

Great Ming 471

Chapter 471 Gao Piao

Standardization and vocational schools could solve the manpower problem.

Eventually.

But "eventually" was something written in reports, not something that helped when grain carts were stuck halfway up a slope and every forge was screaming for hands.

Right now, Gao Family Village didn't lack ideas.

It lacked people.

Li Daoxuan's gaze swept across the diorama.

The labor reform camps were important—very important. They could turn prisoners into productive citizens, one shaved head at a time. But even divine miracles had a cooldown. Reforging a man took time.

What Gao Family Village needed immediately were people who could be put to work the moment they finished eating.

Law-abiding citizens.

Feed them. House them. Hand them tools. Done.

The problem was that such people were rarer than bandits.

Just as Li Daoxuan was weighing this injustice of the universe, he noticed a man enter the main keep.

Plain cotton clothes. Thin frame. Sun-darkened skin. The sort of man who looked permanently apologetic for taking up space.

He walked up to San Shier, bowed properly, and offered a thick stack of manuscripts with both hands.

"Third Steward," he said carefully, "I... I drew a story. I was hoping you could see whether it's worth printing."

San Shier froze for a moment, then squinted.

"...Shi Piao?"

The man's shoulders loosened. "You remember me?"

"Of course I do," San Shier said. "People like you are hard to forget."

Li Daoxuan, watching from above, also remembered now.

Shi Piao.

Back when Flat Rabbit had just arrived in the village, this fellow had been knocked unconscious by five thieves on the road, his New Year's goods stolen clean. Flat Rabbit had personally dragged the culprits back, cursing the entire way.

Li Daoxuan had assumed Shi Piao later settled down as a blacksmith.

He clearly underestimated the man's ability to drift.

San Shier looked him over. "Shi Piao, let me be honest with you. One day you're learning blacksmithing, the next carpentry, then cooking. You change trades faster than refugees change bowls. This isn't versatility—this is professional panic."

Shi Piao scratched his head. "I know... I just can't seem to stick with anything. I try hard, but nothing really works out."

He hesitated, then added in a small voice, "A few days ago, I heard Gao Sanwa made a fortune drawing picture books. I thought... well, drawing doesn't need literacy, right?"

San Shier sighed, rubbing his temples. "Drawing pictures doesn't. But telling a story? That needs structure, pacing, tension, release. An illiterate man mastering that?"

He shook his head. "That's harder than climbing to the heavens."

Shi Piao hurriedly said, "I just drew everyday family things."

"...Fine."

San Shier surrendered. "Let me see."

He lowered his gaze to the cover.

"Gao Piao"

His eyelid twitched.

Up in the heavens, Li Daoxuan nearly laughed out loud.

Gao Piao.

Floating in Gao Family Village.

That was either tragic poetry or a deliberate stab.

San Shier looked up. "What does 'Gao Piao' mean?"

Shi Piao answered honestly, "It means drifting. Floating. Living without roots—in Gao Family Village."

San Shier closed his eyes.

"Just from the title," he said gravely, "I already feel this book will be... very bad."

"No!" Shi Piao panicked. "Please don't say that before reading it! I'll cry, I really will!"

San Shier sighed and opened the book.

The story followed a poor man named Shi Piao.

Unable to survive in his hometown, he wandered everywhere begging. One day, he heard of a place called Gao Family Village that took in refugees. With nothing to lose, he set off.

When he arrived, he was fed relief gruel—thin, but warm. He slept in a brightly painted refugee shack, eight people packed together like pickled vegetables.

He worked road construction. Lived in employee dormitories. Tried blacksmithing. Failed. Tried carpentry. Failed. Tried cooking. Failed.

Around him, friends flourished.

One became a blacksmith.

One a carpenter.

One joined the gunpowder workshop and suddenly had relatives he'd never met before.

Only Shi Piao remained... unremarkable.

Until one day, he found work as a whitewasher.

"I am a whitewasher," he declared proudly. "A master of my trade."

Life stabilized.

He earned wages. Moved into a larger house. Married a wife. Had a daughter.

The end.

San Shier closed the book.

"...Pfft."

He laughed helplessly. "This is painfully ordinary. No climax, no twist, no drama. It reads like a ledger. I can't print this."

Shi Piao blinked. "Huh?"

Li Daoxuan leaned closer.

Interesting.

The story lacked fireworks—but it had something rarer.

Details.

Relief gruel.

Refugee huts.

Dormitories.

Skill training.

Train rides to work.

Rice noodles after labor.

Street plays.

Buying candy with hard-earned wages.

It wasn't fantasy.

It was a map of Gao Family Village—seen through the eyes of a man who failed at almost everything, yet stayed.

Li Daoxuan smiled.

This book might not sell. It might even lose money.

But if it worked...

It would be the best recruitment poster Gao Family Village could ever have.

He turned his gaze toward the watchtower.

"Yiye," he called. "Stop staring into space. Time to work."

Gao Yiye, bored out of her mind, instantly brightened and jumped onto the balcony.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun! You need me?" she asked happily. "I thought once your incarnation descended, you wouldn't need me anymore."

The last sentence came out softer than intended.

Li Daoxuan smiled. "I didn't descend to play. I'm very busy."

"Busy eating hand-torn ribs?" she asked sweetly.

"...Focus."

"Yes!"

"Go tell San Shier this: the village treasury will not fund Gao Piao. Instead, you—as Saintess—will personally fund its printing. Profits and losses are yours alone."

Gao Yiye nodded without hesitation. "Understood."

As she turned to leave, Li Daoxuan added calmly:

"Sometimes, the most ordinary stories bring the most people."

She paused.

Then smiled.

Chapter 472 Distribute This Book

Gao Yiye was no stranger to publishing at her own risk.

Her previous venture—The Legend of Dao Xuan Tianzun, the Demon Slayer—had sold so well that her residence was now less a home and more a warehouse for silver. Coins piled up in corners. Boxes blocked hallways. The air itself smelled faintly of copper and success.

To Gao Yiye, this was not wealth.

It was an obstacle to walking.

For a long time, she'd taken to standing on the balcony just to breathe fresh air, staring into the distance and wondering when money had become so rude.

So when Dao Xuan Tianzun issued another divine decree, her spirits soared.

He still needs me!

Her steps became light. She practically skipped down from the watchtower, weaving through the aging stone alleys of the main fortress.

Thump!

She slammed straight into a man exiting San Shier's house.

The two tumbled apart.

Papers scattered like frightened birds.

The man scrambled up, took one look at the mess, and immediately collapsed back to his knees, eyes welling with tears.

"My illustrated book..." he wailed. "Steward San Shier didn't approve it... no chance of publication... and now it's all over the ground... What did I do in a past life to deserve this?!"

Gao Yiye rubbed her shoulder and looked down.

"Shi Piao?" she said. "Good timing. If you'd taken two more steps, you might've gone home and cried yourself into a new career."

Shi Piao froze.

"Huh?"

She smiled brightly. "Come with me. I'll help you publish it."

Happiness arrived so suddenly that Shi Piao nearly short-circuited.

If anyone else had said that, he wouldn't have believed it. But when the Saintess spoke, miracles tended to follow.

"R-Really?!" he gasped.

"Of course." Gao Yiye pointed skyward. "Dao Xuan Tianzun personally ordered me to handle this."

Shi Piao slammed his head to the ground.

"Many thanks, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"Careful," Gao Yiye said. "You'll dent the pavement. Pick up your manuscript first."

"Yes! Right away!"

Together, they gathered the scattered pages. Once everything was neatly stacked, Gao Yiye led him back into San Shier's home.

"Steward San Shier," she called cheerfully, "I'm here."

San Shier hurried out. "Saintess—ah? Shi Piao? You haven't left yet?"

Shi Piao stood straight, glowing. "I'm not leaving. The Saintess is helping me publish my book."

A large, invisible question mark slowly rose above San Shier's head.

Gao Yiye listened quietly to Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice from above, then smiled.

"I hear you didn't like Gao Piao," she said gently. "That's fine. You don't have to. I like it."

San Shier's question mark multiplied.

"I'll personally fund the printing," Gao Yiye continued. "Paper, engravers, printers, transport—everything. Profits and losses are on me. Shi Piao and I will split whatever comes out of it. The village treasury won't lose a single coin."

San Shier was stunned. "Saintess... have you actually read the book? It's unbelievably plain. No villains. No humiliation arcs. No sudden awakening where the protagonist crushes his enemies in three panels."

He gestured helplessly. "From beginning to end, it's just... life."

"Exactly." Gao Yiye giggled.

"Good literature should be like mountains," San Shier insisted. "Peaks and valleys! This is flatter than a salt pan. Commercially, it's doomed."

"I know," Gao Yiye said happily. "But for culture to thrive, you need more than one flavor. Let a hundred flowers bloom."

San Shier paused.

Wait.

That phrasing...

Realization dawned.

This wasn't her line.

He immediately bowed. "Understood. Since the Saintess bears the cost, we will print it."

"Not just print it," Gao Yiye said. "Distribute it."

San Shier stiffened. "Distribute... how?"

"Everywhere," she replied. "Baishui County. Dali County. Hancheng. Dragon Gate Ferry. Gudu Ferry. Anywhere our transport routes reach."

She smiled. "Bundle it with The Legend of Dao Xuan Tianzun, the Demon Slayer. Half-sale, half-gift."

San Shier's mind went blank.

That strategy was used only for books of strategic importance.

But Gao Piao was just... daily life.

Seeing his confusion, Gao Yiye laughed. "Steward San Shier, you're thinking too narrowly."

He looked up at the sky. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... this humble servant truly doesn't understand."

"That's fine," Gao Yiye said cheerfully. "The Heavenly Lord says this is called 'temporal limitations.'"

San Shier winced. "I don't even understand the term!"

"Then don't." She waved her hand. "Just do the work."

San Shier bowed and immediately rushed off.

One thing was clear: if this book ranked alongside Demon Slayer in priority, then engraving had to begin now.

More engravers were summoned. Multiple pages carved at once. Speed above all else.

The wind swept through Hancheng, carrying the earthy scent of the Yellow River.

Life here was improving—quietly, stubbornly.

Not long ago, a relief convoy had arrived from Heyang County, selling grain at absurdly low prices.

Well—selling books, technically.

The grain was just a bonus.

Every household now owned a copy of *The Legend of Dao Xuan Tianzun*, the Demon Slayer. People devoured it. When Dao Xuan Tianzun smote bandits, cheers erupted. Opera troupes scrambled to adapt the stories, and the city buzzed with his name.

Today, the convoy returned.

With a new book.

"Gao Piao"

Same deal. Buy a book, get grain.

No one questioned it anymore.

Soon, every street and alley held readers flipping pages—then frowning.

"This one's... strange."

"Nothing happens."

"Why is it just... chores?"

But page by page, murmurs changed.

"Wait—he gets food as soon as he arrives?"

"Eight people to a room, but that's still better than sleeping outside..."

"He earns flour in one day building roads!"

"Commoners can ride those giant vehicles?"

"His friend became a blacksmith and got rich... I'm a blacksmith too."

The city grew quieter.

People kept reading.

And somewhere far away, Gao Family Village quietly gained more residents—before anyone realized they'd already decided to go.

Chapter 473 Cultural Invasion

Han City had never been this noisy.

Every street corner buzzed with discussion, not about grain prices or bandits, but about picture books—colorful, shamelessly vivid ones—clutched in the hands of men, women, and children alike.

Unlike the old storybooks that required imagination, these didn't bother asking readers to picture anything.

They simply showed it.

Tall houses rose neatly from the pages. Wide streets bustled with people. The Gao Family commercial district looked so lively it practically spilled off the paper. Even the food was illustrated in cruel detail—steaming buns, glossy braised meat, bowls piled obscenely high.

"This isn't fair," someone muttered. "Why draw it like this? Now I'm hungry and poor."

The books made one thing painfully clear: life in Gao Family Village was not some unreachable fantasy.

Work existed. Pay was clear. Rules were enforced.

And no one stole your wages.

"I kind of want to go see it," one man said hesitantly. "I mean... staying in Han City, I'm already useless. Going somewhere else, at least I might be a useful useless person."

"I'm definitely more capable than the idiot in Gao Piao," another scoffed. "That guy didn't know anything. I at least know how to count change."

"I make sesame flatbreads," a third chimed in eagerly. "If I opened a stall there, maybe I'd actually earn silver instead of apologies."

"And there's a god watching over them," someone added in a lowered voice. "Dao Xuan Tianzun."

"Gods?" a rough voice snorted. "I don't care if there are gods. If they pay me fairly and don't let anyone rob me, I'll worship the payroll."

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

And the discussions didn't fade.

They multiplied.

Han City was already a husk. After Wang Zuogua's repeated assaults, the surrounding villages had been stripped bare. Refugees poured in, only to find nothing waiting for them but other refugees.

Once you'd already lost your home, the idea of going a little farther stopped feeling scary.

It started to feel... reasonable.

And just as that thought settled in—

The grain convoy from Heyang County arrived again.

Carts rolled in. Grain was unloaded. Familiar faces appeared.

Then a man dressed like a merchant stepped forward into the market square and raised his voice.

"My name is Tan Liwen," he announced. "From the Gao Family Village Management Committee."

The words Management Committee alone made people stand straighter.

"We are currently recruiting workers," Tan Liwen continued calmly. "The following positions are open: blacksmiths—unlimited. Carpenters—unlimited. Engravers—five. Lamp makers—two. Dyers—twenty. General laborers—unlimited."

The crowd stared.

Unlimited?

That wasn't recruitment.

That was a vacuum.

"I can do one of those!" someone shouted.

The realization spread like fire through dry grass.

People surged forward, shouting questions over one another.

"What's a blacksmith paid?!"

"I make lamps! How much do lamp makers earn?!"

"What about just carrying things?!"

The crowd vibrated with energy, pacing, shoving, craning necks—more anxious than a man waiting outside a delivery room for his first child.

Tan Liwen didn't answer a single question.

Instead, he calmly unfurled a massive sheet of paper and pasted it onto a nearby wall.

No one stopped him.

In later eras, officials would have arrested him on the spot for illegal posting. But in these times, walls were honest things. If you had something worth saying, you stuck it there.

The crowd surged closer.

Then they froze.

The paper wasn't text.

It was pictures.

A blacksmith hammering iron.

Three silver ingots beside him.

Understanding struck instantly.

"Three taels..."

Below it, a carpenter sawing wood.

Three silver ingots again.

Gasps followed.

At the bottom, a man hauling heavy loads—clearly a general laborer.

Beside him: three small piles of flour.

Three catties.

They scanned the page again and again.

Skilled work brought silver. No skills still brought food.

There was no trick.

No fine print.

Tan Liwen's voice rang out once more.

"Our grain carts will return to Gao Family Village once unloading is complete. Anyone who wishes to work there may travel with us."

That sentence shattered the final barrier.

For people who had never left home, the greatest fear wasn't distance—it was going alone.

But this?

This came with carts. With officials. With food.

"I'm going!"

"I'll go too!"

"Count me in!"

A wave surged forward.

Tan Liwen allowed himself a faint smile.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had been right.

Trying to convince people who knew nothing would have been impossible.

But Gao Piao had already done the work.

It showed them what life looked like.

So now, only a few words were needed.

Tianzun called this cultural invasion.

Tan Liwen finally understood.

Conquer the heart first. The feet would follow.

At dawn, the convoy departed.

Empty carts rolled south.

Behind them walked a sea of refugees, each carrying a small bundle containing everything they owned. Children stumbled along, dragged by hands that refused to let go.

They walked for hours.

Then days.

When they crossed into Heyang County, the difference hit them like a slap.

Green fields stretched endlessly. Crops stood tall. The land looked... confident.

Farmers sang as they worked.

By the roadside, old men sat chatting, smiling as they watched the massive procession pass.

Tan Liwen stopped and greeted them. "Elders, how are the crops this year?"

The old men laughed.

"Thanks to Gao Family Village," one said cheerfully. "You brought fertilizer—and Mr. Zhao! Last year's Celestial Fertilizer worked wonders. This year will be even better."

He puffed up proudly. "I memorized the mixing method perfectly!"

Another sighed. "But we haven't seen Mr. Zhao in a long time. How is he?"

Tan Liwen smiled. "He's gone to Shanxi. Helping people there."

The old men grew solemn.

"What a good man," one murmured. "Helping Heyang, then Shanxi. We hope heaven rewards him—and that his breathing gets better."

"Gulp! Gulp!"

At Gudu Ferry, Zhao Sheng grimaced as he swallowed a bowl of bitter medicinal soup.

"When you brew this," he whimpered, "couldn't you add a little more sugar?"

Perched on the attendant's shoulder, the tiny Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun snorted.

"Excess sugar leads to weight gain. Weight gain worsens respiratory conditions. This Tianzun forbids it."

Zhao Sheng wailed. "Tianzun! I am deeply moved by your concern! But such boundless care is truly unbearable! Please—just one spoon!"

Tianzun ignored him entirely and flopped over, arms crossed.

Zhao Sheng stared at the soup.

Then at the puppet.

Then drank anyway—tears included.

Chapter 474 This Old Man's First Time Playing the Villain

Hejin County Town!

Shi Jian led more than fifty garrison soldiers sprinting through the streets, shouting until their throats went hoarse.

"Everyone, move! Leave Hejin County Town at once! Head for Dragon Gate Ferry! Wang Jiayin's bandits are on the way—if you stay, you'll die here!"

Beside them scampered the Titanic Dao Xuan Tianzun, moving with surprising agility for something that technically shouldn't count as a living being.

Li Daoxuan had always thought of himself as a stay-at-home type—an indoor cultivator of the highest order. Yet ever since he'd unlocked statue co-sensing, he'd developed a worrying habit of going outside and causing trouble.

Perhaps no one was truly a homebody. They were merely people who hadn't yet found something outside more entertaining than staying in.

The Titanic Dao Xuan Tianzun, molded from silicone and frighteningly lifelike, blended perfectly into the crowd. Dressed in plain clothes, he looked like nothing more than a slightly aloof young man jogging through the city. No one mistook him for a monster—at worst, they thought he was a refugee with unusually calm eyes.

At first, Li Daoxuan treated this trip like sightseeing.

Then he saw Hejin County Town properly.

Burned-out houses littered the streets. Walls collapsed inward like broken ribs. Gaunt figures wandered aimlessly, eyes empty, expressions numb.

His mood sank.

Most townsfolk, hearing Shi Jian's shouts, hurriedly packed what little they had and followed the soldiers out. Outside the city, personnel were already organizing evacuation routes, guiding people toward Dragon Gate Ferry, where they would be fed and sheltered, and where a water fortress would soon rise.

But not everyone moved.

A small group remained seated amid the ruins, staring blankly into space.

Why run?

Die to bandits.

Die to hunger.

What difference did it make?

Li Daoxuan leaned toward Shi Jian and murmured a few instructions.

Shi Jian nodded sharply, then barked new orders. The soldiers changed their pitch and shouted again as they charged through the streets:

"Everyone, go to Dragon Gate Ferry! There's food—real food, every day! And if you help build the docks and the water fortress, you'll be paid daily!"

That did it.

The hollow-eyed refugees stirred. Food and wages? That sounded better than waiting to be slaughtered like livestock.

More people began to move.

Still—around five hundred remained.

They didn't trust officials.

They trusted soldiers even less.

"Relief food?" someone scoffed. "From soldiers? You expect us to believe that?"

"Paid labor?" another spat. "Working for the army and getting money? I wasn't born yesterday."

Shi Jian felt his scalp tightening.

The soldiers were equally helpless. Fighting bandits? Fine. Killing enemies? No problem. Convincing civilians who'd been betrayed a dozen times already?

That was harder than facing cavalry.

A group of soldiers returned, whispering urgently. "Centurion Shi... there are still over five hundred who won't leave. They think the bandits won't come back."

One soldier hesitated, then said, "Should we... just pull out and retreat?"

Bam!

Shi Jian's fist knocked the man flat.

"Idiot!" Shi Jian roared. "If they don't trust us, that's because soldiers earned this reputation! And now you want to abandon them? If we do that, we deserve every curse they throw at us!"

The beaten soldier scrambled up, covering his face, not daring to reply.

Another asked quietly, "Then... what do we do?"

Silence fell.

At last, Shi Jian turned to the Titanic Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Li Daoxuan climbed onto a half-burned rooftop, surveying the shattered town.

Even if the bandits never return, he thought, this place is finished. Without rebuilding from scratch, no one survives here.

Those five hundred had to leave—whether they liked it or not.

He asked calmly, "You've heard the story of Feilai Peak?"

The soldiers nodded.

"Master Jigong warned a mountain would fall. The villagers didn't believe him. So he grabbed a young woman and ran. Her family chased him... and that's when the mountain crushed the village."

Li Daoxuan folded his arms. "Extraordinary times require extraordinary methods. Even if the method looks wicked—if the result saves lives, it's worth it."

Shi Jian's eyes lit up. "Understood! I'll go grab a—"

Li Daoxuan's eyelid twitched.

"...You'll what?"

Shi Jian blinked.

Li Daoxuan stared at him. "Why is kidnapping women always your first idea?"

Shi Jian froze. "...Isn't that how the story goes?"

Li Daoxuan sighed deeply. "You're soldiers. Be intimidating. Be unreasonable. Be the thing people fear."

Shi Jian slapped his forehead. "Right!"

He rallied his men, all fifty-plus soldiers donning savage expressions as they stormed toward the stubborn group.

Shi Jian snarled, voice cold as iron.

"All of you—move to Dragon Gate Ferry now. Anyone who refuses, I'll chop them up and report them as bandit chiefs!"

The effect was immediate.

The five hundred stiffened. Courage evaporated. Nobody wanted to test whether this was bluff or truth.

They packed up and fled the city at once.

More than ten thousand refugees streamed out of Hejin County Town.

They trudged for dozens of li, dragging children, carrying the elderly, crying all the way. By the time they reached Dragon Gate Ferry, they expected misery.

Instead—

A massive cargo ship was docked at the pier.

Grain was being unloaded nonstop.

A foreman shouted, "What are you staring at? Come help unload—food's waiting!"

At the word food, hesitation became blasphemy.

The refugees surged forward.

Chaos turned into order. The elderly, women, and children began cooking for thousands. Able-bodied men hauled cargo without being asked.

By the time the last arrivals showed up—the five hundred stubborn ones—they froze.

Instead of chains or whips, they saw steaming noodle pots and people working willingly.

Someone whispered, stunned, "They... didn't lie?"

Only then did Shi Jian relax his scowl. He rubbed his face and muttered with a bitter laugh:

"To save you hardheaded fools, this old man had to play the villain for the first time in his life... damn it."

Chapter 475 We're Helping the Common People

While the people of Hejin County were still being relocated...

Wang Jiayin's massive bandit host swept through Taiyuan Prefecture, Fenzhou (modern Fenyang), Lu'an Prefecture (modern Changzhi), and Zezhou (modern Jincheng), pushing relentlessly into the Qin River basin.

Several days later, more than ten thousand men split off from the main force and marched westward, their objective clear—

Pinelyang Prefecture (Linfen).

The straight-line distance between Pinelyang and Hejin County was barely over a hundred li.

Hooves thundered.

A military courier rode hard, dust flying behind him.

He was an official messenger bearing urgent intelligence. Yet when he arrived at Hejin County, he nearly fell off his horse.

The city was empty.

Not abandoned—emptied.

No magistrate.

No yamen runners.

No common folk.

A dead city.

The messenger knew Bu Zhan Ni had slaughtered the county officials and that Hejin had long since fallen out of effective control—but he hadn't expected it to be this clean.

For a moment, he wondered if the city had been cursed.

Shaking off the thought, he spurred his horse onward and continued south.

When he reached Dragon Gate Ferry, his jaw nearly dropped.

Thousands upon thousands of people were working feverishly—cutting trees, hauling stone, erecting palisades. A massive waterside fortress was taking shape with alarming speed.

Above it all flew a single banner:

"Shi."

The messenger's heart skipped.

Shi Yaoyu?

One of Wang Jiayin's bandit chiefs?

But a closer look told a different story.

The archers on the watchtowers wore regulation armor. Their formations were disciplined. Their movements were precise.

Bandits destroyed.

They didn't build.

This was a government stronghold.

The messenger rode to the gate and shouted, "Who commands this garrison?"

A sentry replied crisply, "Under Grand General Wang Cheng'en of Shaanxi—Centurion Shi Jian."

"...A centurion?"

The messenger almost cursed aloud.

This fortress.

This population.

Run by a centurion?

And the man even dared to fly his own banner?

Suppressing disbelief, he called, "Summon Centurion Shi!"

Shi Jian quickly came out to meet him.

The messenger blurted, "How many troops do you have?"

Shi Jian replied honestly, "I'm a centurion. How many do you think?"

The messenger fell silent.

Right.

That question was on him.

He hurriedly explained, "I am an envoy of Commander Li Huai. Over ten thousand of Wang Jiayin's men are preparing to assault Pinelyang Prefecture. General Li has only eight hundred soldiers. He fears he cannot hold. He requests immediate reinforcement from all nearby forces!"

Behind Shi Jian, the Dao Xuan Tianzun listened quietly.

Eight hundred versus ten thousand...

Li Daoxuan nodded internally. Government troops clearly have the advantage.

Then he froze.

Wait. No.

If I think they have the advantage, then they're absolutely going to lose.

This was the immutable Advantage-in-Me Law.

Shi Jian sighed and replied, "Regrettably, I command only fifty-odd soldiers. And as you can see, I must protect tens of thousands of refugees. I truly cannot spare men."

The messenger expected nothing more. He only said grimly, "Pinelyang is only a hundred li away. If General Li falls, the bandits will come here next."

With that, he turned his horse and rode off without looking back.

Once the messenger vanished, Shi Jian leaned close and whispered, "Tianzun... what should we do? Should we help?"

Li Daoxuan's silicone eyes rotated once.

He considered it for exactly one hundredth of a second.

"Yes."

Shi Jian blinked. "We're... helping the government?"

Li Daoxuan corrected him calmly.

"We are helping the common people."

"Pinelyang is a prefectural city. Its population may exceed a hundred thousand. If it falls, rivers of blood will follow."

Shi Jian inhaled sharply. "...You're right."

Li Daoxuan's awareness extended outward, syncing with his logistics network.

"Do not worry. Reinforcements from Gao Family Village are already on the way."

"How many?"

"Two hundred."

Shi Jian nodded—then soon understood why.

A cannon-armed transport vessel arrived.

Two hundred militia disembarked.

Among them—one hundred veterans from Wangjia Village, led by none other than Wang Er himself.

Officially, they were Bai Mao's "private troops."

In reality?

The most infamous rebel in the land was now commanding a government unit.

This was called infiltrating the system from the inside.

Wang Er had removed his mask and deliberately styled his hair in an outrageous fashion—long bangs covering half his face, a thick beard merging with it, wild and unkempt.

No one could recognize him.

Shi Jian finally realized Bai Mao had been promoted to bazong, now commanding four hundred men.

He laughed. "Then I'll lead Bai Mao's unit to reinforce Li Huai. If all goes well, I might even get promoted myself."

"Go," Li Daoxuan said. "But be cautious. These are smoothbore arquebuses being phased out. Use them wisely."

"Understood."

Wang Er added solemnly, "Rest assured, Tianzun."

Shi Jian left his fifty garrison soldiers behind to guard the refugees. He and Wang Er prepared to march.

Before leaving, Shi Jian hesitated and asked, "Brother Wang... did you bring an image of Dao Xuan Tianzun? Ever since I gave mine away, food hasn't tasted right."

Wang Er tapped his chest.

An embroidered image stared back—its eyes quietly shimmering.

Shi Jian was ecstatic. "I'll embroider one too!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun watched silently.

This is how religions spread, he thought.

By hunger, fear, and extremely practical benefits.

Chapter 476 Ambush

Sun Family Ravine, six li south of Pingyang Prefecture.

Commander Li Huai was running for his life.

His armor was gone—discarded somewhere along the road. His helmet too. Sweat, dust, and fear plastered his hair to his skull as he fled through the ravine with what remained of his troops.

Not long ago, he had fought Wang Jiayin's forces.

Or rather—he had been crushed by them.

This time, it wasn't Wang Jiayin's main host, but a detachment of ten thousand, led by Zhang Xianzhong, one of the infamous Eight Great Kings of the South Camp. There were no elderly, no women, no children among them—only prime-age fighters, hardened and vicious.

All the dependents had been abandoned back in Hequ County during the rebels' breakout from the encirclement. Imperial Censor Wu Shen was now shepherding those thirty thousand refugees toward Gao Family Village.

Gao Family Village, for its part, was about to gain another generous batch of labor reform candidates.

With their burdens gone and supply lines discarded, the rebel army moved like a released beast. Where before they crawled nine li a day, now they marched twenty, thirty—sometimes more—pulling off so-called "military miracles" like hundred-li forced marches.

Against this, Li Huai had eight hundred men.

None elite.

The result had been decided before the battle began.

His formation collapsed almost instantly. Casualties mounted. Discipline shattered. In the end, Li Huai had only one thought left—

Run.

"Through Sun Family Ravine!" his aides shouted. "Another six li and we reach Pingyang! Run!"

Men shoved, stumbled, and screamed as they forced their way through the narrow gorge.

They had no idea that at the northern exit of the ravine, death was already waiting.

Wang Er.

Shi Jian.

Two hundred militia soldiers.

They had sealed the exit into a killing pocket.

Two hundred smoothbore arquebuses were leveled calmly at the ravine's mouth.

No shouting.

No movement.

Only patience.

The noise of pursuit grew louder—boots, shouting, ragged breathing. Then figures burst out of the ravine.

Li Huai staggered into the open first, hair wild, eyes bloodshot, dragging a few hundred broken men behind him. Some glanced back in terror. Others didn't dare look.

Several hundred meters behind them, Zhang Xianzhong charged like a madman, laughing as he ran.

"You cowardly officials! Stop running!" he roared. "Turn around and fight!"

"When I catch you and break Pingyang Prefecture, I'll slaughter every last one of you!"

He laughed as he threatened—loud, theatrical, obscene. Only a bandit king could turn murder into performance.

Li Huai burst out of the ravine and saw woods ahead.

Without thinking, he plunged in with his guards.

He had hoped for cover.

Instead, hands seized him from both sides.

He slammed to the ground.

It's over, he thought grimly. A rebel ambush.

Then a calm voice spoke beside his ear.

"Commander Li, don't be afraid. We're government troops."

Li Huai froze.

He looked up.

Uniforms—proper ones. Armor in regulation style. Faces disciplined, alert.

Not rebels.

"Which unit?" he asked hoarsely.

The young man replied, "Shi Jian. Centurion under Grand General Wang Cheng'en of Shaanxi."

Relief surged—then immediately turned to dread.

"A centurion?" Li Huai blurted. "So... a hundred men?"

Shi Jian smiled. "I'm assisting with troop transport. I have a bit more."

Li Huai grabbed his arm. "How many?"

"Two hundred."

Li Huai almost choked.

Two hundred?

What could two hundred men possibly do?

Shi Jian, however, spoke evenly. "Commander Li, stop your banner here. Gather what men you can. Then—watch."

Li Huai hesitated.

If I run back to Pingyang like this, I'll still be punished. If I can delay the enemy even briefly...

He clenched his teeth. "Fine."

He planted his banner.

Some soldiers kept fleeing. Others, seeing the standard, instinctively gathered around it.

And of course—

The rebels charged toward it.

From afar, Zhang Xianzhong saw the banner standing still above the trees.

He burst out laughing.

"Not running anymore, Li Huai?" he shouted. "Planning to make a final stand in a patch of woods?"

"Your grandpa's here to take your dog life!"

The rebels surged forward.

They weren't entirely stupid. Woods meant ambush. They expected blades, shouting men, sudden charges.

What they didn't expect—

Was silence.

Then a voice cut through it.

"Fire."

The first hundred arquebuses roared.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Dozens of rebels at the front dropped instantly.

Zhang Xianzhong froze—then laughed again.

"That's it?" he mocked. "A hundred guns?"

"Don't be afraid! Charge!"

Before the words finished—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The second hundred fired.

Another swathe of rebels collapsed.

The ravine mouth was narrow. Men piled up. Momentum stalled.

Confusion rippled through the rear ranks.

And in that heartbeat of hesitation—

The first line finished reloading.

Less than thirty seconds.

They raised their guns again.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The ambush tightened its jaws.

Trivia :

Why Smoothbore Guns Still Dominate Choke-Point Battles

At first glance, smoothbore firearms look clumsy—slow to reload, inaccurate at long range, and technologically inferior to later rifled weapons.

So why do they absolutely terrorize enemies in places like ravines, gates, bridges, and narrow streets?

Short answer: geometry beats technology.

1. Choke Points Cancel Accuracy

In open fields, accuracy matters.

In a ravine? Targets line up for you.

When enemies are forced through:

narrow exits

gates

bridges

mountain passes

they cannot spread out. Even wildly inaccurate shots still hit something. Miss the man you aimed at, and the bullet finds his friend.

In historical terms: you don't shoot to aim—you shoot to fill space.

2. Volume of Fire > Precision

Smoothbores excel at one thing: putting a lot of lead downrange, fast.

No need to carefully aim

Fire, reload, fire again

Multiple ranks cycling shots

Against tightly packed troops, this creates continuous shock. Not just physical damage—but psychological collapse.

Historically, soldiers feared the sound of smoothbores almost as much as the bullets.

3. Choke Points Turn Casualties into Obstacles

In open terrain, fallen men are bypassed.

In a ravine?

They pile up.

Bodies block movement.

Wounded scream and panic spreads.

The rear ranks don't know what's happening.

Suddenly, the enemy isn't charging forward anymore—they're trapped behind their own dead.

This effect was famously exploited:

in mountain warfare

city gate defenses

river crossings

fortress approaches

4. Reload Time Becomes Irrelevant

Smoothbores are "slow" only when the enemy can keep advancing freely.

In choke points:

the enemy must slow down

even a brief pause is fatal

staggered volleys maintain constant pressure

That's why alternating fire (as used here) was historically devastating.

Two hundred smoothbores ≈ continuous death funnel.

5. Fear Multiplies Losses

Smoothbore wounds were horrific:

large-caliber balls

shattered bones

massive bleeding

In tight terrain, seeing comrades torn apart at arm's length breaks morale instantly.

Many historical routs happened before half the men were even hit.

Men run not because they're dead—but because they don't want to be next.

Fun Historical Examples

Swiss pike passes vs musket troops

Ottoman chokepoint defenses

Ming & Qing fortress ravines

European gate battles before rifled muskets

In every case:

A narrow space + crude guns = industrialized slaughter.

Chapter 477 The Two-Stage Firing Method

The tactic currently employed by the Gao Family Village militia was known as the two-stage firing method.

One hundred riflemen would step forward and fire, then immediately fall back to reload. At the same time, the second hundred would advance, fire, and withdraw—after which the first group would step up again.

Compared to the more famous three-stage volley, the two-stage method produced a slower firing cycle, with slightly longer gaps between volleys. However, it had one overwhelming advantage:

It was actually trainable.

Only after personally drilling the militia did Li Daoxuan realize how outrageously unrealistic the three-stage volley was outside of storybooks.

In novels, protagonists introduced the three-rank rotation with a few shouted commands and magically obedient soldiers. In reality, even one mistimed step caused a chain reaction. One man hesitated, the next bumped into him, a third panicked—and before long, the entire formation collapsed into chaos.

Worse still, Gao Family Village was expanding at breakneck speed. New recruits poured in constantly. Just as one unit became proficient, it absorbed fresh faces who needed retraining.

In such conditions, insisting on the three-stage method was nothing short of delusional.

Thus, the two-stage firing method became the militia's standard.

And today—

Today was its first true battlefield test.

The soldiers were nervous, but they held their ground.

Sheltered by the woods and arranged in a pouch-like formation, they avoided direct melee contact and reduced the risk of disorder during reloads.

The rhythm settled quickly.

One hundred fired.

Another hundred replaced them.

Reload.

Advance.

Fire again.

Each rotation took just over ten seconds.

It was enough.

Completely enough.

Outside the forest, the rebels were thrown into total confusion.

"Damn it! How many riflemen are in there?!"

"More than a hundred!"

"No—more than two hundred!"

"At least five hundred!"

"They're still firing—still firing!"

Panic spread like rot.

To the rebels, the woods had become a living thing—gunfire erupting from nowhere, muzzle flashes blooming like ghostly fireflies, smoke drifting and vanishing without pattern. Bullets slammed relentlessly into Sunjiagou Pass.

The rebels who had surged out of the ravine now screamed in terror, unable to tell where death would strike next.

They weren't the only ones stunned.

Commander Li Huai stood frozen, mouth hanging open wide enough to swallow an egg.

Muskets weren't rare. He'd seen plenty.

But a centurion commanding two hundred muskets—and using them to simulate the firepower of five hundred?

That defied all reason.

Ten thousand ferocious bandits were now jammed at the ravine mouth. Those in front hesitated. Those behind refused to advance.

And just like that—

Li Huai's routed soldiers rallied.

Moments earlier, they had been scattering like headless chickens. Now, instinctively, they gathered beneath the "Li" banner. In the blink of an eye, his eight hundred men seemed to rise from the dead.

Well—almost.

Seventy or eighty had already fallen.

Many had ditched their helmets and armor during the rout.

Some stood barefoot, clutching nothing at all.

Li Huai took one look and felt a surge of despair.

Even rallied, this was still a pile of trash.

"Where are your helmets? Your spears?" he roared. "Did you throw them all away? Damn it—you pile of dog shit!"

Before his rant could continue, a lazy voice cut in.

"General Li," Wang Er said dryly, "where is your helmet?"

Li Huai froze.

A sharp inhale.

Fine. He'd lost enough face already—what was a little more?

He cupped his fists toward Wang Er and Shi Jian. "Gentlemen, please. Help me defend Pingyang Prefecture. If the city falls, countless lives—"

Wang Er interrupted, voice dripping with sarcasm. "You mean countless lives... or your official hat?"

Li Huai went silent again.

Then he exploded. "You insolent bastard! A mere foot soldier daring to lecture this general! What is your position—official critic?"

Wang Er was about to snap back—

Then remembered who he was pretending to be.

Forget it. He snorted and turned away.

On his chest, the embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun stretched into a wide, mischievous grin.

Li Huai blinked.

"...Did that embroidery just smile?"

He stared again.

Nothing.

"...Hallucination?"

Shi Jian stepped forward calmly. "General Li, your men may lack armor and weapons—but they still have mouths."

Li Huai frowned. "And what good are mouths?"

Shi Jian grinned. "Everyone—shout with me."

He bellowed toward the ravine mouth:

"Hahahaha! You foolish rebels! You've fallen straight into this general's trap! With the ambush sprung, not one of you will escape alive!"

Understanding dawned instantly.

Li Huai joined in.

Then his soldiers.

Hundreds of voices roared together, blending with the gunfire, echoing through the ravine like thunder.

Outside, the rebels' hearts sank.

Zhang Xianzhong, the Eight Great Kings of the Southern Camp, roared in fury:

"Damn it! Li Huai deliberately lost! He lured us in!"

"We've fallen for it—retreat! Retreat now!"

The rebels needed no further encouragement.

Already shaken by relentless gunfire, they turned and fled in a screaming mass, pouring back out of Sunjiagou's southern exit and vanishing into the distance.

Silence fell.

Li Huai collapsed where he stood.

He couldn't run anymore.

Neither could his men.

Wang Er looked at the stripped, panting government soldiers with open disdain. He wanted to speak—but restrained himself.

Then a soft chuckle sounded from his chest.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice whispered, amused:

"The army is the backbone of a nation. Look at them—what a sorry backbone the Great Ming has now, hm?"

Wang Er muttered, "Heavenly—no, Dao Xuan Tianzun is right. These soldiers are rotten to the core."

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "Then look at the rebels. How are they?"

Wang Er thought seriously for a moment... then sighed.

"Even worse."

Li Daoxuan concluded, "That is why neither side can protect this realm."

Wang Er's eyes lit up.

"...I understand now."

"This realm—"

"It must depend on us."

Chapter 478 Keep This Force Here

Shi Jian and Wang Er led two hundred flintlock riflemen into Pingyang Prefecture.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, nestled against Wang Er's chest, followed along as well.

In later generations, this place would be known as Linfen, one of the cradles of Chinese civilization, steeped in ancient glory and cultural heritage. The moment Li Daoxuan entered the city, excitement surged.

"A tourist destination!" he thought eagerly. "This time it must be a real historical city, not another fake scenic spot, right?"

Pffft!

If he had possessed a physical body, he would have spat blood on the spot.

Pingyang Prefecture had no "historical charm" to speak of. No ancient splendor, no grand monuments—only rows of collapsing houses, cracked walls, and muddy streets. Refugees crowded every corner, shoving and stumbling past one another, while nearly all the shops along the streets sat shuttered and abandoned.

Fear hung over the city like a shroud.

The Prefect of Pingyang, escorted by a large entourage of constables, clerks, militia, and assorted hangers-on, stood guard at the city gates. His face was pale with anxiety. The moment he saw Li Huai return, he hurried forward.

"General Li, what is the situation of the ban—"

The words died in his throat.

Li Huai stood before him in utter disarray, helmet missing, armor half gone. Behind him, most of the soldiers had also abandoned their gear, looking stripped, ragged, and humiliated.

The Prefect's heart sank.

It's over. Completely over.

Pingyang Prefecture is finished.

This official will die with the city.

Just as despair overwhelmed him, Li Huai suddenly pointed at Shi Jian.

"This is Centurion Shi Jian," he announced. "A valiant commander under Regional Commander Wang Cheng'en of Shaanxi. It was entirely thanks to Centurion Shi that the bandit army was repelled."

The Prefect blurted out, "What? A centurion?"

To a prefect, a centurion was practically invisible—an officer smaller than a sesame seed. His first thought was disbelief.

A mere centurion defeated ten thousand bandits? Is Li Huai trying to fool me?

But immediately, he realized something was off.

That's not right.

He knew Li Huai well enough. Military officers were notorious for stealing credit from subordinates. If Li Huai could take the glory, he absolutely would.

Yet here he was, openly attributing the achievement to a junior officer.

That means this centurion must be terrifyingly capable—so capable that Li Huai dares not claim his merit.

The Prefect's expression changed at once.

He clasped his hands toward Shi Jian. "This official, Dou Wenda, thanks General Shi for coming to Pingyang's aid. Though the bandits have retreated for now, they may return at any time. Our prefecture will still have to rely on General Shi."

Shi Jian replied modestly, "I am but an insignificant centurion, merely transporting troops for a colleague while passing through."

Li Huai leaned closer to Dou Wenda and whispered, "Centurion Shi commands two hundred flintlock riflemen—but they aren't his. They're the private guards of a battalion commander. He's only escorting them and plans to leave soon."

Dou Wenda's eyes widened.

Two hundred flintlock soldiers?

A battalion commander's private guards are this well-equipped?

This was no ordinary backer.

Leave? Absolutely not.

Pingyang Prefecture had no real defensive force. Li Huai was useless. If these men left, the city would be helpless.

But private guards were not imperial troops—there was no lawful way to detain them.

Dou Wenda's mind raced.

Keeping the guards is impossible... but luring their master here? That can be done.

He whispered urgently, "What is this battalion commander's name? Where does he serve?"

Li Huai replied, "He serves under Regional Commander Wang Cheng'en of Shaanxi. His name is Wang Xiaohua."

Dou Wenda's eyes lit up. "Then this matter is simple."

He turned sharply. "Quick! Bring paper and brush!"

Moments later, he began writing a tear-stained memorial, painting Pingyang Prefecture as a city on the brink of annihilation—besieged by bandits, soldiers dying daily, the people facing extinction. He praised Centurion Shi and Battalion Commander Wang for their timely assistance, claiming the city had barely survived thanks to them.

He emphasized that Pingyang dared not ask for many troops, understanding the court's difficulties.

All it requested was one battalion commander.

That alone would suffice.

He sealed the letter and handed it to a trusted confidant. "Deliver this to Supreme Commander Yang at once!"

The messenger rode off at full speed.

Dou Wenda then turned back, smiling warmly. "General Shi, escorting troops must be exhausting. Since you're already here, why not rest in Pingyang for two or three days before continuing?"

Shi Jian replied evenly, "The military situation is urgent. I must deliver these soldiers to Battalion Commander Wang without delay."

Dou Wenda countered smoothly, "Battalion Commander Wang is deep within the main army. These two hundred men are hardly vital to him. Leaving a few days later will make no difference."

As the two continued their polite back-and-forth, Dao Xuan Tianzun watched with quiet amusement.

"Leaving these two hundred here isn't a bad move," he mused. "Pingyang connects north and south—it's a strategic node. Keeping a foothold here will be useful. Besides, the imperial encirclement against Wang Jiayin is nearly over. Bai Mao won't gain much staying with Wang Cheng'en."

He whispered a few instructions.

Wang Er listened, then leaned toward Shi Jian and murmured, "The Dao Xuan Tianzun commands..."

Shi Jian's expression changed immediately.

He smiled. "In that case, I shall impose upon Pingyang for a few days."

Dou Wenda's heart finally settled.

A banquet was arranged at once, lavish and enthusiastic, lest these precious soldiers change their minds and leave.

Not long after, the messenger reached Supreme Commander Yang He.

Upon reading the memorial, Yang He was alarmed. Pingyang Prefecture was indeed in grave danger—and the request was modest.

Without hesitation, he issued an order: Battalion Commander Wang Xiaohua was to proceed to Pingyang with his men.

Several days later, Bai Mao arrived, leading two hundred and forty guards. He met with Shi Jian, who formally transferred the two hundred flintlock riflemen.

In reality, command rested with Wang Er—but Bai Mao held the official title.

They garrisoned Pingyang Prefecture.

Before long, Dou Wenda noticed something astonishing.

Battalion Commander Wang's troops were exceptionally disciplined.

The two hundred private guards never oppressed civilians and often helped common folk with labor and repairs. The remaining two hundred and forty were rougher—occasionally trying to take goods without payment—but Bai Mao punished them harshly, forcing apologies and compensation.

Watching this, Dou Wenda grew thoughtful.

Who knows how long this rebellion will last?

If only I could keep this force here permanently...

He smiled faintly.

"This official will slowly devise a plan."

Chapter 479 The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun

With Bai Mao's troops firmly in place, Pingyang Prefecture finally found something it had lacked for a long time:

Stability.

Two hundred flintlock riflemen garrisoned atop solid city walls were not decoration. When the Eight Great Kings of the Southern Camp launched two probing assaults, they were smashed back by disciplined volleys from the ramparts. Smoke rolled, lead sang, and rebel morale cracked cleanly—twice.

General Li Huai, who had once fled faster than his own shadow, underwent a miraculous transformation.

With the riflemen backing him, courage suddenly bloomed like weeds after rain.

The moment rebel formations wavered under gunfire, Li Huai would fling open the city gates and roar forward, leading a charge as if bravery had been part of his character all along. The Eight Great Kings of the Southern Camp were chased off repeatedly, fleeing in genuine panic.

After several days of holding out, Shanxi Governor Song Tongyin arrived with a massive relief army. He personally directed the campaign and crushed the remaining rebel forces in one decisive stroke.

Pingyang Prefecture was finally at peace.

Unfortunately, peace did not mean harmony.

Almost immediately, Governor Song Tongyin and Prefect Dou Wenda began arguing.

Loudly.

Dou Wenda, though only a prefect, stood his ground with stiff resolve, voice ringing through the hall.

"Your Excellency," he declared, "I ask that you take all Shanxi troops with you. Pingyang Prefecture requires only Captain Wang of Shaanxi for its defense."

Song Tongyin's expression darkened. "Dou Wenda! Pingyang is under Shanxi's jurisdiction. What issue could there be with Shanxi troops guarding it? Why do you insist on keeping Shaanxi soldiers instead?"

Dou Wenda didn't retreat an inch.

"Since taking office, this humble servant has governed diligently. I do not claim prosperity—but despite disasters, the people endured. Yet the moment Your Excellency's army arrived, Pingyang descended into chaos."

He slapped the table.

"In mere days, how many civilians have your soldiers harmed?"

Song Tongyin fell silent.

Truth be told, Song Tongyin was a good official.

A jinshi of the Wanli era, upright and incorruptible. As a prefect, he had rejected bribes outright. During the Tianqi years, he organized flood relief, crushed the White Lotus cult, and earned genuine loyalty from the people. By Chongzhen's second year, his accumulated merit had elevated him to Governor of Shanxi.

But good officials could not magically fix rotten systems.

Bandit uprisings flooded Shanxi. Troops were rushed from battlefield to battlefield. Discipline frayed. Soldiers bullied civilians. Song Tongyin knew it—and it tormented him.

Being confronted so bluntly by Dou Wenda left him humiliated.

After a long pause, he sighed deeply.

"These military ruffians have no discipline," he admitted. "The empire is in chaos. They ignore orders and defy command. I can only wait until the bandits are suppressed, then memorialize the Ministry of War for punishment."

Dou Wenda snapped back, "Later is later! Their crimes are happening now. This prefecture cannot tolerate them. They must leave!"

Song Tongyin frowned. "And the Shaanxi troops—are they any better?"

Dou Wenda straightened proudly.

"Captain Wang's men are exemplary. Look for yourself."

He threw open the window.

From the second floor of the yamen, they saw a Gao Family Village militia soldier helping an elderly man carry a heavy shoulder pole loaded with battered iron pots—likely everything the old man owned. The soldier walked patiently beside him, smiling, adjusting the load when it slipped.

They disappeared down the street.

"This," Dou Wenda said firmly, "is how government soldiers should behave."

Song Tongyin stared.

Impossible.

This had to be an illusion.

After a long silence, he sighed again—this time heavier.

"You once served as a prefect," Dou Wenda added softly. "Surely you understand my position."

Song Tongyin finally relented.

"Very well. I will withdraw all Shanxi troops—and General Li Huai as well. Pingyang Prefecture shall be guarded by these four hundred Shaanxi soldiers."

Dou Wenda's joy was undisguised.

"Many thanks, Your Excellency!"

With that, Song Tongyin departed eastward, resuming the pursuit of Wang Jiayin, whose main force—still over 160,000 strong—had gathered in Qinshui County.

Pingyang Prefecture was left behind.

And with it—

Four hundred Shaanxi troops, now firmly under Wang Er's control.

At Gudu Ferry in Yongji.

Xing Honglang, Gao Chuwu, Zhao Sheng, Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng, Zhan Seng, and the others stood gathered around a brand-new statue.

A statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The previous co-sensing incident had been... unfortunate. Half the clay face had fallen off, terrifying everyone. After much discussion, they agreed:

This time, the Dao Xuan Tianzun must be durable, flexible, and majestic.

They found their solution in an unexpected place—a puppet master from Xiaoyi, Shanxi.

Xiaoyi puppet theater was renowned. Its puppets had lifelike expressions, ingenious internal mechanisms, and joints so flexible they could dance. A divine craft.

They paid handsomely.

The result was astonishing.

The puppet's face was vivid. Its joints articulated smoothly. The mouth could open and close using fine wires, allowing speech and expression.

After days of work, it was complete.

They surrounded it in awe.

Gao Chuwu frowned. "The face is excellent... but why is the mouth a little square?"

"So it can move," Xing Honglang explained. "Watch—pull this string—"

Before Gao Chuwu even touched it, the puppet's jaw snapped open.

"Hey!" it shouted. "I can play here again!"

Silence.

Then—everyone dropped to their knees.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

The puppet stood up with soft clicks and whirs, joints twisting in strange, almost comical ways.

No one laughed.

A puppet moved by humans was funny.

A puppet moved by a god was a miracle.

Li Daoxuan spoke—and the voice that emerged was sharp and rhythmic, altered by the mechanism, almost like a folk rhyme:

"Beware, beware—

Wang Jiayin lies in Qinshui there!

Two hundred li, his banners spread—

Sharpen your blades, prepare ahead!"

The Dao Xuan Tianzun paused.

Satisfied.

Chapter 480 Those Who Can Be Saved Must Be Saved

The moment the words left the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun's mouth, the atmosphere in the tent froze.

"Wang Jiayin's main force has already reached Qinshui County."

Every leader stiffened.

Qinshui County was uncomfortably close to Gudu Ferry.

And worse—Wang Jiayin's army was never a single, neat formation. Wherever his main force went, it acted like a hive disturbed by a stick. Within a radius of several hundred li, all manner of rebel factions would emerge like ants from cracked ground:

Zijing Liang.

The Chuang King.

Lao Huihui.

Cao Cao.

The Eight Great Kings of the Southern Camp.

The Eight Great Kings of the Western Camp.

They didn't march shoulder-to-shoulder with Wang Jiayin—but they never strayed far either. Hundreds of thousands of rebels, scattered yet connected, rolling across Shanxi like a plague cloud.

Xing Honglang spread out a map, her fingers tightening.

"Our Xiao Lake is in danger."

Everyone understood immediately.

Xiao Lake had no official garrison. Only salt makers—hundreds of them—who had quietly established a salt village there. The location was remote, poor, and ignored by officials, which was exactly why it had survived.

But rebels loved places like that.

Empty on the books. Full in reality.

If even a small rebel detachment stumbled upon the salt village, the outcome would be obvious—and bloody.

"We can't evacuate them," Zhao Sheng said grimly. "The soda ash factory at Gao Family Village needs a constant salt supply. If production stops, everything downstream collapses. But keeping them there right now is far too dangerous."

Zao Ying spoke without hesitation.

"I'll go first. I'll take the Cavalry Battalion and station them at the salt village temporarily. If it's a small band of rebels, I'll wipe them out. If it's a large force—"

She paused.

"I'll load the salt makers onto the horses and run."

"Good," Xing Honglang said immediately. "I'll bring the infantry behind you as backup."

Zao Ying clasped her fists, turned, and strode out. Moments later, three hundred cavalry thundered into motion, hooves drumming like war drums as they raced toward Xiao Lake.

Halfway there, Zao Ying frowned.

Clatter. Clatter-clatter.

Every time her horse moved, she heard a strange wooden knocking sound.

She turned her head.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun was sitting squarely on the horse's rump, bobbing up and down. Every joint creaked faintly, wooden blocks colliding rhythmically.

Zao Ying nearly leapt out of her saddle.

"Tianzun?! When did you get on the horse?!"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "The moment you mounted."

Zao Ying flushed. "If I'd known, I would never have let you sit back there. I should have had you sit in front—carefully held—"

Absolutely not, Li Daoxuan thought.

A giant female gorilla hugging a puppet god? That's not a divine image. That's a horror story.

Outwardly, he remained serene. "This position is fine. Do not concern yourself."

Zao Ying hesitated. "But if you leave, the Gudu Ferry won't have a Tianzun statue. Everyone will feel uneasy."

"They'll make another one," Li Daoxuan said lightly.

Zao Ying nodded and urged her horse onward, though with the Tianzun riding behind her, she felt both nervous—and inexplicably more responsible.

They arrived at Xiao Lake swiftly.

The salt village had grown rapidly over the past months. Thatched huts clustered near the shore. Salt-drying ponds reflected the sky. A bamboo fence ringed the settlement—not much, but better than nothing.

The salt makers were busy at work.

Their salt was purchased directly by Gao Family Village: ten copper coins per jin, five times the official price. If they didn't want money, they could take grain instead.

It was the kind of deal that turned desperation into motivation.

When the cavalry appeared, the salt makers rushed forward excitedly.

"Leader Zao is here again!"

"Leader Zao!"

"Why so many cavalry this time?"

"Is something wrong?"

"Are the officials coming?"

Even fools could sense danger when three hundred cavalry showed up unannounced.

Seeing everyone alive and unharmed, Zao Ying finally exhaled. "Good. You're all safe—for now. Wang Jiayin's army has reached Qinshui County. Leader Xing sent me to protect you."

The salt makers were deeply moved.

"With Leader Xing watching over us, we must have accumulated virtue for generations!" one said earnestly.

Another added, "What we're really worried about are the salt makers at Xie Lake. They haven't moved. Xie Lake is too big—it's an obvious target."

Zao Ying's heart sank.

They were right.

Hedong Circuit guarded Xie Lake—but the Salt Administration Bureau's soldiers were infamous. If Wang Jiayin wanted that salt, those troops wouldn't last an hour.

Rebels needed salt.

A lot of it.

As she hesitated, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke.

"Send scouts to Xie Lake. If the Hedong troops fail, the salt makers there will suffer. Anyone we are capable of saving—we must save."

Zao Ying's eyes lit up. "As you command, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

A scout team of ten was dispatched immediately.

They were all veteran riders—former bandits, sharp-eyed and faster than rumors. Light armor, bows on their backs, blades at their sides. They rode hard toward Xie Lake.

The lake stretched for tens of li. Calm. Deceptively calm.

No visible rebels—yet.

The scouts split up, circling the shoreline, watching, listening.

Meanwhile, at Hedong Circuit.

Tie Niaofei swaggered through the military barracks as if it were his own courtyard.

Though a salt smuggler, he walked openly among the soldiers. They greeted him cheerfully.

"Leader Tie!"

"Made another fortune recently?"

"Next salt run, don't forget your brothers!"

Tie Niaofei smiled, clasping his fists.

"Of course. If I eat, you eat."

Inwardly, he spat.

A pack of greedy dogs.

He entered the Salt Administration Bureau official's residence. The official sat comfortably in a large chair, smiling like he'd just seen a cartload of silver.

"Ah, Master Tie," the official beamed. "What profitable business brings you here today?"

Tie Niaofei smiled wider.

And behind that smile—

The storm was already gathering.