. "Wasn't he once a rebel? Won't the authorities have him on record?"

Wang Er waved it off. "Not at all. He was always a small fish. No name, no fame, no wanted posters. Now that he's with us, no one would connect him to any rebel band. He's just another honest salt-worker turned soldier."

Cheng Xu nodded. "Good. Then it's decided—Shi Jian and Bai Mao. By the way, what's Bai Mao's real name?"

Wang Er coughed lightly. "...Wang Xiaohua."

Cheng Xu promptly choked on his tea. "What? That's adorable! Who names a battle-hardened man 'Little Flower'?"

Wang Er spread his hands. "He's suffered for it all his life. But names are a parent's decision—you can't exactly file a complaint with Heaven."

Up above, Li Daoxuan—eavesdropping as usual—nearly dropped his celestial teacup. Wang Xiaohua? Merciful heavens! Thank the stars my parents weren't poets.

Far away, in Hequ County—the so-called "Prince's Mansion" of the self-styled Heaven-Defying One-Character King, Wang Jiayin—the evening was taking a different turn.

Wang Jiayin lounged on a couch, half-drunk and smug, his arm draped around his wife, Zhang Shi.

Zhang Shi was the sister of Zhang Liwei—the very man who had once tried to kill Wang Er.

She had been forced into this marriage six months ago, when Wang Jiayin's army conquered her hometown of Yaomao. Her father, Zhang Maoxiu, had offered her to save their clan. Their estates, servants, and treasury had all been "patriotically donated" to Wang Jiayin's cause.

Zhang Shi had endured the humiliation in silence, trading her freedom for her family's survival. Her brother pretended loyalty; her father bent the knee.

Wang Jiayin, drunk on power and delusion, believed his wife adored him.

"My dear queen," he said, grinning. "I have proclaimed myself king. Soon, when I overthrow that pitiful Zhu Youjian and take the throne, you shall be Empress."

Zhang Shi smiled stiffly. "Your Majesty flatters me beyond measure."

He puffed his chest. "I now command three hundred and fifty thousand troops!"

Just as his ego reached critical mass, a servant rushed in. "Your Majesty! Bu Zhan Ni requests an audience!"

Wang Jiayin frowned, then straightened. Bu Zhan Ni was one of the most formidable rebel generals in the region. He couldn't afford to offend him. "Let him in."

Moments later, Bu Zhan Ni strode into the chamber, exchanging perfunctory greetings before cutting to the point.

"Your Majesty, I come seeking judgment."

"What's wrong?" Wang Jiayin asked, frowning.

Bu Zhan Ni's face hardened. "That cursed salt smuggler, Xing Honglang, killed my Fifth Company Commander, Old Zhang Fei. She's entrenched at Gudu Ferry—armed with ships, cannons, and an ironclad fortress. I cannot let this stand. I ask Your Majesty to lend me several more companies. This grudge must be avenged."

The hall fell silent.

Wang Jiayin leaned back slowly, tapping his cup against the armrest.

"Xing Honglang..." he murmured. "A salt dealer who kills generals? Interesting."

A dangerous smile crept across his face. "Very well. Let's discuss vengeance."

Chapter 442 Infiltrating the System

Wang Jiayin blinked. "A salt smuggler," he repeated slowly, letting the words hang in the air. "With her own navy, artillery, firearms, and a fortress to boot? That's not audacious, that's a full-blown career choice."

Bu Zhan Ni spat on the ground, fuming. "Audacious doesn't even cover it! Where does she get the nerve? Playing house with a private army right under the Emperor's nose—is she trying to get erased from the census? She even had the gall to attack my men!"

Wang Jiayin stroked his chin, putting on his best "thoughtful leader" face for a solid three seconds. "Brother Bu," he said, his tone placating. "Let's not run headfirst into a stone wall. Give me a moment to... strategically ponder this. You'll have my answer soon."

Bu Zhan Ni offered a salute that was more insult than respect and stormed out.

Well, that was dramatic, Wang Jiayin mused the second the door shut. Do I look like I run a revenge-for-hire service? Bu Zhan Ni's thugs get themselves killed, and I'm supposed to waste my actual soldiers

avenging them? Please. My underlings bicker like children over the last dumpling every other Tuesday. Not my circus, not my clowns.

He leaned back, a new thought taking shape. But this salt smuggler, Xing Honglang... now she's a different story. Fortresses, cannons, boats... that's not petty crime, that's entrepreneurship. She's built a whole anti-government franchise.

A slow smile spread across his face. The enemy of my enemy isn't just a friend—it's a potential business partner. And frankly, a smuggler with an arsenal was a far more attractive acquisition than a hot-headed lout like Bu Zhan Ni.

Decision made. He summoned a trusted aide. "Take a scenic trip south along the river," he instructed. "Find this 'Lady Fortress' at Gudu Ferry. Let's see if she's interested in a more ambitious... merger."

In Han City, Li Daoxuan slurped a bowl of liangpi, his eyes tracking the Gao Family Village grain convoy like a hawk. Riding alongside the precious cargo were two men: Shi Jian and Bai Mao.

Shi Jian elbowed his companion, a grin splitting his face. "Hey, Wang Xiaohua!"

Bai Mao's eye twitched. "We agreed. In the field, it's Bai Mao. The scary bandit alias. Use it."

"Can't do it," Shi Jian singsonged, thoroughly enjoying himself. "We're about to waltz into a military camp. What if someone hears 'White Hair' and gets the wrong idea? Better to use your sweet, innocent, government-registered name." He leaned in. "Wang Xiaohua."

Bai Mao looked heavenward, as if asking for patience. "Could you not use it unless it's a life-or-death situation?"

"Absolutely not," Shi Jian cackled. "Wang Xiaohua! It's just too good. It sounds like the girl next door who sells flowers, not a man who can disarm three bandits before breakfast. Hilarious."

Bai Mao was pretty sure a vein in his forehead was about to achieve sentience and strangle Shi Jian itself.

Their bickering was cut short as the city gates swung open. Out marched General Wang Cheng'en himself, a man whose very posture screamed "military burden."

The General's stern gaze swept over the grain carts, and his expression did a miraculous 180 into pure, unadulterated relief. "Chengcheng County has this general's deepest gratitude," he boomed, the very picture of noble appreciation. "This kindness will be etched in my memory."

An aide coughed discreetly, nodding toward Shi Jian and Bai Mao. Wang Cheng'en's smile tightened imperceptibly. Ah. The obligatory 'gifts.' Every county magistrate felt the need to dump a few useless relatives or hangers-on into his ranks to pad their own records. It was a bureaucratic ritual as unavoidable as dust.

He turned to the pair, his tone shifting to brusque efficiency. "You'll serve in my army. I have no lofty posts free, but I can start you both as Centurions. Acceptable?"

A "Centurion" here was a title in search of a century. They'd have the rank, the pay (theoretically), and exactly zero soldiers to command. A classic empty-title promotion.

Shi Jian and Bai Mao, forewarned and forearmed, bowed in perfect unison. "We are honored, General," Shi Jian said, face the picture of earnest duty. "We will strive to be worthy."

And with that, they were in. Officially, if not effectively.

They collected their tags, found their assigned tent, and were cheerfully making their way toward it when a human wall of muscle and menace blocked their path.

The man looked like he chewed nails for breakfast and spit out rust. "The name's Ma," he growled, his voice like gravel. "Men call me Centurion Ma. Let's get one thing straight: I carved my way to this rank. I don't like backdoor climbers, and I really don't like pretty boys who think a title is a free pass to strut. Stay out of my way. Clear?"

Shi Jian and Bai Mao didn't even flinch. They just shared a look that said, Right on schedule.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had predicted this exact scenario. Their mission wasn't to fight the system; it was to buy it a drink and become its best friend. And the universal language of friendship, as always, was cold, hard cash.

Shi Jian stepped forward, his smile wide and utterly disarming. "Brother Ma! Your reputation precedes you! A man of true grit and skill—how could we ever dream of strutting? We're just humble newcomers, utterly in awe."

As he spoke, his hand found Ma's in a practiced motion, depositing a solid silver ingot that felt like five taels of pure, weighty persuasion.

Centurion Ma's bluster evaporated mid-snarl. He stared at his palm, then at Shi Jian, his fierce scowl melting into bewildered confusion. "I... uh... that is... brothers, my words just now... pay no mind to this old fool's rambling!" he stammered, the ingot working faster than any diplomacy. "From today, you need anything, you come to Old Ma!"

On cue, Bai Mao glided over to another glaring officer and performed the same silver-plated handshake. "Brother," he said amiably, "to celebrate our arrival, how about a feast tonight? Our treat. Meat for everyone."

A soldier nearby piped up, "But camp rules—no alcohol!"

Bai Mao waved a dismissive hand. "Details! We'll drink tea. The important part is the mountain of meat."

Meat.

The word rippled through the crowd of underfed soldiers like a physical wave. Eyes that had been dull with hunger suddenly gained a sharp, focused glint.

Shi Jian bowed slightly to the growing crowd. "Brothers, from today, as long as we're here, no one goes to bed hungry! Tonight, we raid the best restaurant in Han City!"

"But the restaurants are all closed! No grain!" someone shouted.

"Then we bring our own grain and pay the chef!" Bai Mao declared, as if it were the simplest solution in the world. "Problem solved!"

A roar of approval went up. The two new "nepotism hires" were suddenly looking less like dead weight and more like personal patron saints.

As the soldiers cheered, Shi Jian and Bai Mao shared another glance, a smirk playing on their lips. Phase one: complete. With Dao Xuan Tianzun's infinite resources funding their goodwill tour, winning over an underpaid, underfed army was turning out to be the easiest infiltration job ever. All it took was being the guys who brought the buffet.

Trivia :

Could you really join the army through nepotism in the late Ming?

Answer: Absolutely, and it was often the only way a sane person would want in. By the late Ming, the hereditary military household (junhu) system was in total collapse. Being a registered soldier was a miserable, debt-ridden hereditary curse—more like a state-owned serf than a profession. However, in semi-private, semi-mercenary armies led by generals like the fictional Wang Cheng'en (modeled on real figures like Wu Sangui or Zuo Liangyu), things worked differently.

So, what was the benefit of being a soldier in the late Ming?

For the common rank-and-file, the benefits were... not dying immediately, and the slim chance of plunder. Pay was erratic, often withheld for years, and rations were scarce. Soldiers frequently had to farm or take side jobs to survive, making them part-time farmers, part-time bandits, and occasionally part-time soldiers. Their loyalty was not to the Emperor or the state, but to their immediate commander who fed them (or failed to). This is why Shi Jian and Bai Mao's strategy of "meat and silver" is so devastatingly effective—they are addressing the core, chronic vulnerabilities of the late Ming military.

Chapter 443 The Workers Outside

Gudu Ferry.

Zhao Sheng, accompanied by a large group of workers, was drawing lines on the ground.

They meticulously arranged pebbles into long, neat rows, roughly outlining the shape of the future district.

As he marked the lines, Zhao Sheng glanced at the Heavenly Lord's construction blueprint in his hand and announced loudly, "Here, we'll build a town office. The future town chief managing this town will work here."

The workers quickly marked the center of the pebble-outlined area, indicating the building's location.

"This area will become shops... where merchants can buy and sell goods."

"And here, residences will be built..."

Zhao Sheng spoke as he walked, but soon began to gasp for breath, his words broken by wheezing.

A young man from Qingjian County ran over with a large bowl of fragrant yet bitter herbal medicine. "Sir, your asthma-relieving decoction is ready."

Zhao Sheng took the bowl and drank a mouthful, his face contorting from the bitterness.

When he rested, work stalled as everyone waited for his instructions, severely hampering efficiency.

Just as he grew anxious, two elderly farmers rushed over carrying a bamboo sedan chair. With cheerful smiles, they said, "Master Zhao, please ride in this. We'll carry you so you won't get tired."

Zhao Sheng protested, "Oh? How could I trouble you like this?"

The two farmers insisted, "You're our great benefactor. We don't know how else to repay you, so please let us do this small service."

Faced with such sincerity, Zhao Sheng could no longer refuse. He meekly climbed onto the sedan chair. The difference was immediate—carried swiftly by the two farmers, he could now reach any construction site easily.

He hurried from one site to another. Naturally impatient and previously hindered by asthma, Zhao Sheng now felt his efficiency multiply. Soon, his presence was felt everywhere throughout the ferry construction site...

"Oh, right," Zhao Sheng turned to ask two young monks, "I heard yesterday the cement factory was short of limestone. Has that been resolved?"

Eager to prove themselves, the young monks quickly replied, "Sun Genping from Sunjia Village led over a hundred people and found limestone near a small hill two li north. They're organizing transport to bring the stones back today."

Zhao Sheng smiled. "Good."

No sooner had he spoken than shouts erupted from outside the camp. The limestone-digging workers came fleeing back in panic, having apparently abandoned their handcarts.

Zhao Sheng blinked in surprise. "Hm?"

Zhan Seng rushed forward urgently. "What happened?"

Sun Genping, leading the group, looked embarrassed. "We'd just finished loading the limestone onto carts and were about to transport them back when a group of bandits appeared. They terrified us, so we had to abandon the carts and run back."

Zhan Seng's expression darkened. "More bandits?"

Zhao Sheng added, "Oh? How could this be? I'll find Commander Zao and have the cavalry retrieve our limestone carts."

Everyone sprang into action...

The camp instantly buzzed with activity. Zao Ying assembled the entire Gao Family Village cavalry battalion for an emergency deployment, mounting their horses.

But just then, a sentry on the watchtower shouted, "People approaching from outside the camp! Look north—a convoy from the north!"

Several leaders climbed the watchtower. To their astonishment, a large group of ragged people, looking very much like bandits, were pushing the limestone carts toward Gudu Ferry.

With this unexpected development, the cavalry's sortie was halted. Everyone watched quietly.

The group stopped an arrow's flight from the camp. Their leader, unarmed and hands raised, stepped forward and shouted toward the camp, "Good people, don't shoot! We're not here to fight! It was all a misunderstanding. We didn't steal your carts. Look, we've brought them back for you, still loaded with stone."

Those inside the camp exchanged puzzled glances. After a moment, Xing Honglang called out, "I'm Xing Honglang of Yongji! Who are you?"

"We're farmers from Linyi County to the north. You can hear our Shanxi accent," the leader replied. "A few days ago, Old Zhang Fei's men robbed us and forced us to join the rebels. We came with them... even attacked your camp, but we stayed in the rear... didn't even fight. We ran as soon as the battle started."

Hearing this, everyone in the camp paused simultaneously.

That story was believable! Anyone who'd dared charge the camp that day had most likely ended up dead—killed by grenades, muskets, or expertly dispatched by He Ping...

The farmer shouted, "We never wanted to be bandits. They held knives to our throats and forced us. When we saw you kill Old Zhang Fei, we didn't dare surrender. But... we've been hiding nearby, watching secretly for days. You're different from other bandits. You're building a camp, even providing work..."

As he spoke, everyone understood: they had come seeking refuge.

Zhan Seng pressed his palms together. "Amitabha! Evil deeds instill fear and drive people away, but good deeds attract them. These people have been drawn by Commander Xing's benevolent actions. This humble monk believes they can be trusted."

Xing Honglang also recognized their Shanxi accent. Since they weren't from Shaanxi, they must be local Shanxi commoners who had been coerced. "They can be trusted, but not entirely. I think it's best not to let them into the camp yet, to prevent them from starting fires at night or coordinating with outsiders. Let them work outside the camp, digging and transporting limestone for us. We'll pay them wages."

Lao Nanfeng and Zao Ying both nodded, agreeing the plan was sound.

Gao Chuwu grinned. "Sounds good!"

As commander of the Shanxi "expeditionary force," his approval settled the matter.

Xing Honglang leaned over the camp wall and shouted, "Understood! You don't want to be bandits anymore, right?"

The farmer outside replied, "We never were bandits to begin with."

"Alright! That simplifies things," Xing Honglang said. "Then we'll keep you here to work. Your job is to dig stone and transport it back to our camp. We'll give each of you three catties of flour per day."

The people outside cheered. "Wonderful! We'll have food!"

Chapter 444: Tianzun, Someone Is Insulting You

The limestone miners finally arrived—and with them came an idea no one in the fortress had dared to voice before.

Zhao Sheng slapped the table. "Listen up. If we let outside workers haul in stone, timber, and supplies, our own people won't need to risk their necks anymore. We stay behind the walls, keep things safe, and little by little... pull those outsiders into our camp."

Zao Ying grinned. "Smart. For the ones we don't know yet—the sketchy types—this setup's perfect. Feed them, work beside them, watch them over time. The solid ones stay. The rotten ones? We'll smell them eventually."

Everyone nodded. Even old Nanfeng, who usually found fault with breathing, hummed approval.

Soon, the fortress gate creaked open. Under banners of iron discipline, soldiers escorted carts of grain toward the limestone haulers from Linyi County.

The poor fellows had dragged those carts over a hundred li of broken road. When the smell of real food hit their noses, their eyes went red. Before anyone could stop them, they set up pots right outside the gate, boiling noodle dumplings on the spot.

From atop the wall, the people inside watched the ragged crowd huddled around steaming pots and felt an uncomfortable stab of guilt.

The refugees from Pujiu Temple whispered among themselves.

"We got lucky. Leader Xing pulled us out and brought us to Gudu Ferry. Inside these walls, we eat, we sleep, we don't fear bandits. If we'd stayed behind... we'd be out there now."

A chill rippled through the group.

Just then, the clatter of hooves shattered the quiet.

A lean rider tore down the northern road, dust spiraling behind him. He reined in hard before the gate, eyes widening at the sight of peasants cooking noodles. His horse, however, had no patience for sightseeing—it shoved through the crowd, scattering bowls and curses, and stopped square beneath the fortress wall.

The man cupped his hands and shouted, "Is this the water fortress of Xing Honglang, Leader Xing of Yongji?"

Xing Honglang stepped forward atop the wall, her voice steady as steel.

"I am Xing Honglang. Who's asking?"

The rider straightened proudly. "Envoy of the Heaven-Spanning Single-Stroke King, Wang Jiayin!"

The name dropped like a stone into still water.

Inside the fortress, faces darkened. Outside, the noodle-boilers clenched their fists.

"Wang Jiayin?" someone hissed. "That dog ruined half the county—and now his lackey shows his face here?"

Zhao Sheng muttered, "Calls himself a king, yet his name sounds like something scribbled on a tavern wall. Heaven-Spanning Single-Stroke King... what nonsense. What's next, an imperial seal carved from stolen pork?"

Snickers rippled through the ranks. Even the monk Zhan Seng joined in.

"A-mi-tou-fo. That title offends both Heaven and literacy."

Someone whispered, "Bold words from a monk who still can't pronounce Amitabha right."

Xing Honglang raised a hand, cutting through the laughter like a drawn blade.

"Enough. He came bearing an envoy's banner. Words come before steel. That's jianghu rule."

The soldiers straightened at once, faces cooling into discipline.

"Open the gate," she ordered. "Invite him in."

The heavy doors groaned apart.

The envoy led his horse through slowly, scanning everything. He'd expected a smuggler den—filth, chaos, fear. Instead, his stomach sank.

Order.

Soldiers stood in neat ranks. Walls scrubbed clean. Weapons gleaming. Flintlocks hung polished on racks, held by men who smiled with the calm confidence of professionals.

These weren't ragtag rebels.

This was an army.

The envoy swallowed hard.

He followed his escort into the main hall. A wooden plaque read: Council Hall. The air smelled of sandalwood and steel.

Then he froze.

At the head of the hall sat a clay statue of a youthful deity—eyes sharp, robes flowing like mountain clouds. One hand held a sword, the other a whisk, both carved with unsettling grace.

The envoy squinted. "And... who might this be?"

Xing Honglang's lips curved slightly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun. The deity who watches over us."

Dao Xuan Tianzun?

The envoy had never heard the name. Another cult idol, he thought—no different from White Lotus fantasies.

Still, he bowed, more from caution than belief, mumbling something reverent while thinking: What a ridiculous-looking god.

Meanwhile—far beyond mortal sight—

Li Daoxuan lounged inside his "box," peering through its ethereal screen at Han City. On display, Shi Jian and Bai Mao were charming a group of government soldiers with endless food and wine.

He chuckled. "I only taught them how to pour without spilling. Now they've turned half the army into drinking buddies."

The box flickered.

"Huh?"

Text shimmered across the surface:

Someone beyond your view is insulting you.

A nearby statue may serve as a vessel.

Do you wish to co-sense?

Yes / No

Li Daoxuan blinked. "Wait—someone's talking trash about me?"

His curiosity ignited instantly.

"Co-sense through a statue?" He laughed. "I've heard of gods descending through incense—but this thing wants me to show up just because someone ran their mouth?"

He rubbed his hands together. "Interesting."

He tapped Yes.

Light surged. Time stretched. Color, sound, heartbeat twisted together—then snapped.

When his vision cleared, he was no longer in the box.

He sat inside a wooden hall, surrounded by familiar faces—Gao Chuwu, Xing Honglang, Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng, Zhao Sheng, a burly monk, and a battle-scarred stranger.

Li Daoxuan blinked slowly.

"Huh," he muttered. "Shanxi? Didn't expect the signal to be this strong."

Behind him, the clay statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun seemed to smile.

Trivia Corner

The Truth Behind the "Heaven-Spanning Single-Stroke King"

In the late Ming chaos, rebel leaders loved absurdly grand titles—King of Heavenly Virtue, Great Bright Dragon Marshal, and worse. Wang Jiayin is inspired by those self-crowned "kings."

As for "Single Stroke"?

Some say his calligraphy was so terrible he could only finish one stroke before giving up. Others claim it described his saber style—one slash, fast and brutal.

"Heaven-Spanning" was likely added later by flatterers.

In short: pure bandit marketing. No mandate. No lineage. Just confidence and a loud mouth.

In jianghu, that's often enough to start a legend...

or end one.

Chapter 445 Dao Xuan Tianzun Stirs

Li Daoxuan blinked, and the world around him snapped into focus.

He could see everything — the timber walls, the lamplight flickering, the faint scent of smoke — and for the first time, he laughed out loud.

"Hah! Finally, I can actually interact with my people inside their little world!"

Then he paused.

"...Wait a second."

Something wasn't right.

He tried to move.

Nothing happened.

His eyes darted down, and that's when he realized — his arms were fused to his body. His legs weren't legs at all, just one solid mass of baked clay.

"Oh, come on..." he groaned inwardly. "You call this craftsmanship? I look like a bargain-bin idol from a roadside shrine!"

Before he could wallow too much, Gao Chuwu suddenly exclaimed, "Hey! Did anyone else see that? Dao Xuan Tianzun's eyes just moved!"

Xing Honglang turned, scanning the statue, her tone sharp but skeptical.

"No. Dao Xuan Tianzun didn't move a muscle."

Lao Nanfeng snorted. "It's just a clay statue, not the real Tianzun. If Dao Xuan Tianzun really stirred, a single slap would probably flatten the whole fortress!"

Zao Ying chuckled. "Exactly! Chuwu, stop seeing ghosts in daylight."

"But I swear it moved!" Gao Chuwu insisted, scratching his head.

Meanwhile, inside the statue, Li Daoxuan smirked.

"So I can move my eyeballs, huh? Interesting. If I can get the lips working, maybe I could talk too."

He wanted to try right away — but that would ruin the fun. Watching Gao Chuwu get roasted was too good to interrupt.

So, like a mischievous god in on a prank, Li Daoxuan froze his gaze and let the room settle.

A few seconds later, everyone sighed and went back to business.

Xing Honglang stepped forward, clapping her fist toward the envoy. "We've long heard of Wang Jiayin's reputation. What business brings the Heaven-Spanning Single-Stroke King's man here today?"

Li Daoxuan immediately understood. So this sharp-looking fellow was Wang Jiayin's envoy — probably the same guy who'd insulted him earlier.

Only one face in the room remained a mystery — a kindly middle-aged monk, who looked far too peaceful for this crowd.

The envoy bowed politely. "Prince Wang has long admired Chief Xing's name. He sent me regarding the matter of Bu Zhan Ni."

That name landed like a pebble dropped into still water. Everyone's brows twitched ever so slightly.

"Huh? Dao Xuan Tianzun's eyebrow just moved again!" Gao Chuwu blurted.

Xing Honglang leaned in and hissed, "Chuwu, shut it. Say one more word and you'll embarrass us in front of outsiders."

Chuwu zipped his mouth shut.

Inside, Li Daoxuan nearly burst out laughing. "Oh, this is priceless."

The envoy cleared his throat and went on. "The Prince heard that Old Zhang Fei, commander of Bu Zhan Ni's fifth company, had some friction with Chief Xing... and that Chief Xing, uh, accidentally killed him."

Li Daoxuan thought, 'Accidentally,' huh? Nice way to sugarcoat a duel to the death.

The envoy continued, putting on a face of moral grandeur. "We're all heroes of the jianghu, united in rebellion against tyranny. Fights happen, yes, but we mustn't forget our true enemy — the emperor and his corrupt officials. We should be brothers, not rivals."

He clasped his fists and bowed deeply. "So Prince Wang sent me to mediate. He hopes to ease the conflict between Chief Xing and Bu Zhan Ni."

Xing Honglang's eyes gleamed with amusement. "Tell your Prince he worries too much. I don't go looking for fights. As long as Bu Zhan Ni doesn't come barking at my gate, I won't go chasing him down. What good would it do me? It's not like he's carrying bags of silver."

"Hahaha!" Gao Chuwu laughed. "Yeah! Beat him up and he won't even drop loot!"

Then he froze mid-laugh and pointed. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun statue just... smiled!"

Everyone gave him a look that said we're ignoring you for our own sanity.

The envoy sighed, forcing patience. "Chief Xing, it's good you wish for peace. But Bu Zhan Ni is proud and hot-headed. Losing a man, he won't let it rest. He'll come for revenge."

"Then let him come," Xing Honglang said coldly. "I'm not the one who should be afraid."

The envoy's tone softened into diplomacy. "Of course, the Prince knows you're brave, Chief Xing. Still, fighting among jianghu comrades only makes the imperial dogs laugh. Better to mend fences and stand united."

Xing Honglang's patience snapped. "Enough talking in circles. What does your Prince actually want?"

The envoy smiled faintly — the kind of smile that hid ambition behind courtesy. "Prince Wang wishes for Chief Xing to join us. Once you're under our banner, Bu Zhan Ni will back down. Together, we can focus on the true enemy — the government troops. United, we'd be unstoppable."

A cold silence spread through the hall.

Everyone exchanged glances, the same thought flashing in their eyes: Ah, so this was all a recruitment pitch.

Wang Jiayin wanted to absorb them.

Inside the statue, Li Daoxuan nearly groaned. "What an idiot. Talk about overreaching."

Xing Honglang's hand twitched — she was this close to telling the envoy to shove it.

That's when the statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun stirred.

Li Daoxuan took a breath. He could sense what was about to happen — Xing's pride was flaring, and this could turn ugly fast. But in truth, neither Wang Jiayin nor Bu Zhan Ni would last long. Why waste good soldiers now when history would handle them soon enough?

Time to intervene.

He willed the statue's mouth to open. Clay cracked. Dust fell. A gritty, hoarse voice rumbled through the chamber — low, heavy, and inhuman, like thunder rolling from a mountain cave.

"...Wait."

Every head turned.

Gao Chuwu's jaw dropped. "See! See! I told you Dao Xuan Tianzun moved! And now he's talking!"

Xing Honglang didn't even look — she just flicked her foot, sending Gao Chuwu sprawling face-first into the floor.

Then she spun and dropped into a deep bow. "We pay our respects to Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

The others followed suit — Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng, Zhao Sheng — their voices ringing together:

"We pay our respects to Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

The envoy just stood there, dumbstruck — halfway between fear and disbelief.

And inside that crumbling clay head, Li Daoxuan grinned.

"Now this," he thought, "is going to be fun."

Chapter 446 New Function: Co-Sensing

Everyone hit their knees at once.

Only two men stayed upright—Zhan Seng the monk and the envoy. Both looked around, completely lost, as if everyone else had just agreed to bow to a random lump of clay.

Zhan Seng's fingers tightened around his staff. His eyes stayed locked on the statue before him—just a man-sized idol, nothing more. It had been hauled here months ago by the Shanxi Expeditionary boys to "boost morale."

He'd seen it plenty of times. Never thought it would talk.

That alone was enough to make even a monk's heart skip.

The envoy looked worse. His mouth opened, but no sound came out—pure, wordless terror.

Inside the statue, Li Daoxuan was having the time of his life.

"Envoy," his gravel-thick voice rumbled from the clay throat, "what you said earlier was quite good. We're all fighting the tyranny of corrupt officials for the sake of the common folk. Infighting only feeds the enemy. On behalf of Chief Xing Honglang—"

a deliberate pause—

"—I accept your terms. From this day forward, Chief Xing shall be counted among the rebel alliance."

The room froze.

Xing Honglang's jaw nearly hit the floor. Her comrades exchanged looks that screamed what did we just hear?

Dao Xuan Tianzun—the Dao Xuan Tianzun—had personally smited bandit scum like Wang Jiayin's men at Qichuan Ferry not long ago!

And now he was joining them?

But nobody dared question a deity. Gods never acted without meaning; mortals were supposed to meditate, not debate.

Zhan Seng blinked, utterly baffled. Nothing in his sutras covered "talking clay deities signing military alliances."

Only one man was smiling: the envoy.

To him, this was divine confirmation. Mission accomplished! Promotion incoming!

Except... that voice chilled him to the marrow. He wanted to run before the clay thing decided to eat his soul.

He clasped his hands in a bow. "Then I shall take my leave!"

He turned and bolted for the door—

"Wait," the voice rumbled behind him. "You cursed me in your heart just now, didn't you?"

The envoy froze mid-step, blood draining from his face. How—how did the statue know? Was this god or demon?

"Don't worry," Dao Xuan Tianzun continued. "I won't be angry... if you take a face-plant right now."

Without hesitation, the envoy dove forward. Thud! His face met floor with divine precision.

He scrambled upright, eyes wild. "I—is this acceptable?"

"Good. You may leave."

"Thank you, Great One!" he squeaked, and fled like a man chased by thunder.

Li Daoxuan turned his attention to the others. His "little people" still knelt, trembling with reverence. Only Zhan Seng remained standing, staff tight in his grip, cautious eyes darting.

Ignoring the monk, Li Daoxuan said warmly, "Enough bowing. Sit. Speak freely."

Chairs scraped. Nobody dared look him directly in the eyes, but they sat. The air hummed with awe.

This was the first time they'd heard Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice directly.

No more cryptic scrolls, no glowing hand from the heavens—just the deity himself, right here in the room.

For the faithful, it was electric. Their blood sang.

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly. "You're all wondering why I agreed to join Wang Jiayin's army, aren't you?"

Heads nodded instinctively.

The clay mouth stretched into a smile—crack. Fissures snaked across the statue's cheek.

"A heavenly secret," he said lightly. "And heaven's secrets are not to be spoken. Simply hold them steady for a while. Do that, and neither Wang Jiayin nor Bu Zhan Ni will trouble you again."

The believers bowed. "As Dao Xuan Tianzun commands!"

"Remember this," the deity intoned. "Our purpose has never changed—to let the common folk live well. Whoever threatens that, no matter their name, is our enemy."

As he spoke, the clay body began to crumble. Each word loosened another layer. Mud and sand slid down its sides until half the face collapsed entirely.

Light warped. The hall dissolved into a swirl of stars. Beams of color streaked past.

A blink later, Li Daoxuan found himself back in his villa, seated beside the diorama box, heart racing.

"Holy—this new function is awesome."

He scrolled through the box's interface. Sure enough, below the familiar directional buttons sat a brand-new one: Co-Sensing.

From experience, he pieced it together—he didn't need direct vision anymore. As long as a statue existed somewhere, he could manifest through it.

One word for it: overpowered.

He grinned and tapped the button.

Then paused mid-motion.

"Oh wait, I didn't pick which statue—"

Too late.

The first image that flashed in his mind was the colossal golden idol in Chengcheng County. The system took that as confirmation.

A familiar sensation of falling yanked him into the dark again—stars, light, rushing wind—

then impact.

When vision returned, the world looked tiny.

From this height, buildings reached only to his knees.

"Ultraman mode, huh?" he muttered.

He was seated behind the grand City God Temple, encased in gold leaf so bright it could blind a man at noon.

Temptation itched through him—he wanted to stretch, to move, to wave maybe. But he stopped himself. Last time, he'd talked too much and wrecked the body.

This statue had been built by thousands of his followers—he wasn't about to waste their sweat.

So he sat still, majestic and silent.

Until movement below caught his eye.

A tiny figure, chattering away near his feet.

Li Daoxuan focused—and saw it clearly.

Liang Shixian.

Chapter 447 It's Not a Big Deal

Beneath the blinding sunlight, Liang Shixian stood before the towering golden statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun, voice raised in righteous indignation.

"Oh, Dao Xuan Tianzun," he began solemnly, "I don't mean to badmouth the Saintess, but I must speak truth for Heaven's sake. She's been... shall we say, creative with your divine decrees. Ordered me to assign two men to Wang Cheng'en's army—both fine young gentlemen from Gao Family Village, and,

let's be honest, probably her close friends. Clearly, she's trying to use me to help them earn merit, get promoted, and snag a cushy official title down the line..."

Inside the idol, Li Daoxuan nearly burst out laughing. His giant golden form trembled as he fought to hold it in—one wrong chuckle and the whole statue might just collapse.

Liang Shixian went on earnestly, "It's not a huge scandal—this kind of thing happens in the court all the time—but I figured it's my duty to tell you. If word reaches your divine ears later, you can't say I stayed silent."

Inside the statue, Li Daoxuan nodded in amusement.

Liang Shixian's a keeper, he thought. Integrity like that is worth its weight in iron. When I rebuild the realm, this man's getting a serious promotion.

Just then, his Shaoxing Advisor came running up, excitement written all over his face.

"Magistrate! The workers have found a huge iron ore deposit in Yaotou Town. What should we do?"

Liang Shixian blinked. "What do you think? Mine it, obviously! Dig! Dig until Heaven itself begs for mercy!"

He jabbed a finger toward the horizon. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun loves nothing more than building and digging, digging and building. The Gao Family Village has iron tools, yes, but those came from Heaven's gift! We barely produce our own. So—dig! Every idle hand in the county goes to the mines!"

The Advisor hesitated. "But, Magistrate, we're short on labor. After Dao Xuan Tianzun's divine rain, the refugees went home to farm. The city's population's been cut in half!"

Liang Shixian's eyes gleamed with a brilliant (and slightly devious) idea.

"Then go west to Baishui County and south to Dali County. Dao Xuan Tianzun's grace hasn't reached them yet—they're still choking on drought. Announce that we'll take anyone willing to come. Register them as our people, feed them, put them to work!"

The Advisor paled. "Poaching citizens from other counties? Their magistrates will storm our gates!"

Liang Shixian snorted. "Hmph. Their people are starving! If I take them in and feed them, I'm saving lives—and their jobs. When they report to the Governor, I'll still come out smelling like lotus blossoms."

The Advisor grinned. "Clever as ever, Magistrate!"

He bowed and dashed off, already barking orders.

Liang Shixian turned back to the golden titan, bowing deeply.

"Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun. With your divine blessing, I dare to act boldly—to save the people, and to live up to the teachings of the sages."

A voice echoed faintly from beyond the idol.

"...Deactivate Co-Sensing!"

And with a shimmer of light, Li Daoxuan was back in his villa, staring at the diorama box.

He smirked, grabbed a handful of flour, and sprinkled it into the miniature scene near Liang Shixian's position.

Below, Liang Shixian looked up and gasped—the flour manifested as heaps of white grain. Instantly, he understood.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun supports me!"

He fell to his knees. "This humble official will not disappoint!"

Meanwhile, in Shanxi, at Gudu Ferry, chaos reigned.

Six people stood before the half-crumbling idol of Dao Xuan Tianzun—Gao Chuwu, Xing Honglang, Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng, Zhao Sheng, and a bewildered Zhan Seng—all gaping at the statue's cracked, broken face.

Xing Honglang wiped sweat from her brow. "Who sculpted this thing? Fifty lashes! The Dao Xuan Tianzun's face—half gone!"

Gao Chuwu rolled up his sleeves. "I'll handle it!"

"Hold it!" Zao Ying stepped in quickly. "If you lash him, there won't be anything left to fix. Maybe it's not the sculptor's fault! Maybe the statue was too small to hold Dao Xuan Tianzun's immense divine power. It just... couldn't handle it."

Everyone nodded in sudden enlightenment.

"Ah! Of course!"

"That makes perfect sense!"

Lao Nanfeng suddenly slapped his forehead. "Ahhh, damn it! When the Dao Xuan Tianzun appeared just now, I was too shocked! I forgot to ask who that celestial singer in the divine mirror was!"

Zhao Sheng stared at him. "...That's what you're upset about?"

Lao Nanfeng glared. "Hey! You've been guarding the frontier for ten years with nothing but men and dry biscuits! I'm half-feral at least—what's your excuse?"

Zhao Sheng, defeated, stayed silent.

Zhan Seng finally spoke up. "Amitabha. Forgive me, but... what just happened?"

Xing Honglang folded her arms proudly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun descended, obviously."

Zhan Seng frowned. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is...?"

She gestured at the cracked idol. "As you can see—a Daoist immortal. Naturally, a monk like you wouldn't recognize him."

Zhan Seng clasped his palms together serenely. "Ah, excellent! I too know a Daoist—Cihang Zhenren, your Guanyin Bodhisattva, who infiltrated Daoism to one day stab Yuanshi Tianzun in the back."

Everyone froze.

Did... did this monk just slander Guanyin?

Then they remembered—this guy was a former salt smuggler turned monk. Enlightenment might not have caught up with him yet.

Gao Chuwu broke the awkward silence. "Less gossip, more work! We need a sculptor! It's unsettling, seeing Dao Xuan Tianzun missing half his face."

"Quick! Ask if any villagers know how to sculpt!"

"There are plenty of craftsmen around, right?"

"Pay them double! The Dao Xuan Tianzun deserves express service!"

"Someone grab a copy of 'The Tale of Dao Xuan Tianzun Vanquishing Demons'! They'll need it for reference!"

The courtyard erupted in frantic activity, everyone shouting over each other.

Only Zhan Seng stayed still. He gazed at the broken idol for a long time, then sat cross-legged before it.

"Amitabha..." he murmured. "So this is a true immortal. To think I, a mere sinner, would meet one..."

He lowered his head.

"In youth, I slew without mercy. Only in middle age did I realize my sins. Tell me, Dao Xuan Tianzun... does Heaven still have forgiveness for me?"

The statue said nothing.

Zhan Seng's voice trembled. "If you do not speak, I'll take it as consent. I can still walk the path of redemption... right?"

Silence.

Then tears spilled freely down his face. "No... I can't even lie to myself. Someone like me—my fate's already sealed."

The wind carried his sobs through the quiet shrine.

The cracked face of Dao Xuan Tianzun watched in silence.

Chapter 448 Better Call an Ambulance

Morning sunlight spilled through the windows of Li Daoxuan's villa as he scrolled through his contacts and dialed up Cai Xinzhi.

"Hey, Old Cai. I've got a new project for you."

A yawn crackled through the phone. "Another ship? Or are you finally moving on to rocket models?"

Li Daoxuan leaned back with a grin. "Neither. I need a full-articulation, life-size—well, life-like—replica of a human body. The kind that can move its limbs, open its mouth, roll its eyes... silicone skin preferred."

Silence.

"Hello? You there? Bad signal?"

Cai Xinzhi exhaled the kind of sigh only a man burdened with a friend's nonsense can manage.

"Brother... you need a girlfriend. Making dolls is not a long-term cure for loneliness."

"What?!" Li Daoxuan shot up from his chair. "What on earth are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking about your health," Cai Xinzhi said solemnly. "You keep telling yourself it's for the art, but next thing you know, you'll be giving her a name and arguing about dinner plans."

Three veins popped on Li Daoxuan's temple. "I'm building a functional miniature, not a concubine!"

"Oh, right, right," Cai Xinzhi said quickly. "No judgment here. We all have our hobbies. Which celebrity head do you want sculpted? Just please don't ask for our old high-school belle—she's got two kids now. That's crossing into moral bankruptcy, and even I have standards."

"STOP!"

Li Daoxuan's shout rattled the windowpanes. "It's my own face, you idiot!"

A sharp inhale on the other end.

"...Playing with yourself? Brother, that's—"

"Fifteen minutes," Li Daoxuan growled. "Call an ambulance."

One Day Later.

A box arrived. Inside lay a four-centimeter-tall silicone doll—his exact proportions, minus the dignity. The texture was uncannily close to human skin; you could almost feel pores. Beneath the soft surface, a metal micro-skeleton allowed every joint to move.

Cai Xinzhi had even given the tiny figure a vaguely human face... though "vague" was generous. The features were a blurred suggestion of humanity, somewhere between an ancient clay figurine and a deflated pastry.

No problem. Li Daoxuan popped the doll's head off, handed it to Gao Yiye, and said, "Find a proper sculptor. Carve me a face that doesn't look like a melted bun."

He also gave her a small cube of silicone—one cubic centimeter—and a new order:

"Use this as reference. I want a life-sized version built, too."

Both projects—mini and monumental—went into production side by side.

Spring Festival, Fourth Year of Chongzhen.

A new year dawned. Gao Family Village, once a trembling speck of forty-two souls, now thrummed with ten thousand residents. It wasn't a village anymore; it was a small city with ambition in its bricks.

Yet this year's Spring Festival was... quiet.

The laborers who'd come from neighboring towns to work had all packed up their wages, bought red paper and firecrackers, and chugged home on the village's miniature train to celebrate with family.

The surrounding villages blazed with color and noise—lanterns, drums, the works. Gao Family Village, at the center of it all, sat in peaceful emptiness.

Some people, however, stayed behind.

Song Yingxing, for one—the brilliant, slightly manic craftsman from Jiangxi. Returning home would mean months on the road through bandit-ridden territory. So he stayed, fiddling with gears in the Craftsman workshop.

He was halfway through repairing a steam-driven textile machine when he noticed a familiar silhouette.

"Hey, Young Master Bai? Why aren't you back at Bai Fortress for the New Year?"

Bai Gongzi turned, eyes shining. "Go home? When my steam miniature train is about to have its first test run? Not a chance."

Song Yingxing chuckled. "Ah, right. Priorities."

They both looked out the workshop window.

Outside stood two trains side by side—the divine, colorful electric model gifted by Dao Xuan Tianzun... and Bai Gongzi's new beast: a dark, stubby steam locomotive, ugly enough to frighten crows, but real—born of hammer, coal, and sweat.

No divine tricks. Just engineering.

Rails snaked less than a li into the fields, a humble start for a revolutionary toy.

"How long till it runs?" Song Yingxing asked.

"Five days, tops!" Bai Gongzi said proudly. He turned to a nearby blacksmith. "Cabin door ready by then?"

The blacksmith saluted. "Guaranteed!"

Song Yingxing blinked. "Wait... the door's not done yet?"

Bai Gongzi coughed. "We focused on the engine first. Priorities, you know? The smokestack's still... experimental, too. Right now the coal smoke kind of fills the cabin and—uh—everyone passes out."

Song Yingxing slowly lowered his head into his hands.

Five days, he says. I should've known.

Chapter 449 Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun

Inside the Craftsman Well, the hammering stopped—and an ecstatic yell split the air.

"It's done! Hahaha—we finally finished!"

Song Yingxing and Young Master Bai turned just in time to see two sculptors burst out of the workshop, hauling a life-sized statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The figure stood about one-point-eight meters tall—neither bulky nor thin, robed in flowing Daoist silks, sword in one hand, whisk in the other. The likeness was perfect; anyone from Gao Family Village would have recognized him instantly. After all, who in the village hadn't watched Dao Xuan Tianzun Vanquishing Demons projected on the temple wall every festival?

Song Yingxing tilted his head. "Another statue? Where's this one going—new grotto, maybe?"

One sculptor laughed. "Not this time! This material was personally bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself—something from the Immortal Realm. He ordered us to shape it according to his form. We've no idea where it'll be placed; we just obey the decree."

"Material from the Immortal Realm?" Song Yingxing's eyes gleamed. He loved strange substances more than wine. The mysterious 'plastic' Tianzun had gifted months ago still haunted his thoughts. Now there was something new? He couldn't resist.

"Pardon me," he murmured, reaching out to touch the statue's sleeve.

The instant his fingers brushed it, he froze.

The texture was uncanny.

"Ah! Truly a thing of the Immortal Realm—skin-soft!"

The sculptors chuckled. "Scared us too! Regular chisels ruined it; we had to shave tiny layers with knives until Dao Xuan Tianzun's features appeared."

Song Yingxing nodded, awestruck. "Celestial craftsmanship indeed—"

Then the statue's eyes moved.

He staggered backward—but the statue reached out and caught him.

Every jaw in the workshop dropped.

Anywhere else, half the crowd would've died of fright. But this was Gao Family Village—the capital of divine absurdity. After three heartbeats of silence, everyone straightened, bowed, and shouted:

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Li Daoxuan—now inhabiting the silicone body through the Co-sensing Function—blinked once, still getting used to the rubbery sensation. His hand, which had caught Song Yingxing, felt springy, almost bouncy.

So this is what being a 'gum-man' feels like, he thought. Flexible, yes... dignified, maybe not.

The body had no skeleton at all—just solid silicone—but at least it didn't crumble like clay.

Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled; his voice rolled out deep and resonant, like wind across mountains.

"No need for such formality."

The crowd bowed deeper.

He turned to the two sculptors. "Excellent work."

They looked ready to ascend on the spot.

Young Master Bai composed himself enough to salute. "Has Dao Xuan Tianzun truly descended into this statue to walk the mortal realm?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled. "Indeed. Merely a short visit. Pretend I'm not here—carry on."

Right. Pretend the celestial patriarch himself wasn't standing beside them, blinking. Impossible. The entire Craftsman Well moved as if underwater, reverent and terrified.

Dao Xuan flexed his fingers. Something tugged—the sword was carved into his palm.

"Oh, heavens," he muttered. "The sword's stuck."

He wiggled it; the soft blade flopped like wet tofu.

"Remove it," he told the sculptors. "It's inconvenient."

They blanched. "Tianzun, if we remove it, we'll have to re-carve your fingers!"

"Then re-carve." He settled into a bamboo chair, extending his hand like a noble at a salon.

Sweat trickled down the artisan's face. Does he mean right now?

He began slicing carefully at the connection. "Forgive my boldness, Tianzun—will this cause pain?"

"No," said Dao Xuan Tianzun serenely. "Proceed."

He lifted his left hand. "And the whisk—remove that too. Same problem."

Two sculptors now worked in tandem, blades whispering against the silicone. Each scrape echoed like a prayer. Dao Xuan Tianzun mused inwardly, So this must be how mortal ladies feel getting their nails done.

By now, half the workshop was kneeling outside, and someone had run to fetch Gao Yiye. Within moments, she burst in, Qiu Ju and Dong Xue panting behind.

She saw him—froze—and fell to her knees. "Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

He raised a hand. "No need for more bows. Speak normally."

Gao Yiye rose, eyes wide. This was the first time she'd seen Dao Xuan Tianzun life-size—no giant face in the clouds, no projection of light. He looked real. The silicone's lifelike sheen made him seem to breathe.

Her heart thumped wildly.

For an instant, the divine felt human.

Then the sculptors resumed trimming his palms, and reality returned. Gao Yiye remembered this was only divine will moving a statue. The fleeting warmth in her chest, she pressed down with effort.

Still, the image of the soft-skinned Tianzun lingered in her mind like a dangerous prayer.

Chapter 450 The Airtightness Problem

Gao Yiye positioned herself half a step behind Dao Xuan Tianzun, the way her secretaries usually did.

Moments later, San Shier, Tan Liwen, and the rest from the main keep arrived—then Cheng Xu, Wang Er, and a flood of curious faces from outside.

The tiny Craftsman Well suddenly became the hottest place in the empire.

Dao Xuan Tianzun looked at the sea of people and sighed inwardly.

I'm literally just sitting here. Why does everyone treat that like divine theater?

He was about to tell them to clear out when Xu Dafu, head of the Gao Family Village Ordnance Bureau, squeezed through the crowd like a cat avoiding rain.

Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled. "Xu Dafu, why are you moving like you're sneaking into a tiger's den?"

Xu Dafu bowed. "Tianzun, this is still a forge. Blades, muskets, explosives everywhere. Even with your divine protection, a loose hammer could still squash me like tofu."

The crowd exchanged looks. This was the same man who once wore armor to drink tea.

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled. "Since you've risked death to get here, I assume you have something worth showing?"

Xu Dafu's eyes lit up. He pulled a tiny round object from his pocket, cradling it with reverence.

"Tianzun! I've succeeded—behold, the percussion cap! Using that miraculous powder you granted—the one that explodes if you so much as drop it—I've made a trigger cap that ignites on impact!"

Instantly, every craftsman in the hall leaned forward. The object in his palm gleamed no larger than a fingernail, a flat disc of alchemy and obsession.

Dao Xuan Tianzun recognized it immediately. So this is that little component at the base of modern bullets... the heart of the bang.

While he pondered, Li Da emerged from the smithy carrying a long rifle.

It was the early breech-loading Chassepot, the prototype Tianzun had once described in detail. The springs had been perfected; the barrel gleamed. Only the bullet design had remained unsolved—until now.

Xu Dafu compared the percussion cap with the rifle's chamber, nodded, and began wrapping a paper cartridge right there on the floor.

Black powder in the middle, lead up front, percussion cap at the rear—rolled tight in paper into a spindle shape. Primitive, but effective.

Li Da loaded it, snapped the breech shut, aimed at a wooden board across the hall—

Bang!

A neat hole appeared dead center.

The officials blinked; the engineers cheered.

Cheng Xu slapped Wang Er's shoulder. "A masterpiece! So much faster than muzzle-loading muskets!"

Wang Er's eyes gleamed. "Exactly! Rifled guns were too slow before—our militias couldn't use them. But with breech-loading, even foot soldiers can reload fast. This changes everything!"

Cheng Xu nodded gravely. "Smoothbore guns may soon vanish entirely."

They were already mentally rewriting their battle manuals when Song Yingxing raised his hand.

"I see one serious flaw."

Dao Xuan Tianzun's eyes brightened. Ah, the sharp scholar speaks.

"The breech," Song Yingxing explained. "It's packed with pins, slides, and springs. The seal isn't tight enough. When the gunpowder ignites, force leaks from the gaps. That's why the shot's power is weaker than a muzzle-loader."

Everyone turned toward the target—and realized he was right.

Song Yingxing continued, "It's the same flaw that plagues my steam engine. Steam leaks everywhere. If we solved airtightness, both firearms and engines would multiply in strength."

Dao Xuan Tianzun silently applauded. As expected of him. Sharp as ever—but the solution's still beyond Ming-era chemistry.

Then Song Yingxing's eyes glimmered. "Actually... I just found the material that could solve it."

The crowd leaned closer. "What material?"

He pointed—straight at Dao Xuan Tianzun.

"The same substance as Tianzun's statue."

Gasps. Then outrage.

"Blasphemy!" several cried. "Do you plan to chop up Tianzun's sacred body to patch rifles?!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun burst out laughing. "Hahaha! Peace, everyone. Master Song speaks from curiosity, not irreverence. He thinks in mechanisms, not metaphors."

He turned to Song Yingxing, eyes twinkling. "But you're right about the material. Still—there exists something even better for sealing engines and breech chambers. You'll reach it in time. For now, allow me to provide some."

His voice echoed like thunder within silk.

Then his consciousness lifted from the silicone body and returned to his true form outside the Box.

He reached to his side, picked up a lump of soft black rubber—modern magic disguised as divine grace—and dropped it through the air.

In the Craftsman Well below, the villagers saw a dark mass descend like a celestial gift.

The era of airtightness had just begun.

Trivia:

The "Airtightness Problem" — How Ming Almost Invented the Industrial Revolution.

If there were a list titled "Top 10 Historical Innovations That Missed the Bus by 200 Years," airtightness would take the gold medal.

In real-world history, the whole "airtightness problem" haunted engineers for centuries. Steam engines before James Watt (1736–1819) were basically noisy kettles with more leaks than a corrupt tax office. They wasted so much power that entire factories ran on what could barely puff a teapot. Watt's big brain moment came when he realized: if you keep the steam from escaping, you don't just make it stronger—you make it civilization-changing. That single insight birthed the Industrial Revolution.

Now, imagine if Song Yingxing—the Ming Dynasty's real-life science polymath, author of *Tiangong Kaiwu* (The Exploitation of the Works of Nature)—had access to airtight pistons and rubber seals. China's early steam tech might've gone full steampunk two centuries early. Trains across the Great Wall. Gunboats on the Yangtze. Bureaucrats clocking in with punch cards.

Instead, the "airtightness problem" stayed unsolved—until Dao Xuan Tianzun dropped literal rubber from heaven, a substance Ming chemistry couldn't even imagine.

In the 19th century, when the West did discover rubber's industrial uses, it kicked off colonial wars just to secure enough of the stuff. But in Gao Family Village? It came free with divine packaging.

So yes, airtightness sounds boring. But in both worlds—real and fictional—it's the difference between a steam-powered empire and one still pushing carts by hand.