

Great Ming 451

Chapter 451 The Policy of Pacification

Rubber.

Of all the strange gifts the heavens could drop into a half-modernized Ming dynasty, this one was basically cheating.

Dao Xuan Tianzun glanced at the glossy black block sitting in the Craftsman Well — the villagers stared at it like cavemen discovering fire.

"Go on," Tianzun said with a casual flick of his hand. "Touch it."

Song Yingxing stepped forward and pressed a curious finger against the block. His expression lit up like a scholar finding a lost classic. "Hmm. Softer than that 'plastic' material the Tianzun gave us, but tougher than the Immortal's statue. It's perfect — airtight, flexible, heat-resistant! Truly, a treasure of the Immortal Realm."

Tianzun smiled faintly. At this rate, these people will reinvent the Industrial Revolution before Newton is even born.

The two sculptors beside him straightened nervously. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, your divine hands are complete. Please, inspect our humble work."

He looked down. Both hands — sculpted, flexible, soft as flesh — moved perfectly. A bit floppy, sure, but serviceable. Like those bendy toys kids poke for fun.

He flexed his fingers, nodded, and stood up. "All right, everyone, back to work. I'm going for a walk. Alone."

A collective gasp. A divine stroll? The Heavenly Lord taking a leisurely walk down the street? It was like seeing Confucius pop by the marketplace for bubble tea.

Gao Yiye hesitated, then gathered her courage. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... may I accompany you?"

He paused, smiled. "Come."

Her joy was radiant enough to light a lantern.

So they walked — Tianzun in front, Gao Yiye a respectful half-step behind. Every motion of his silicone body was strange, soft, springy. Should've added a steel skeleton, he mused. Maybe a better spine. Or hydraulics.

He swung his arm absently and brushed her hand. She froze, wide-eyed, but didn't retreat.

A few paces later, Gao San Niang came striding toward them, muttering something about the Saintess meeting a man — until she looked closer.

Then, thud! She fell to her knees. "This humble one greets Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"Rise," he said gently.

But Gao San Niang didn't move. She backed away like a villager retreating from thunder, breathless. Within moments her voice echoed through the street: "Dao Xuan Tianzun has descended to the mortal realm!"

And that was it. The news spread faster than wildfire in dry reeds. Everywhere Tianzun walked, people froze mid-task, eyes wide, then dropped to their knees as if struck by lightning.

He sighed. "At this rate, I can't even enjoy a casual stroll. Too many knees hitting the ground — it's bad for public morale."

Gao Yiye laughed softly behind her hand. "If you descend more often, they'll get used to you, Tianzun."

He gave her a sidelong glance. "Hmm. Tempting."

He hadn't created this body for sightseeing, after all. He already saw every corner of Gao Family Village from his divine perspective — every rice stalk, every forge, every gossip session. This little walk was just... curiosity. A chance to feel the world instead of simply watching it.

But now, seeing Yiye like this — eyes bright, heartbeat trembling between reverence and something unspoken — he wondered.

Perhaps one statue should stay here. Just one. For quiet afternoons.

"Yiye," he said suddenly, "shall we go hiking?"

Her smile was instant. "Yes, Tianzun!"

The Capital — Early Spring, Fourth Year of Chongzhen (1631)

The imperial court was cold enough to freeze a phoenix mid-flight.

Zhu Youjian — the Chongzhen Emperor himself — sat slumped on the dragon throne. Around him, ministers stood in uneasy ranks, their ceremonial silks too heavy for such air.

News had come from Shanxi: Wang Jiayin, self-declared King, commanded three hundred and fifty thousand rebels. The number hit the court like a cannonball.

"Three hundred and fifty thousand..." Chongzhen muttered, his voice dull. "More than my entire imperial army. If I had such men..." His hand clenched on the armrest. "The Manchu barbarians would've been ash long ago."

He forced composure, turning to the court. "Gentlemen, the bandit plague in Shaanxi and Shanxi grows worse by the day. What shall we do?"

Liu Jiayu, Shaanxi's Provincial Commissioner, stepped forward, bowing low. "Your Majesty, I bring a letter from Yang He, Supreme Commander of the Three Borders. He begs Your Majesty's attention."

"Read," said the Emperor.

Liu Jiayu unrolled the letter and began:

"The rise of bandits stems from famine — the people are driven to rebellion by hunger.

To suppress them is costly; to execute them is endless.

They scatter, only to rise again.

The only true path is pacification — give them land, cattle, and seed, and they will return to tilling the earth.

Money spent on suppression is lost forever; money spent on pacification feeds the empire for generations.

To save one life is to preserve one soul.

Once the people live without fear, rebellion itself will die."

The court fell silent. Even the Emperor's sigh sounded ancient.

Pacify the people, the letter said. But with what silver?

Trivia:

"Suppress or Pacify" — The Eternal Dilemma of Every Empire

The "Policy of Pacification" was one of those rare bright moments of reason in late Ming politics — and also one of the most tragically ignored.

Yang He (1561–1627), the real-life general behind the letter, had served in the northwest during the early 1600s, where endless droughts turned starving peasants into rebels. His argument was revolutionary for its time: don't crush them — feed them.

But the Ming treasury was emptier than a monk's wine jug. Officials preferred the cheaper option: execution and "suppression." Predictably, each "pacified" region flared up again a few months later.

Ironically, centuries later, both Chinese and Western thinkers rediscovered the same principle — that social stability costs less than military suppression. Modern economists call it Keynesianism; ancient strategists called it benevolent governance.

In short: history's most expensive policy mistake wasn't losing battles — it was refusing to pay for peace.

Chapter 452 The Notorious Bandits

Zhu Youjian sat silently on the dragon throne, the echoes of Yang He's letter still ringing in his ears.

Money spent on suppression vanishes. Money spent on pacification multiplies.

The logic was flawless — if one ignored the fact that the imperial treasury was emptier than a temple donation box after a drought.

"Pacification is the priority now!" cried every minister in unison.

Zhu Youjian almost laughed. Every single one of them was chanting it like a hymn — none offering a single coin of their own. He had seen this trap too late.

"Pacification requires silver, farmland, and cattle," he said slowly. "Where shall this money come from?"

The answer came like arrows:

"Your Majesty's personal funds."

Then again.

"Your Majesty's personal funds!"

And again — a chorus, rhythmic, merciless.

Zhu Youjian felt his temples pulse. But he had already spoken of the people as "my children." He could hardly retract it now without strangling his own image of virtue.

So he bit down, lifted his brush, and wrote:

"Let 100,000 taels of imperial silver be dispatched for the pacification of Shaanxi and Shanxi.

Those coerced into rebellion who surrender will be forgiven and given seed, cattle, and land.

Let them return to farming — the Court shall embrace them anew."

Censor Wu Shen knelt, took the decree and the silver, and set out for the northwest — to redeem the realm with coin and compassion.

But one name was marked for death.

Wang Jiayin — who had already crowned himself "King."

For him, no forgiveness. Only the sword.

Several weeks later — outside Yan'an Prefecture

In a grove of gnarled trees, Miao Mei crouched with a few dozen surviving bandits — the last remnant of Wang Zuogua's shattered host.

Months of running had stripped them to the bone. No more great raids, no more rich caravans — only scraps stolen from terrified peasants.

"Brother," whispered a scarred man named Miao Dengyun, "there's news from the cities. Supreme Commander Yang He has issued an edict of pacification! Surrender, and we're forgiven. They'll even give us cattle, farmland, and grain."

Miao Mei blinked, then smirked. "Is that so? Then we'll surrender — eat our fill, rest a while, and rise again."

Miao Dengyun laughed. "A fine plan! I'll go first — talk terms with Hong Chengchou himself."

Yan'an Prefecture's gates loomed dark and grim.

Hong Chengchou — newly appointed Governor of Yansui — was a man feared by all. He had risen from a humble Grain Intendant to command armies, breaking bandit hordes that outnumbered him ten to one.

But when Miao Dengyun arrived waving the edict of pacification, Hong Chengchou welcomed him with the calm politeness of a Confucian scholar.

"Hero Miao," he said, smiling faintly, "your repentance brings peace to the land. It is most commendable. Please — attend a banquet tomorrow. Let us seal this reconciliation with wine."

Miao Dengyun's chest swelled. Even the iron-hearted governor bows to policy now. The Emperor himself commands pacification — what can he do but smile?

The next day, Miao Mei and his last 320 hardened men marched proudly into Yan'an Prefecture, weapons sheathed, swagger in every step.

The banquet was magnificent — roast meat, hot wine, the illusion of peace. Cups were raised in laughter.

And then —

The hall doors burst open.

He Renlong stormed in, blade flashing like lightning.

Before Miao Mei could even stand, his head was gone — rolling across the banquet floor, eyes still wide with disbelief.

The bandits froze for half a heartbeat — then chaos erupted. But from every shadow, imperial soldiers poured in, slaughtering them to the last man.

When it was over, the hall was red.

Hong Chengchou emerged from behind the trees outside, careful not to stain his robes. He looked upon the corpses, his gaze cold.

"Hmph. Notorious villains," he muttered. "Their surrender was a lie. They meant to eat the Court's grain and rise again. Yang He may be fooled by sweet words — but I, Hong Chengchou, am not."

He turned away as calmly as if leaving a dinner party, his boots untouched by blood.

Trivia:

The Iron Governor — Hong Chengchou's Calculus of Mercy and Murder

Hong Chengchou (1593–1665) was one of the most complex figures of the late Ming — a man equal parts Confucian scholar and ruthless strategist.

His massacre of Miao Mei's band is not just fiction — it reflects a real historical tension between Yang He's pacification policy and Hong Chengchou's pragmatic ruthlessness.

Yang He, an old-school idealist, believed bandits were simply starving farmers — that mercy could turn them back into citizens. But Hong Chengchou, a career survivor, had seen too many "surrenders" turn into ambushes. To him, compassion without caution was suicide.

Ironically, his skepticism was partly justified. Many "pacified" rebels in Shaanxi and Shanxi did indeed rearm once their bellies were full. Yet Hong's brutality also sowed deeper resentment, feeding the endless cycle of revolt that would later engulf the Ming completely.

After the Ming fell, Hong Chengchou himself surrendered to the Qing — using the same cold logic he once used on bandits: "Better to live and serve than die for a dead ideal."

So the man who killed false surrenderers became history's most famous true one.

Chapter 453 This Is No Laughing Matter

The evening air in Han City hung heavy with dust and the faint smell of roasted millet. Through the half-empty streets swaggered two unlikely "lords of the barracks" — Shi Jian and Bai Mao, each leading a trail of soldiers like generals returning from conquest.

They weren't true generals, of course. Just a pair of clever upstarts who'd somehow wrangled control over the food supply — which, in an army starving for three winters straight, was far more potent than a sword or seal.

So now, even the four-hundred-man commanders, men who once barked orders loud enough to scare chickens into silence, bowed and scraped to them.

Because in this army, grain was power.

They stopped before a small flatbread stall — shuttered, silent, and half-collapsed. The old owner nearly fainted at the sight of the uniformed crowd.

"Relax, uncle," Shi Jian said with an easy grin, waving his hand as if to part the tension itself. "We're soldiers, not thugs. Children of the people, remember? No need to quake like we're here for your last bowl of gruel."

The soldiers laughed awkwardly, trying to look less like wolves and more like sheep.

Outside the "box," far beyond their world, Dao Xuan Tianzun watched the scene with amusement from his divine vantage point. "Ah, the art of soft power," he murmured. "Win hearts with grain before you win wars with blades. Not bad, Shi Jian. Not bad at all."

Shi Jian turned back to the trembling shopkeeper. "Word has it your Han City Sesame Flatbreads were famous once — crisp, fragrant, golden brown. So I brought my brothers here to try them."

He smiled wider. "And don't worry — we'll pay."

Dao Xuan Tianzun, watching from above, froze mid-bite on his celestial beef patty.

Han City Sesame Flatbreads again? Seriously?

Every time mortals discovered a new "local delicacy," he was stuck drooling through the glass like a cosmic tourist.

The shopkeeper sighed miserably. "Great sirs, I would love nothing more. But the drought... there's no flour to be had. I barely have enough to live on."

Shi Jian chuckled, producing a small sack from his back. "Look again."

The man opened it — and nearly cried. Fine flour, pure and white as snow.

"Make your famous flatbreads," Shi Jian said kindly. "We'll pay three copper coins a piece. Fair work for fair pay."

The old man's lips trembled. "You... you're good men, truly good men!"

Shi Jian turned to the soldiers behind him, voice suddenly ringing with practiced conviction. "Soldiers exist to protect their people. If the people starve, we've failed our duty. Remember that."

A rumble of assent echoed behind him. "Yes, Centurion Shi!"

Shi Jian exchanged a sly grin with Bai Mao. The Heavenly Lord—ah, Dao Xuan Tianzun—will love this performance.

Unfortunately, outside the box, Dao Xuan Tianzun was fuming.

"They're eating flatbreads again! And I'm still stuck with this cosmic beef patty!"

Before long, everyone was eating. The crack of sesame crust and the soft chew of the bread filled the alley with the music of hunger satisfied.

Centurion Ma sighed blissfully. "Ah, that's the taste of life. These past years, no pay, no meals — I'd forgotten food could make a man tear up."

Then he added, through a mouthful of crumbs, "Thanks to Centurion Shi... and Centurion Wang!"

At once, Shi Jian's eyes sparkled wickedly. "Wang Xiaohua!"

Bai Mao froze mid-bite, face twitching like an irritated cat. "I told you never to call me that!"

He almost blurted out his old alias — Bai Mao, the notorious bandit name — but bit it back just in time. The soldiers nearby chuckled. The tension of the day dissolved into laughter.

Then — a voice sliced through it like a blade.

"Centurions! Urgent orders! Return to camp immediately!"

The laughter stopped.

Dao Xuan Tianzun leaned forward in his seat. "Hmm? Deployment already? Don't tell me they're going after the bandits..."

He tossed aside his uneaten patty and watched through the glowing screen of the box as Shi Jian and Bai Mao hurried back toward the camp, still clutching half-eaten flatbreads.

Inside, torches blazed. Wang Cheng'en, Commander-in-Chief of Shaanxi, stood fully armored, the weight of duty in his stance.

"Looks serious," Dao Xuan Tianzun muttered.

He wasn't wrong.

By the time the last horn sounded, five thousand men stood assembled — 1,500 elite troops gleaming in polished armor, and another 3,500 garrison soldiers in rough cloth and dented helmets. The banners rippled like fire in the dusk.

It was the grandest sight Dao Xuan Tianzun had seen since his "Heaven-Spanning Single-Stroke" mural.

He admired the lineup. "Now this... this looks like an army, not a mob of half-starved farmers."

Wang Cheng'en cleared his throat. His voice boomed across the square:

"Bandit chieftain Wang Jiayin has committed the gravest of crimes—he calls himself king, appoints ministers, and defies the Son of Heaven. His treachery cannot stand."

Dao Xuan Tianzun raised a brow. "Ah, finally. Someone poked the dragon's tail."

Wang Cheng'en continued:

"By decree of the Ministry of War—General Du Wenhuan shall serve as Grand Commander, with Cao Wenzhao of Gushan as his deputy. Together they shall lead the forces of Shanxi, Shaanxi, Pingyang, and Ningxia to encircle Hequ County and eliminate the traitor Wang Jiayin."

As the banners lifted and drums thundered, Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly.

"The imperial court always dances the same dance," he said. "Talk peace with the weak, but bring steel to the proud. You can steal silver, you can plunder granaries—but declare yourself king, and suddenly the heavens remember justice."

He leaned back, eyes glinting like twin suns. "A lesson for all mortals and immortals alike..."

"This," he said, "is no laughing matter."

Trivia Corner –

Han City Sesame Flatbreads (韩城芝麻烧饼)

A humble snack with a surprisingly long résumé. Originating from Han City in Shaanxi during the late Ming, these flatbreads were crisp on the outside, soft within, and coated in roasted sesame seeds.

When baked properly, they stayed warm even in winter — the perfect street ration for soldiers, couriers, and bandits alike.

According to one folk chronicle, Emperor Chongzhen himself once tasted these during an inspection of famine relief in Shaanxi and remarked, "This bread is as resilient as my people." Sadly, resilience couldn't save his dynasty.

Chapter 454 That Absolutely Must Not Be Done

"Set off at once!"

Wang Cheng'en's order cracked through the dusk like a war drum.

The camp erupted into motion — horses snorted, armor clattered, boots pounded the frozen earth. Thousands of soldiers surged toward Dragon Gate Ferry, the great crossing on the upper Yellow River.

If the Yellow River was a dragon, this was the spot where mortals dared to leap. The old saying — "a fish leaping over the Dragon Gate" — wasn't just a metaphor here; it was a legend carved into the bones of the land.

Even Dao Xuan Tianzun, watching through the shimmering pane of the divine box, found himself intrigued.

Dragon Gate, huh?

He'd read about it — the Qin lords, the Tang emperors, all those ancient heroes who'd crossed here to change the fate of dynasties. Even in another line of time, Li Zicheng would one day march east from this very spot to topple the Ming.

It was history's revolving door.

And Dao Xuan Tianzun was eager to peek through it.

His gaze followed Shi Jian and Bai Mao's column as they advanced, banners fluttering, spears flashing like scales of a metal serpent.

"Alright, let's see what the famous Dragon Gate looks like up close..."

Then the view stopped.

Thunk.

His divine field of vision hit an invisible wall. The soldiers kept marching — and simply walked out of existence, vanishing past the boundary of the box.

"Wait, what—hey! Hey! Come back!" Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice echoed in the void. "Don't tell me the box ends here!?"

He slammed his palms against the invisible glass. Nothing. The world refused to extend.

"Aaah! My pilgrimage! My Dragon Gate!"

He brooded for a moment, then snapped his fingers.

"Think, Dao Xuan. Think. You're a deity, not a tourist on a budget tour."

Then he remembered: Shi Jian's cloth doll — the little stitched effigy of Dao Xuan Tianzun that hung from the soldier's belt, hand-sewn by the women of Chengcheng County. Embroidered face, little golden thread halo — a local charm for safety and blessings.

Could he co-sense through that?

"Well," he said, grinning, "no harm trying."

He jabbed the "Co-Sensing" rune.

The world lurched.

Colors fractured into shards of light, then reformed — and Dao Xuan Tianzun found himself hanging by a string, bobbing rhythmically with every step.

He was the doll now.

"Whoa—whoa! I'm swinging! This is not majestic at all!"

Shi Jian was riding a horse, so every stride made Dao Xuan's cloth body sway like a drunk wind chime. The dizzying motion made his immortal head spin.

"Nope. Nope! Not the doll getting dizzy — me!"

He tried to steady himself by grabbing the string above his head... only to realize his "hands" were just two stitched cotton balls. Round, fingerless, utterly useless.

"Oh, come on!"

Determined not to lose dignity, Dao Xuan improvised. He smashed his plush palms together, hooked the thread between them, and climbed — an immortal scaling a mortal belt like a tiny monkey god.

After a few heroic wiggles, he made it to the edge of Shi Jian's armor and sat down. The view was steadier, and the dizziness faded.

Perfect.

Then, spotting the dagger tucked at Shi Jian's side, Dao Xuan Tianzun got an idea. He rubbed his cloth hands against the blade until snick! the string snapped.

Free at last.

He climbed higher — up the man's chest, over his pauldron — and perched proudly on his shoulder like a celestial parrot.

Shi Jian rode on, oblivious... until Bai Mao suddenly gawked.

"Uh, Shi Jian! Shi Jian!"

"What?"

"Look at your shoulder!"

Shi Jian turned — and nearly fell off his horse.

The tiny Dao Xuan Tianzun doll was sitting there, alive, its stitched mouth curving into a smirk.

"Don't panic," the doll said casually. "Just enjoy the view."

Shi Jian blinked.

Bai Mao blinked harder.

Finally, Shi Jian stammered, "Has... has Dao Xuan Tianzun descended to issue a divine decree?"

"Nah," the little doll replied. "Just sightseeing."

Both men went utterly speechless.

So the great Dao Xuan Tianzun... was tagging along as a plush toy tourist.

By the time they reached Dragon Gate Ferry, Dao Xuan Tianzun was already unimpressed.

He'd imagined towering cliffs, thunderous water, maybe a few ethereal dragons breaking the surface. Instead — a narrow river bend, barely 120 meters across, lined with muddy sandbanks and overworked ferrymen.

He sighed.

"Scammed again. Every 'famous site' is the same: a river, a sign, and some overpriced temple incense."

Down below, soldiers worked feverishly to build a pontoon bridge. Ropes were stretched across the river, planks laid, boats lashed together.

Dao Xuan Tianzun watched for a minute. Then yawned.

"Logistics," he muttered. "The least cinematic part of war."

With a flick of thought, he cut the link. "Alright, enough sightseeing. Time to find something more entertaining."

Meanwhile, in Shanxi Province...

The air over Hejin County was thick with smoke and blood.

Bu Zhan Ni's rebel army had stormed the gates by dawn, and by noon, the once-proud city lay in ruins. Hejin — once known as Longmen County, cradle of ancient heroes — now echoed only with the screams of the dying.

In the county yamen, Bu Zhan Ni lounged in the magistrate's chair, a severed head lying near his boots.

His lieutenant, Shuangchi Hu, burst in and reported, "Boss, the yamen runners and local militia are all dead. The brothers are searching for grain."

Bu Zhan Ni nodded. "Good. Once we finish here, we march south. Yongji's next. I hear Xing Honglang has set up a fort at the Gudu Ferry. Let's go pay her a visit."

Shuangchi Hu hesitated. "Boss... Xing Honglang's already sworn to Wang Jiayin. She's one of his Thirty-Six Camp Commanders now. If we hit her, it's like spitting in Big Brother Wang's face."

Bu Zhan Ni sneered. "Wang Jiayin's 'face'? I'll grind it into the mud if I feel like it!"

That's when a quiet, sharp voice cut in from the doorway.

Li Zicheng, captain of the Old Eighth Squad, stepped into the light, bowing slightly. His expression was calm, but his tone was cold.

"Boss," he said,

"That absolutely must not be done."

Trivia Corner –

The Dragon Gate (龙门渡口)

The Dragon Gate Ferry near Hejin, Shanxi, isn't just a poetic metaphor — it's one of the oldest river crossings on the upper Yellow River. Ancient Chinese believed that carps who could leap the Dragon Gate's rapids would transform into dragons, symbolizing transcendence through struggle.

Historical Note: During the Spring and Autumn era, Qin forces used this crossing to ambush the Jin state.

Tang Dynasty: Li Yuan (Emperor Gaozu) crossed here to reclaim the Central Plains, launching the Tang dynasty.

Folklore: Even Li Zicheng, the Dashing King of the late Ming, was said to "leap the Dragon Gate" — not as a fish, but as a rebel who overthrew an empire.

Today, the phrase "Fish Leaping Over the Dragon Gate" survives in idioms and school proverbs, urging scholars to strive for success.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's verdict?

"Overhyped view, great symbolism. 2 stars. Bring snacks."

Chapter 455 "Are We Really Afraid of the Authorities?"

The moment Li Zicheng spoke, Bu Zhan Ni slammed a meaty hand on the table.

"What's stopping us? Speak."

Li Zicheng's tone was calm but urgent.

"Xing Honglang's situation isn't normal. She's supposed to be a salt smuggler, but she somehow has ships, cannons, and firearms. That's not something you pick up from smuggling brine and fish guts. Someone's backing her. I suspect she's not a smuggler at all—she's a plant, an imperial agent in disguise, laying a trap for us."

Bu Zhan Ni gave a derisive laugh.

"And what if she is an agent of the court? What then? Are we really afraid of them?"

Li Zicheng sighed. "We're not afraid of the court. But we should be afraid of the soldiers."

Bu Zhan Ni snorted. "Pah! Imperial soldiers? A bunch of soft-bellied bureaucrats with spears. Since we crossed from Shaanxi into Shanxi, what government soldier has ever stood in our way? Shanxi's Regional Commander Wang Guoliang—useless as a pig on parade. The moment he hears our name, he packs up and runs."

Even as he bragged, a scout stumbled in, gasping for breath.

"Report! Great Chief—Sha'anxi Regional Commander Wang Cheng'en's army has crossed the Dragon Gate Ferry and is heading our way!"

Bu Zhan Ni froze for half a second, then barked out a laugh.

"Wang Cheng'en? That dog still alive? I remember him—he gave us some trouble in Shaanxi. Didn't expect him to chase us across provinces. Persistent, that one."

Li Zicheng's eyes darkened.

Bu Zhan Ni continued, roaring with laughter, "Once, I might've feared him. But now? He's gone to the capital, kissed imperial boots, and came back empty-handed. No rations, no pay. His men must be starving. Meanwhile, I've got fifty thousand fighters here—each one fed and armed. Tell me, who's got the advantage?"

Li Zicheng's gut twisted.

Not again, he thought. Every leader I serve gets drunk on arrogance. Wang Zuogua was like this before he died. Now Bu Zhan Ni too...

He looked at his so-called chief and thought grimly, This man's already dead. He just doesn't know it yet.

Outside the tent, Li Zicheng found his nephew Li Guo waiting.

"Uncle," Li Guo asked, "why the grim face?"

Li Zicheng grabbed his arm. "We're leaving."

"Leaving? Why?"

Li Zicheng's voice dropped to a whisper. "Because Bu Zhan Ni won't live through this battle. Wang Cheng'en has crossed the Yellow River—don't you understand what that means?"

Li Guo blinked. "Is Wang Cheng'en really that dangerous? You sound like you're afraid of him."

Li Zicheng shook his head. "I don't know if he's dangerous, but I know this: no imperial general can leave his jurisdiction without authorization. If the Shaanxi Regional Commander crossed into Shanxi, it means one thing—the Ministry of War sent him. Which means this isn't some border skirmish."

He leaned close, voice low and sharp.

"The imperial court has finally decided to move. Wang Jiayin's declaration of kingship angered the Emperor himself. Now, they'll sweep through Shanxi like a storm. Anyone near Wang Jiayin will be wiped out."

Li Guo swallowed hard. "So... we're running?"

Li Zicheng nodded. "Running means living. Staying means dying."

Within the hour, the Old Eighth Squad—the same battle-worn brothers who'd followed him since Mizhi—quietly packed their gear and slipped out of camp under the cover of dusk.

Behind them, Bu Zhan Ni's campfires still burned bright and defiant.

When Dao Xuan Tianzun reconnected to the Puppet Heavenly Lord—the little embroidered doll hanging from Shi Jian's shoulder—it was already evening.

The pontoon bridge was complete, and the army of Wang Cheng'en had finished crossing the Yellow River.

The Daoist deity-turned-doll squatted on Shi Jian's shoulder, looking back over the Dragon Gate Ferry, grumbling to himself:

"Tourist trap. Overpriced, underwhelming, and no dragons."

A scout galloped up and shouted, "Report! The main force of the bandit Bu Zhan Ni has been found! Over forty thousand strong, entrenched in Hejin County!"

A dark light flashed across Wang Cheng'en's eyes.

"Hejin County... has it fallen?"

"Completely, my lord," the scout said. "The magistrate is dead, the citizens butchered. The streets run red. They've even torn down the city walls."

Every soldier's expression turned grim.

Even Dao Xuan Tianzun, watching through the doll's stitched eyes, felt his cloth hands tighten.

(Well, he tried to tighten them, but cotton doesn't clench well.)

Wang Cheng'en's voice rang out, cold and clear.

"If they still had walls, it might be difficult. But without walls? All the better. Prepare to march. Hejin County will burn clean by morning."

The army surged forward.

Out of five thousand troops, roughly three and a half thousand were ragtag conscripts—farmers, porters, the kind of men who tremble at their own armor. The remaining fifteen hundred, however, were elite, handpicked by Wang Cheng'en himself.

They advanced in disciplined silence.

From the horizon, Hejin County appeared—naked and broken. No walls, no gates, just a smoking carcass of a city crawling with bandits.

Wang Cheng'en raised his riding crop.

"Rout them."

The command snapped through the ranks.

Shields locked, spears leveled, and the imperial phalanx moved like a steel tide. Arrows hissed through the air. The bandits' return fire clattered uselessly off the shields, while the imperials' volleys cut swathes through their ranks.

Then came the thunder—the Three-Eyed Arquebuses roared from the center line, belching smoke and flame.

Dao Xuan Tianzun nearly fell off Shi Jian's shoulder from the recoil echo.

"Holy Heaven! You call those muskets? They sound like mini thunder cannons!"

The gunfire shattered the bandit formation.

From both flanks, two small cavalry detachments—barely a hundred riders each—burst forth, sweeping in from left and right like scissors cutting through paper. The rebels broke.

That was when Wang Cheng'en finally moved.

He reined his horse, raised his spear, and bellowed, "Main formation—charge!"

Shi Jian and Bai Mao shared a fierce grin, drew their weapons, and spurred their horses forward with the commander.

Dao Xuan Tianzun, ever the enthusiastic spectator, raised his stubby cloth arm dramatically.

"Forward, soldiers of the righteous path! Charge!"

Then promptly slipped and almost tumbled off Shi Jian's shoulder.

The deity of Dao laughed, even as war horns blared and the clash of steel filled the air.

"Mortals," he muttered. "So fragile... and yet, so magnificent."

☯️ Trivia Corner:

Muskets, Mayhem, and Ming Tactics

The "Three-Eyed Arquebus" (三眼镜) was a real Ming-era firearm—a handheld gun with three rotating barrels. Soldiers could fire three consecutive shots before reloading, giving it the terrifying name "Thunder of the Infantry."

Effective range: about 50–70 meters

Reload time: long enough to get stabbed if you weren't quick

Psychological effect: priceless—nothing scared peasants like thunder and smoke

Tactical note: Ming armies often paired gunmen with sword-and-shield infantry for protection. Once the muskets fired, the spearmen rushed in to finish the job—a hybrid formation that foreshadowed early modern warfare.

Chapter 456 Young Master Bai's Steam Locomotive

The battle at Hejin County was over before dusk had even fully settled.

Bu Zhan Ni's grand army of fifty thousand rebels—so fierce and loud in the morning—was now a sea of tattered banners, streaming northward in complete disarray.

They had been smashed apart by Wang Cheng'en's disciplined forces, broken like clay dolls under an iron hammer. Not even a hair of the general's armor had been touched.

Yet, victory carried no joy.

What Hejin County reclaimed was not a city, but a grave.

The streets were filled with corpses. Three or four out of every ten townsfolk lay dead. Another two were taken away to serve as unwilling soldiers. Less than half of the people still breathed—and even they sat amidst ruins, their eyes empty as old wells, staring at the burned skeletons of their homes.

Their tears had long since dried.

Wang Cheng'en walked through the wreckage, his boots crunching over shattered tiles and bones. His face was set in grim silence. When he finally reached the county yamen, he sank into the magistrate's chair—the seat of authority now turned into a memorial of ruin—and muttered under his breath,

"Everywhere looks the same... Whether by rebel hand or foreign barbarian, the result never changes."

Shi Jian, standing nearby, asked quietly, "The Jiannu do the same, General?"

Wang Cheng'en let out a hollow laugh. "The same? Worse! When I went north months ago to serve His Majesty, I saw towns that the Jiannu had taken—villages soaked in blood, every home looted, corpses stacked in the streets. Three days of slaughter for every city captured. Tell me, what's the difference between them and these so-called 'bandits'?"

The air thickened with silence. Even Bai Mao, usually quick with a joke, said nothing.

Dao Xuan Tianzun, perched quietly on Shi Jian's shoulder in the form of a small puppet doll, sighed. His porcelain face caught a glint of firelight from the burning ruins. Mortal cruelty is a cycle that not even Heaven can untangle, he thought, but someone has to try.

Wang Cheng'en straightened slightly. "The people of Hejin County will starve. I'll write to the imperial court—petition for funds and grain."

Shi Jian exchanged a glance with the puppet on his shoulder.

Dao Xuan Tianzun whispered directly into his ear, his tone sardonic but tinged with sympathy:

"Write all you like, but don't expect a single copper to fall from the sky. The court can barely feed its own soldiers. Tell him Gao Family Village will handle the relief—on one condition: we take control of the Dragon Gate Ferry."

Shi Jian's eyes lit up instantly. He clasped his fists. "General, our Chengcheng County still holds some grain in reserve. We can ferry it from Heyang's docks up to Dragon Gate Ferry. With your permission, we'll distribute it to the Hejin refugees."

Wang Cheng'en's brows lifted. Hope, rare and fragile, flickered across his face—then quickly turned to concern.

"You've already lent grain to this general before," he said. "Wouldn't this be too great a burden for your village?"

Shi Jian's voice was firm. "Saving a life is more meritorious than building a seven-story pagoda. As long as our people can help, we will not sit idle."

For the first time in days, Wang Cheng'en smiled. "Very well. I'll entrust this to you."

Shi Jian bowed. "Then I request permission to remain at Dragon Gate Ferry, personally overseeing the escort of relief grain."

Wang Cheng'en nodded almost absently, thinking, So, this one wants to stay far from the front lines. Can't blame him—connections from Liang Shixian's circle, never trained for war, probably terrified after his first real battle.

Let him have the ferry. It'll keep him safe, and I'll still get my grain.

He waved his hand. "Approved. I'll send a hundred garrison soldiers with you for protection."

Shi Jian's heart leapt. He saluted with all due ceremony, then hurried out of the tent with Bai Mao.

Once out of sight, Shi Jian leaned close. "Wang Xiaohua, I'll head to Dragon Gate Ferry to handle the relief. You stick close to Wang Cheng'en and report back when things move."

Bai Mao chuckled. "Alright, I'll handle the frontlines."

The puppet of Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly jumped from Shi Jian's shoulder with a soft thump—landing perfectly on Bai Mao's.

Bai Mao froze, wide-eyed, then bowed slightly. "Tianzun... has blessed me?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun crossed his tiny cloth arms. "Just making sure you don't get killed, kid. Try not to embarrass me."

Shi Jian burst out laughing. He bowed to the puppet and took his leave, leading the hundred soldiers assigned to him toward the Dragon Gate Ferry.

Bai Mao, now carrying the divine doll like a badge of fate, returned to the command tent.

Wang Cheng'en raised an eyebrow. "Shi Jian gave you his doll?"

Bai Mao smiled nervously. "Yes, General. His protective charm."

Wang Cheng'en snorted softly. A soldier relying on a doll for courage... these 'connections' from Liang Shixian's camp are truly something else.

Meanwhile—Gao Family Village, Number Two Railway Station

For the first time in Ming history, a column of steam hissed into the winter sky.

Young Master Bai, standing proudly atop a wooden platform, had eyes shining brighter than the furnace behind him. Before him lay six li of railway track—stretching from Gao Family Village to the Valley of Exiles—a metallic vein that shimmered under the sunlight.

It had taken him half a year of sweat, sleepless nights, and singed eyebrows to get this far.

San Shier, ever the pragmatic administrator, had approved the project with the same indifference one might show to a hobbyist tinkering in a barn.

"Moderate support for research," Dao Xuan Tianzun had once said, and San Shier had taken that as gospel. No lavish funding, no hundreds of craftsmen—just three blacksmiths, a hundred laborers, and whatever scrap iron they could melt down.

Yet somehow, they had done it.

The locomotive—an iron beast weighing thousands of jin—sat on the tracks, its surface rough and riveted like armor, its chimney breathing little clouds of steam. The villagers whispered in awe, unsure whether to fear or worship it.

Even Magistrate Liang Shixian and Magistrate Feng Jun had come from Chengcheng and Heyang to witness the test run. Bai Yuan, Young Master Bai's father, stood beside them, unable to hide the tremor in his hands.

And Madam Bai—always supportive, always dramatic—had hired a chorus of village girls to act as cheerleaders. Their red scarves fluttered like flames as they shouted,

"Go, Young Master Bai! Go, Steam Dragon!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun observed from afar through his puppet's vision, smirking. "If nothing explodes in the first five minutes, I'll call it divine engineering."

Young Master Bai took a deep breath and shouted, "Add coal! Stoke the furnace!"

The blacksmiths threw in baskets of coal. The firebox roared. Steam whistled through the iron pipes, and the whole machine began to tremble.

Cogs turned, pistons moved, and with a groan like a waking dragon, the locomotive's wheels began to roll.

"Move!" he shouted.

And move it did. Slowly, painfully, the massive iron beast lurched forward. The villagers gasped. The magistrates exchanged looks of disbelief.

Within seconds, the engine was chugging steadily along the rails—puffs of steam bursting from its chimney in rhythm with its beating pistons.

Liang Shixian's jaw dropped. "By the ancestors..."

Feng Jun muttered, "It's alive."

Bai Yuan couldn't hold back a laugh. He threw an arm around his son and cried, "He did it! My boy actually did it!"

Madam Bai's hired cheerleaders screamed so loudly half the chickens in Gao Family Village took flight.

And Dao Xuan Tianzun, somewhere beyond mortal sight, chuckled softly. "The wheel of history turns—sometimes literally."

Chapter 457 A Massive Demand for Manpower

"Prepare to ignite!"

Even before the words had finished echoing, Bai Gongzi's voice cut through the winter air — crisp, confident, and full of the reckless energy only youth can carry. His eyes gleamed with the thrill of creation, his every gesture sharp and decisive, as if command itself had chosen to reside in his bones.

From a short distance away, Madam Bai watched her son, heart swelling with pride and something softer — nostalgia, perhaps. Once upon a time, she could discipline that boy with a flick of her wrist. Ever since he'd slipped away from her legendary "big smack" years ago, however, the era of maternal authority had quietly ended. Her son had grown into someone she no longer needed to guide — perhaps even someone who now guided her. The proud mother had become the humble follower.

Li Daoxuan — or rather, Dao Xuan Tianzun to those who worshipped him — observed the scene from outside the great mechanical box. He smiled faintly. To his eyes, Bai Gongzi was more than one boy with a clever invention; he was the bright spark of Gao Family Village's future — the living proof that the next generation might step beyond the shadows of feudal limits.

The elders, bound by habit and circumstance, had built the world they knew. But this boy — and the ones like him — they might just reinvent it.

Then came the roar.

The steam engine thundered to life, as two bare-chested stokers — muscles glistening under a layer of coal dust — shoveled pitch-black coal into the hungry furnace.

Whoosh!

Whoosh!

The whistle shrieked — long, full, and alive. It wasn't the frail imitation of a toy train, but the voice of industry itself, echoing through the valley. The villagers gasped. But the one who trembled most was not the crowd — it was Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

When he was a boy, he had often visited his grandmother in the old Huangjueshu village near Shuangqing City. There had been an ancient rail line that cut through the fields. He could still remember the sound of coal trains roaring past, a thunder that filled both sky and chest. Years later, the old woman passed away, the village was razed, the rails torn up, the trains gone. Electric rails came, sterile and efficient — but their whistles were hollow things, lacking the soul of smoke and fire.

Now, as the iron creature screamed once more, something in him stirred. Tears welled up, unbidden, as memory and present intertwined.

"The train... it's moving!" someone shouted.

And indeed, the great iron beast began to lurch forward — slowly, like an awakening god.

"It's moving! It's really moving!"

The people of Gao Family Village erupted in cheers. "A mountain of iron — heavier than a hundred oxen — and it moves just by boiling water!"

Madam Bai threw her hands into the air, laughing so loudly that even the sky might have blushed.

"My son succeeded! Hahaha! He really did it! Girls — you know what to do!"

A group of hired maidens began to scatter paper confetti, chanting with gleeful rhythm:

"General Bai is mighty!"

"General Bai is awe-inspiring!"

"General Bai's invention is divine!"

Bai Gongzi grimaced, waving them off. "Divine, my foot! Who's going to clean this mess up? Do you know how hard paper is to sweep off wet ground?"

The little locomotive rumbled forward, its pace sluggish but determined — perhaps eight kilometers per hour, no faster than a trotting mule. Yet in that moment, it wasn't about speed. It was about history.

Humanity had just taken another step into the age of steam.

Dao Xuan Tianzun, filled with joy, reached into his sleeve and pulled out a golden bracelet. Snapping a small ring from it, he stretched forth a colossal hand — shimmering like dawn light — and set it before Bai Gongzi.

A hush fell.

Inside the box, everyone stared, mouths agape.

The divine hand of Dao Xuan Tianzun descended, holding a golden ring half the height of a man. The villagers whispered — a ring of pure gold! How many taels would that be? How much divine favor had just landed before them?

Then came the decree.

Gao Yiye, the village herald, stepped forward and bellowed,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun commands! Bai Gongzi, who has brought forth an invention for the benefit of all under heaven, is to be rewarded with this golden ring! Let all take him as an example — and strive to create wonders that uplift humanity!"

The valley shook with cheers.

"Congratulations, General Bai!"

Another decree followed:

"Dao Xuan Tianzun commands: from this day forth, Gao Family Village shall enter an age of railway construction! Workers are to be gathered in great number, to lay track across the land and bind every corner of our domain. The Qichuan Ferry, a place of vital trade, shall be connected first — by iron and steam! And hear this well: the celestial toy trains gifted by Tianzun shall be recalled, no longer for mortal amusement."

A collective sigh swept through the onlookers — half regret, half understanding. Those with education, like San Shier, Bai Yuan, and Liang Shixian, had long expected this. Celestial tools were never meant to linger among mortals forever. Dao Xuan Tianzun's generosity had merely given them a head start — now it was time for humankind to earn their own future.

Before long, Liang Shixian, San Shier, and Feng Jun gathered together, their faces serious.

"The three of us," Liang Shixian said, "must decide who will oversee each section of the railway."

Feng Jun wiped a thin trickle of blood from his nose — a side effect of sheer excitement. "My department's short on workers," he muttered. "But I'll take the thirty-li stretch from Heyang County to Qichuan Ferry."

San Shier nodded thoughtfully. "Labor's tight in Gao Family Village too. But fine — I'll handle the segment between Gao Family and Heyang."

Liang Shixian sighed. "Then I'll take Chengcheng County to Gao Family Village. But I'm short-handed as well."

Every man nodded grimly. It was the same story everywhere.

Too much work. Not enough hands.

In the past, they'd worried about too many mouths to feed. Now, they worried about too few hands to build. Gao Family Village, Chengcheng County, Heyang County — everywhere, construction sites had sprung up like mushrooms after rain. The problem was no longer iron or wood, but people.

San Shier shot Liang a teasing glance. "Didn't you go 'borrowing' workers from Baishui and Dali Counties a while back? How many did you end up stealing?"

Liang scratched his head sheepishly. "Quite a few, actually. But then we found a massive iron deposit in Yaotou Town — so they're all down in the mines now. Digging iron takes more men than farming!"

No one laughed at that. They all knew what it meant. Iron — real, earthly iron — was now the bloodline of their progress. Every rail, every gear, every furnace demanded it. If they wanted independence from divine supply, the mines had to thrive.

The men exchanged long, weary looks.

"Once, we complained there were too many people to feed," one muttered. "Now we don't have enough to work."

From somewhere off to the side, Gao Sanwa popped his head up like an overeager gopher and yelled, "Thirty years east, thirty years west!"

Everyone groaned in unison. "Don't just shout random proverbs, you fool!"

Laughter broke through the weariness — brief but sincere. And beneath that laughter, steam continued to rise, the scent of coal mingling with ambition. The train chugged on, slow but unstoppable, carrying the dreams of a village — and perhaps, of a nation — toward an iron-clad dawn.

Chapter 458 A Little Mischief Outing

In the fourth year of Chongzhen — 1631 by modern reckoning — the Ming court moved like a wounded beast lashing out in every direction. Over twenty thousand imperial troops marched from Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Shanxi, forming nineteen encampments across the ravaged countryside. Sixteen officers, ranging from brigadiers to governors-general, spread their banners like a massive net, closing in on Wang Jiayin's rebel army in Hequ County.

For the other scattered rebels, the court offered something different — amnesty and silver, not swords.

Censor Wu Shen arrived in Shaanxi with a hundred thousand taels of emergency funds, scraped together from the Chongzhen Emperor's last vestiges of imperial dignity — palaces pawned, treasures sold, pride mortgaged. His task was to distribute relief grain, soothe rebellion, and, if fortune allowed, remind the commoners that the Son of Heaven still cared for their hunger.

Meanwhile, in Gao Family Village, the crisis wasn't rebellion — it was recruitment.

The great machine of progress needed hands, and hands were precisely what they lacked.

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun!" Liang Shixian stood at attention in Chengcheng County, bowing to the colossal golden statue that gleamed beneath the sun. His voice carried both reverence and frustration. "Your humble servant managed — with no small effort — to lure a few families from Baishui County to settle here. I hoped their example would attract more laborers. But ever since Censor Wu Shen arrived, things have changed. He's opened a porridge station in Baishui County, and now the hungry flock to him instead of us. They'd rather line up for gruel than cross a county line for good pay!"

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun!" Feng Jun's voice echoed from Heyang County. "The people of Dali County have just enough to eat now. They're content. I've used every trick I know, but they won't budge. They'd rather starve slowly at home than live well somewhere new."

From the heavens — or rather, from outside the vast diorama that contained their world — Li Daoxuan watched through the lens of his Co-sensing ability. The emperor's silver and grain were indeed doing their job: famine subsided, rebellion quieted, and for once, the map of Shaanxi looked deceptively peaceful.

The truth, however, was simpler and more ancient.

Humans are loyal to soil.

As long as they weren't starving, they clung to their ancestral homes like moss to stone. Promise them gold and they might nod; promise them comfort and they might smile — but move them? Hardly.

Even in modern times, Li Daoxuan mused, villagers in remote mountains refuse to move to the cities, though those cities might pay ten times the wage. They would rather till the same rocky fields, sunburnt and uncomplaining. It's not logic that binds them — it's hometown sentiment, that quiet ache that says: "I was born here, and here I shall die."

And so, the question stood.

How do you outwit sentiment itself?

While Li Daoxuan pondered, a messenger came sprinting through the county streets to Liang Shixian's golden statue. "County Magistrate!" he shouted breathlessly. "Censor Wu Shen has arrived — with chests of silver and cartloads of grain! He claims to be here for disaster relief and requests your presence to greet him!"

Liang blinked, taken aback. "Disaster relief?" he muttered.

The words sounded almost comical to the ears of Chengcheng's residents. Disaster relief? For them? Usually, they were the ones being begged to help others.

Still, duty was duty. Liang Shixian turned, bowed deeply to the towering figure of Dao Xuan Tianzun, and declared, "Your humble subordinate must take his leave to welcome this so-called angel of the court."

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled from his perch beyond the stars. Now this, he thought, could be entertaining. Perhaps this Censor Wu Shen will deliver me a new labor force wrapped in silk and ceremony. Liang's decent, but diplomacy isn't exactly his forte. Best I intervene before he offends half the imperial court.

He grinned. A little mischief never hurt anyone.

With that thought, Dao Xuan Tianzun activated Co-sensing once more.

Inside the ancestral shrine of Gao Family Fortress, the silicone statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly sat upright. Once, there had been only one clay idol in that hall — a crude figure of piety. Now, thanks to Li Daoxuan's peculiar hobby, the shrine housed an entire army of silicone Dao Xuan Tianzuns, each crafted with unnerving lifelike precision. Sculptors labored day and night, their chisels guided by faith and caffeine.

Li Daoxuan selected one of the silicone forms and slipped his consciousness into it. The statue's eyes blinked open.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!" cried San Shier and Gao Yiye, who had been offering incense. They both fell to their knees in alarm as the idol sat up.

Dao Xuan Tianzun stretched, smiling. "I think I'll take a little stroll among mortals today. Fetch me some props — a tattered monk's robe, a string of prayer beads, a cracked wine gourd, and a broken palm-leaf fan."

San Shier gawked. "Uh... may I ask what for, Your Divine Excellency?"

Gao Yiye, on the other hand, brightened with amusement. "Oh! Isn't that how Monk Ji Gong dresses? The opera troupe that came last year performed a play about him. Are you going to disguise yourself as Ji Gong, my lord?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed. "Exactly! If Guanyin can moonlight as a Daoist, surely I can borrow a monk's robes for a day. I might even give the Tathagata himself a friendly tap on the back of the head!"

San Shier paled. Gao Yiye clapped like a delighted child.

The Heavenly Lord hasn't changed one bit, San Shier thought miserably. Still the same prankster who once filled Gao Yiye's house with divine rice just to see what would happen.

Before long, San Shier returned with the costume borrowed from the opera troupe. The silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun slipped the ragged monk's robe over his immovable Daoist one, slung the cracked wine gourd over his shoulder, and tucked the broken fan under one arm. He rubbed a smear of ash across his cheek for good measure.

Then, fanning himself lazily, he began to hum:

"My shoes are torn, my hat is torn, my kasaya is torn..."

You laugh at me, he laughs at me, my fan is torn..."

If there had been an audience, they would've sworn Monk Ji Gong himself had descended from the stage.

"Perfect," he said with a grin. "Let's pay our good Censor a visit."

Since this form wasn't bound by flesh, the logistics were simple. No need for steam trains or solar carts — a thought would suffice.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's real self reached into the diorama box, pinched the tiny silicone monk between his fingers, and lifted him gently into the air.

To the people inside the model world, it looked like divinity itself had taken flight.

Villagers gasped and pointed. "Look! Dao Xuan Tianzun is flying!"

Another cried, "Why is He wearing a monk's robe?!"

"Maybe He's off to prank some Buddhist monks!"

Gao Laba burst out laughing. "Hahaha! You don't know half of it! Once, He filled Gao Yiye's entire house with celestial rice! When she opened her door, she almost drowned in it!"

As laughter rippled through the village, Dao Xuan Tianzun reached down from the real world and tapped the glowing label marked 'Chengcheng County' on the box's side.

The scenery inside the diorama shifted — villages, fields, rivers flickering away like pieces on a chessboard.

Then, with a faint pop, the silicone monk hovering above Gao Family Fortress vanished.

The villagers cried out in awe.

"He disappeared!"

"The Heavenly Lord used immortal magic!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled.

Ah, mortals. Always good for applause.

Trivia :

The real Ji Gong — or Daoji — lived during the Southern Song Dynasty and was, by all accounts, delightfully insane. He was a monk who drank wine, ate meat, and scolded the greedy in rhyme. The

people adored him precisely because he was imperfect — a walking contradiction who proved enlightenment didn't have to come wrapped in solemnity.

The figure of Ji Gong endures because he pokes fun at both hypocrisy and holiness. In a way, Dao Xuan Tianzun dressing as Ji Gong is poetic justice — a heavenly being pretending to be a mad monk to toy with bureaucrats.

Chapter 459 Teleportation

The border between Baishui and Chengcheng counties was alive with the sound of drums, hooves, and the murmurs of nervous officials.

Liang Shixian stood at the head of more than a hundred attendants — clerks, constables, and county aides — all sweating under their ceremonial hats. They waited respectfully beneath fluttering banners, eyes fixed on the approaching procession that glittered in the distance like a moving treasury.

At the forefront strode a man whose very posture shouted imperial authority. His robe gleamed with embroidered cranes, his nose tilted heavenward as though sniffing divine approval. Behind him marched an entourage of household guards, soldiers, and porters pushing carts piled high with crates of silver and sacks of grain.

Censor Wu Shen had arrived.

Appointed by the imperial court to "deliver Heaven's grace," he carried a hundred thousand taels of real silver — no paper, no promises. His steps were confident, even theatrical. If someone had played a fanfare, he might have matched his stride to the beat.

As his retinue entered Chengcheng County, the man's arrogance shone like fresh lacquer. He basked in the collective awe of local officials — until, quite suddenly, his gaze fell on the countryside ahead.

The earth was green. The air fragrant. Birds trilled from fat, healthy trees. Fields shimmered with moisture.

This — this was supposed to be a disaster zone.

Wu Shen blinked, then frowned in disbelief. "This place... why is it like this?"

Liang Shixian immediately understood. He stepped forward, bowing with both hands raised. "Your Excellency, this county has been blessed by—"

He caught himself. It wouldn't do to mention Dao Xuan Tianzun. To the imperial court, that name might sound suspiciously like heresy.

So he quickly revised: "—by divine favor! The Dragon King has seen fit to bless our land with rain."

Wu Shen snorted softly, brushing off the idea. He'd heard every sort of superstition from famine victims, and this one barely ranked. Most likely, Chengcheng had simply been lucky — a patch of wet earth in a sea of dust.

He sighed, deflated. Another county that doesn't need saving.

"It seems your region has been spared Heaven's wrath," he said with faint irritation. "No need for relief funds, then."

This disappointed him more than he cared to admit. On the road from province to province, every magistrate had treated him like a living god, bowing, flattering, begging for aid. To dispense grain and silver like a minor deity — that was power. But here? Here no one wanted anything from him. It was almost insulting.

Liang Shixian smiled politely. "Indeed, our needs are few. Perhaps Your Excellency could extend those precious supplies to other counties still suffering?"

Wu Shen's frown eased a little. "Very well. I shall pass through Chengcheng and continue on to Heyang County for relief."

Liang bowed again, hiding a smirk. Perfect. Go burden Feng Jun instead.

He was just about to dismiss the crowd when a drowsy voice drifted from the roadside grass.

"Ahhh... what a lovely nap."

Wu Shen's guards instantly tensed. "Who's there?" Swords rasped from scabbards.

The grass rustled — and out stepped a ragged monk. His robe was tattered, his straw hat half-collapsed, his sandals worn thin. In one hand he held a cracked wine gourd; in the other, a broken palm-leaf fan that stirred not even a whisper of wind.

Liang Shixian and his entourage froze. They knew that face.

Dao Xuan Tianzun — though now disguised as a slovenly monk.

No one dared to acknowledge him aloud, of course. Instead, the Chengcheng officials dropped their eyes, praying that the imperial envoy wouldn't notice their sudden collective panic.

Wu Shen's guards, however, had no idea. They merely exchanged uneasy glances. A wandering monk... perhaps a trickster? Or a spy?

The ragged figure adjusted his hat, fanned himself with his broken fan, and smiled slyly. "Wu Shen, from Xinghua, Jiangsu. Jinshi of the forty-first year of Wanli. Dismissed in disgrace during the Tianqi reign for offending Wei Zhongxian. Only recently restored to office. How's the temper these days?"

The road went silent.

The guards' swords leapt up with a hiss. "Insolent monk!"

Wu Shen himself went pale. No one — no one — was supposed to know those details. That dark chapter of his life had been buried under official records and shame.

A random monk emerging from the roadside grass, knowing his past and speaking it aloud? It chilled the blood.

"Seize him," Wu Shen snapped. "Alive! I want to know who sent him!"

The guards surged forward, blades flashing.

But the monk merely laughed and stepped back into the tall grass.

They rushed in after him — and found nothing.

He was gone.

A moment later, someone shouted and pointed: the monk now stood atop a tree several zhang away, smiling down at them, fan tapping against his shoulder.

"How—how did he—?"

"After him!"

They charged again, stumbling through thorns and branches. The monk leapt — vanished into the grass — and reappeared on another tree even farther away, as though mocking them.

To the guards, it looked like teleportation.

To Liang Shixian, it looked like divine mischief.

To Li Daoxuan — sitting comfortably outside the diorama box — it was simply physics.

He moved the silicone puppet with his hand.

And since his hand could move five meters per second, the puppet's apparent speed inside the miniature world translated to roughly a kilometer per second — nearly two li.

To the people within, that meant instant travel. Immortal magic.

The guards froze, trembling. Even Wu Shen's face turned gray.

Then, before their stunned eyes, the monk floated.

Not jumped — floated. Rising three or four zhang into the air, he drifted lazily forward, the tattered robe fluttering like the wings of a lazy crane.

He landed softly before the imperial envoy, fan flicking open. "Well, Wu Shen," he said, grinning, "still intent on capturing me?"

No one moved.

A guard opened his mouth. "What kind of demon—"

Another guard clapped a hand over his mouth, whispering fiercely, "Fool! He's not a demon. He's... he's Monk Ji Gong!"

And thus, on the dusty border of two counties, an imperial envoy, a hundred guards, and a handful of trembling bureaucrats bore witness to the first recorded instance of "teleportation" — courtesy of Dao Xuan Tianzun and a particularly amused giant hand.

Chapter 460 So, This Was the Reason

Wu Shen stood frozen, the "divine monk" still echoing in his mind like the aftershock of a thunderclap.

Calm down, he told himself. You've done nothing corrupt. No bribes, no embezzlement. A clear conscience fears no ghost, right?

He tried to sound convincing even to himself.

"Master," Wu Shen finally managed, bowing slightly, "may I ask who you are—and what wisdom you bring?"

The monk—Dao Xuan Tianzun in the flesh of mischief—smiled under his frayed hat. His fan fluttered like a lazy butterfly. "Who I am doesn't matter," he said. "What matters is that I've come to give you a little advice."

Wu Shen leaned in, cautious. "Please, speak."

Dao Xuan Tianzun's grin turned sly. "You seem... rather pleased with yourself, walking around with a hundred thousand taels jingling in your purse, hm?"

The words hit harder than any imperial reprimand.

Wu Shen coughed. "This humble official merely carries out His Majesty's command—to relieve the people's suffering. I dare not take pride in it."

Classic bureaucratic reflex: when cornered, quote virtue.

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled. "One hundred thousand taels to save an entire province? Let's do the math, shall we? Give one tael to each person—how many can you feed?"

Wu Shen blinked, stalling for arithmetic.

"Right," Dao Xuan Tianzun went on. "At current prices, one dou of rice in Shaanxi costs seven hundred to a thousand wen. That's about one and a half dou per tael—less than twenty jin of grain. So tell me, Censor Wu—how long will that last?"

Wu Shen's mind whirred like an abacus in panic mode. "Fifty days," he admitted. "At best."

Dao Xuan Tianzun spread his hands. "Fifty days of rice for a hundred thousand people... in a province of ten million. Congratulations, you've invented symbolic charity."

Liang Shixian, finally catching on to the act, stepped forward, bowing. "Imperial Envoy, if I may—those funds must also resettle surrendered rebels, not just feed the hungry. His Majesty decreed it himself: land, oxen, seed grain—everything."

Wu Shen froze mid-breath. "That's right..." he murmured, paling. "If I use the treasury's silver for all that... it won't even cover the livestock."

Dao Xuan Tianzun tilted his head. "So tell me, Great Envoy, what happens when you pacify rebels but don't feed or settle them?"

Wu Shen hesitated. "I... suppose they would—"

Liang's adjutant, Fang Wushang, cut in, his voice booming like a war drum. "They become official bandits!"

Wu Shen stared at him.

Fang went on, fire in his words. "Fan Shan Yue of Heyang was pacified once. The moment he got his title, his men scattered, looting and killing in the name of 'collecting provisions.' The county bled for months. I fought his rabble for half a year before order returned."

Wu Shen's jaw dropped. "Official bandits... good heavens."

Dao Xuan Tianzun's tone softened. "You've been too long in marble halls, Wu Shen. The world you think you serve—the 'Empire of Order'—is run by hungry men with knives."

Wu Shen bowed deeply. "Master, please—teach me. What should I do?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun shrugged. "You can't save Shaanxi with pocket change. Go ask Zhu Youjian for more."

Everyone froze.

He'd just named the emperor like a drinking buddy.

But after seeing a man hover in midair, who dared correct his etiquette?

Wu Shen sighed. "His Majesty won't release more funds. The treasury's empty."

Dao Xuan Tianzun fanned himself. "Then Shaanxi is too."

And with that, he lifted off, the wind swirling beneath his tattered robes. His mocking song followed him skyward:

"My shoes are torn, my hat is old,

My robe's in rags, but my heart is bold..."

The melody drifted away, leaving stunned silence behind.

Wu Shen's officials stood frozen. The man himself slowly exhaled. "The divine monk appeared not to condemn me," he murmured, "but to enlighten me. Our methods are useless. I must change them."

He snatched a brush, ink flying.

'Your servant humbly reports: one hundred thousand taels feeds only one hundred thousand people, for fifty days. It is insufficient to save the realm. Should His Majesty not grant more, even the imperial treasury should be opened.'

He thrust the memorial at a trusted aide. "Ride. To the capital. Now!"

The courier galloped off, hooves drumming against destiny.

Wu Shen watched him vanish down the road—then turned toward the green fields of Chengcheng County.

"Magistrate Liang," he said slowly, "your land is untouched. Could it... accommodate some of the displaced?"

Liang's heart jumped. So that's it.

He finally understood Dao Xuan Tianzun's little "performance." The monk act, the arithmetic lesson, the moral theater—it had all led here.

To this moment.

"Indeed, Imperial Envoy," Liang said, bowing with fervor. "Chengcheng County has land, food, and faith enough to shelter them. We will do our utmost."

Wu Shen nodded, a plan crystallizing in his mind. "Then I'll send the refugees here. Let the empire's forgotten find their fortune under your protection."

Liang smiled. "Dao Xuan Tianzun's will be done."

Somewhere, far above, a faint laugh echoed through the clouds.