

Great Ming 481

Chapter 481 One of the Eight Great Jin Merchants

Tie Niaofei laughed heartily and slid forward a small lacquered tray.

Silver gleamed.

The Salt Inspector's eyes swept over it once—and his breath caught.

Fifty taels. At least.

Pure silver.

A fine opening salute, he thought. This one isn't here to chat.

His face immediately softened into something resembling kindness. "Master Tie," he said pleasantly, "you're always so... sincere. Speak. What business brings you today?"

Tie Niaofei replied calmly, "I hope the esteemed inspector might once again allocate to me the output of an entire salt village."

The Salt Inspector's smile vanished as if wiped away by a sleeve.

"An entire village again?" he barked. "Last time I did that, look what happened! You spoiled those salt artisans rotten. Once silver touched their hands, they stopped listening to me altogether! They vanished overnight, leaving the village empty and my output in shambles!"

Tie Niaofei nearly laughed.

Vanished?

Brother, they didn't flee—they were escorted away with drums and banners to make private salt for us.

And now I'm here to repeat the trick—and you're still none the wiser.

But outwardly, Tie Niaofei sighed gravely. "Esteemed sir, that cannot be blamed on me. Your wages are simply too low. Two wen per jin? I hear you charge me twenty wen per jin! If you raised their pay even slightly, they'd never dream of running."

The Salt Inspector snorted. "You think I'm some benevolent merchant? They're dogs. Give them a bone and they should wag their tails. Meat? Hah. Know your place."

Tie Niaofei cursed inwardly.

You piece of—

He forced a smile. "Very well. The artisans are a minor matter. But I truly need salt. Please, just one more village."

The Salt Inspector shook his head decisively. "Impossible. That salt is already reserved."

"For whom?" Tie Niaofei asked.

"For a court-authorized supplier," the inspector said smugly. "A holder of salt warrants. Border army business. Absolute priority."

Tie Niaofei's heart sank.

Jin merchants.

Of course.

Since the founding of the dynasty, the frontier armies had devoured supplies like a bottomless pit. The court, lacking logistical muscle, created the Kai Zhong system—let merchants deliver grain and goods to the border in exchange for salt warrants.

Thus were born the Jin merchants.

Salt, tea, iron, cloth.

Legal monopoly.

Imperial endorsement.

Wealth vast enough to drown counties.

Compared to them, Tie Niaofei—a salt smuggler skulking in shadows—was barely dust.

One Jin merchant could crush his entire operation with a casual wave of the hand.

Damn it all.

Why now?

If I fail Dao Xuan Tianzun's decree, I'll offend a god—and gods don't negotiate prices.

Before he could press further, footsteps approached.

A man entered, dressed in impeccable merchant silks, posture straight, presence heavy. He didn't need to speak. Commerce itself seemed to follow him.

The Salt Inspector didn't bother with introductions.

He didn't need to.

Tie Niaofei recognized him instantly.

Huang Yunfa.

One of Shanxi's Eight Great Jin Merchants.

Salt. Tea. Ironware. Textiles. Caravans stretching beyond the horizon.

And rumors—always rumors—of goods flowing north of the Wall into Manchu hands.

Unproven, of course.

Always unproven.

Tie Niaofei knew better than to linger. He clasped his fists to the Salt Inspector, turned, and left without another word.

Outside, a lieutenant frowned. "Boss... what now?"

Tie Niaofei exhaled heavily. "What else? Back to Gudu Ferry. We beg the Dao Xuan Tianzun for help. Against Huang Yunfa's silver mountains, only divine cheating might work."

They had barely taken two steps—

CLANG—CLANG—CLANG!

Alarm bells screamed from the eastern wall.

A lone horseman burst through the gates, voice shredded raw.

"REBELS! The rebels are here! They've come for the salt!"

Tie Niaofei froze.

Run?

No.

If he ran now, he'd lose all intelligence.

He turned and climbed the city wall.

Eastward—blackness.

A sea of heads surged forward, banners snapping like thunder. At the center, one enormous character flapped violently in the wind:

"CHUǍNG."

Tie Niaofei's blood ran cold.

"Chuǎng Wang..." he whispered. "Third-ranked general under Wang Jiayin. This man fights like a butcher with an army for a cleaver."

Before the rebel vanguard, officials and salt artisans fled in chaos, pouring toward Hedong Circuit. Entire lakeside settlements were being abandoned in minutes.

Panic rolled like a wave.

The Salt Inspector came scrambling up, helmet crooked, face pale. "Rebels? Here? Hedong Circuit isn't some dirt county! How dare they—"

Then he saw the army.

His legs nearly gave out.

At that moment, Huang Yunfa arrived—unhurried, unafraid. He glanced once at the rebel mass and sneered.

"Disorganized rabble," he said. "Inspector, no need to panic. Let my guards strike first. You follow with a flank. This will end quickly."

The Salt Inspector stared.

Huang Yunfa turned calmly. "Deploy the guard."

At once, gates thundered open.

His personal guards surged out.

Cavalry.

Disciplined. Armored. Moving like a blade drawn clean from its sheath.

Among them, a small unit stood out—taller, broader, faces sharp and foreign.

Tie Niaofei's heart thumped.

"That squad..." he muttered. "They look like Manchus."

His subordinate whispered, "If accused, he'll say they're northern herdsmen."

The charge thundered.

Spears pierced. Sabers flashed.

The rebels broke.

Chuǎng Wang's vanguard collapsed into chaos.

The Salt Inspector gaped.

These... these are merchant guards?!

He roared, finding courage where fear had been. "Charge!"

Hedong Circuit's forces poured out.

And Chuǎng Wang's army—moments ago unstoppable—was driven back in humiliating disorder.

Tie Niaofei stared at the battlefield.

Silver.

Salt.

Armies.

And somewhere far away—

A wooden god was quietly rearranging fate.

Trivia:

Jin Merchants, the Manchus, and the Fall of Ming

1. Who were the Jin merchants—really?

The Jin merchants (晋商) were not just rich traders. They were a proto-financial class that emerged from Shanxi during the Ming Dynasty.

Their core advantages:

State-sanctioned salt monopolies (via the Kai Zhong system)

Control of long-distance logistics (grain, tea, iron, horses)

Early forms of banking and credit (piaohao / draft banks)

Close ties to border garrisons and military supply chains

By the late Ming, some Jin merchant families possessed capital rivaling provincial treasuries.

They weren't merchants serving the state anymore.

They were merchants the state depended on.

2. Did Jin merchants really trade with the Manchus?

Yes—but not officially, and not all of them.

Historical records and Qing-era accounts indicate:

Many Jin merchants engaged in gray-zone trade with Jurchen/Manchu tribes

Goods included:

Salt

Iron tools

Cloth

Tea

Horses

Sometimes weapons or metal indirectly

Why?

Northern trade routes were dangerous and under-policed

Manchu leaders paid reliably

The Ming state often couldn't pay on time

Merchants follow silver, not loyalty.

3. Was this treason?

From a legal standpoint: often yes.

From a practical standpoint: the Ming court frequently looked away.

Why the court tolerated it:

Border armies relied on merchant logistics

Officials themselves were bribed or indebted

Enforcement risked collapsing frontier supply lines

In short:

They did not light the fire—

but they sold oil to whoever held the torch.

Chapter 482 This Humble Monk Shall Persuade Him

Chuǎng Wang's army didn't retreat so much as disintegrate.

Men tripped over banners, horses smashed into fleeing infantry, and commanders vanished faster than unpaid wages. By the time the dust settled, only scattered corpses and discarded weapons remained—proof that they'd been here at all.

The government troops returned in triumph.

So did Huang Yunfa.

Yet while the soldiers cheered and the officials laughed too loudly, Huang Yunfa's face remained utterly still, as though he'd just finished swatting flies.

He glanced once at the battlefield, then said calmly,

"Very well. The bandits have withdrawn. Esteemed sir—shall we discuss the matter of salt?"

The Salt Inspector burst into laughter, relief spilling out of him like cheap wine.

"Master Huang's men are truly unmatched! Such courage—such discipline!"

Huang Yunfa gave a lazy hum, already bored. Without another word, he turned and entered the official residence, the Salt Inspector scurrying after him like a clerk chasing a seal stamp.

Their conversation vanished behind closed doors.

Tie Niaofei did not stay to listen.

He had already learned enough.

He slipped out of Hedong Circuit and headed west at once.

He hadn't gone far when a figure emerged silently from the roadside brush.

"Boss Tie."

Tie Niaofei recognized the man instantly—one of Xing Honglang's cavalry scouts.

"Brother," he asked quickly, "what brings you here?"

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun ordered us to patrol Xie Lake," the scout replied. "If the salt workers were in danger, we were to intervene."

Tie Niaofei's eyes narrowed.

"You saw what just happened?"

"We did."

Tie Niaofei nodded once.

"Good. Come with me. We report immediately."

Some scouts stayed behind to continue watching Xie Lake. The rest mounted up and galloped toward Xiao Lake Salt Village.

By the time they arrived, the village no longer looked small.

Three hundred infantry.

Three hundred cavalry.

Salt huts turned into barracks, bamboo fences bristling with men and steel.

Zao Ying was already waiting. Xing Honglang had arrived not long before.

When Tie Niaofei finished recounting what he'd seen, silence fell like a drawn blade.

Even Dao Xuan Tianzun grew quiet.

The puppet's fox-fur brows slowly knit together.

Xing Honglang broke the silence.

"Huang Yunfa's forces... are they really that strong? Stronger than the government troops?"

Tie Niaofei nodded.

"Especially the vanguard cavalry. Bows, horses, formations—clean, ruthless." He paused. "Boss Zao, no offense, but they're better than yours."

Zao Ying bristled instantly.

"Nonsense! My cavalry are former horse bandits! We've robbed merchants for a living—how could we lose to some merchant's dogs?"

"Enough," Dao Xuan Tianzun said lightly.

Zao Ying stiffened and shut her mouth.

Dao Xuan Tianzun sighed.

"Zao Ying, do not be offended. Tie Niaofei speaks the truth. Your cavalry cannot defeat them—because they are not merchants' dogs."

The room went still.

"They are Jiannu elite riders."

A sharp intake of breath spread through the group.

"Certainly?" someone whispered.

No one questioned the Tianzun.

Zao Ying's anger drained away like blood from a wound.

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued, voice calm and merciless.

"The so-called Eight Great Jin Merchants are not traders. They are predators. For years, they have smuggled salt, iron, grain, and silver beyond the passes—feeding the Jiannu. In return, they sell intelligence, troop movements, and the empire's internal rot."

A pause.

"Do you think Huang Yunfa's guards appeared by coincidence? Jiannu cavalry do not escort merchants for charity. Either they are paid in silver, or in futures."

No one spoke.

History loomed unspoken.

These merchants would one day be ennobled as Imperial Merchants, prospering for two centuries after the Manchus entered the passes—living well on the bones of the Ming.

Compared to them, even Wu Sangui was small.

Wu Sangui betrayed under pressure.

These men betrayed for profit.

Dao Xuan Tianzun tilted his wooden face into shadow.

"We kill," he said.

The words landed clean and final.

Some here had seen Dao Xuan Tianzun crush bandits like insects. Others had only known his mercy. The contrast was unsettling.

"Do not allow Huang Yunfa to leave Hedong Circuit alive," Dao Xuan Tianzun continued.

"Do not let him deliver another grain of salt to the Jiannu."

"This is my decree."

Everyone clasped their fists.

"We obey."

Tie Niaofei stepped forward.

"I'll return to Hedong Circuit. Through the Salt Inspector, I'll track Huang Yunfa's movements."

"I'll tighten the net," Zao Ying said. "Scouts everywhere. He won't slip."

Lao Nanfeng unfurled a map with a snap, fingers already tracing routes of pursuit and escape.

Xing Honglang and Gao Chuwu quietly went to prepare arms and supplies.

Only Zhan Seng hesitated.

He pressed his palms together.

"Amitābha. Dao Xuan Tianzun, this humble monk believes killing disrupts heavenly harmony. Even the gravely wicked should first be reasoned with. Perhaps persuasion—"

Before he could finish, Tie Niaofei began winking like a madman.

He pointed subtly at Zhan Seng.

Then made a quiet slicing motion across his neck.

Several people stared, baffled.

Dao Xuan Tianzun understood instantly.

A blade wrapped in scripture, he thought. Elegant.

His wooden mouth clicked softly.

"Zhan Seng speaks wisely. Proper conduct must be observed."

Zhan Seng's eyes lit up.

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued, voice mild as spring water.

"Take me as well. I, too, shall attempt to enlighten Huang Yunfa."

The puppet's jaw clacked shut.

Somewhere, far away, a merchant was counting silver—

unaware that persuasion was already on its way.

Chapter 483 We'll Go Persuade Him

Since Dao Xuan Tianzun had spoken, no one dared object.

"Very well," the group agreed unanimously. "Let Reverend Zhan Seng persuade him toward goodness first. We'll wait outside. If persuasion fails—"

Tie Niaofei smiled politely and finished the sentence for everyone.

"—we carve him up."

Zhan Seng was delighted.

"I knew it!" he declared joyfully. "Dao Xuan Tianzun and all benefactors here are compassionate people!"

Several people silently reflected that their definition of compassion involved blades, but no one corrected him.

"Master," Tie Niaofei said respectfully, "you are a revered monk. I am a salt smuggler. If we walk together, it might... tarnish your reputation."

Zhan Seng nodded gravely.

"A fair point. Reputation is a monk's second life."

Thus, they split.

Zhan Seng, staff in hand, strode openly toward Hedong Circuit city—upright, confident, and unafraid. A famous monk from Puji Temple could walk anywhere. Gates opened themselves for men like him.

Tie Niaofei, meanwhile, picked up a black burlap sack, muttered an apology, and stuffed Dao Xuan Tianzun's puppet body inside.

The puppet was half a man tall but weighed little. Thin wooden limbs, hollow core—easy to carry. Tie Niaofei slung the bag over his shoulder like contraband salt.

Inside the bag, Li Daoxuan was deeply dissatisfied.

No vision. No dignity.

He poked the burlap experimentally.

The fabric gave way with a quiet rip.

A small hole opened.

Ah. Civilization.

Through the tear, Dao Xuan Tianzun observed the world like a god peeking through a keyhole.

At the city gate, Tie Niaofei was greeted with radiant smiles.

"Boss Tie! You're back!"

"No entry tax today, of course."

"Safe travels, God of Wealth!"

Meanwhile, honest civilians queued under the sun, coins ready, being inspected like livestock.

From inside the sack, Dao Xuan Tianzun watched silently.

Merchants truly are the only class with immunity in this world.

They entered Yuncheng, Hedong Circuit.

Later generations would know this city well. The character yun—transport, fortune—fit it perfectly. Salt, tea, grain, horses. Jin merchants swarmed like ants around sugar, moving goods north to the border garrisons.

Most merchants were necessary evils—greedy, but useful.

And then there were predators.

Among the crowd thrived the Eight Great Jin Merchants, smiling as they fed the frontier with one hand and strangled it with the other.

Past the merchant district, the scenery changed.

Alleys darkened.

Salt workers huddled in corners, refugees herded in by chaos, eyes hollow with fear. They watched every passerby like hunted animals.

From inside the bag, Dao Xuan Tianzun sighed.

Tie Niaofei felt it instantly.

He reached into his sleeve, pulled out silver fragments, and walked the alleys. One by one, he placed silver into rough, trembling hands.

He leaned close and whispered,

"If you want to live—leave Hedong. Go west. Someone will meet you."

By the time they looked up, he was gone.

The salt workers stared at the silver.

Staying meant exploitation.

Leaving meant risk—but also freedom.

Chaos was opportunity.

That night, several slipped away.

Back at the Salt Administration residence, Tie Niaofei was welcomed like family.

Old benefactor, after all.

His men were settled in a side courtyard. Reconnaissance was quick.

"Huang Yunfa is in the next courtyard," his men reported with wicked grins. "Reverend Zhan Seng arrived earlier. He's two courtyards over."

Tie Niaofei chuckled.

"Being a monk is convenient. Walks into the city clean, stays at the Salt Administration for free. Meanwhile, we merchants have to pay."

A shadow flipped over the wall.

Zhan Seng landed softly, palms pressed together.

"Amitābha! Excellent, excellent! Benefactor Tie—if monkhood is so convenient, why not renounce the world and cultivate with me?"

Tie Niaofei gestured to the sack.

"Even if I renounced, I'd follow Dao Xuan Tianzun. Daoist priesthood has better job security."

Zhan Seng smiled serenely.

"You misunderstand. Dao Xuan Tianzun embraces all paths. He even tolerates monks like me."

Inside the bag, Dao Xuan Tianzun:

I tolerate you because you're useful.

"Alright," Tie Niaofei said. "We're in. Master goes first?"

"Naturally," Zhan Seng said. "This humble monk shall persuade him toward goodness."

Everyone agreed. No one expected success—but also no danger. No merchant would dare harm a monk inside an official residence.

Half an hour later, Zhan Seng returned.

Dejected.

"I advised him to stop trading with the Manchus," he said. "He denied everything. Said he was innocent as snow."

Tie Niaofei laughed.

"Too many eyes. He's embarrassed to admit treason. Once he leaves the city, try again. Fewer witnesses."

Zhan Seng brightened.

"Excellent, excellent!"

"My turn now," Tie Niaofei said. "I'll find out when he leaves and which road he takes."

"How?" Zhan Seng asked.

Tie Niaofei smiled.

"Business."

Zhan Seng fell silent.

Tie Niaofei adjusted his robes, adopting the polished air of a respectable merchant, and headed toward Huang Yunfa's courtyard.

At that moment, Dao Xuan Tianzun slipped out of the sack.

No way I miss this.

He scurried to the ivy-covered wall between courtyards.

Test of co-sensing mobility, he mused.

Wooden fingers gripped vines. Wooden feet found cracks.

Stable.

With stiff, clattering movements—like a haunted toy with ambition—Dao Xuan Tianzun climbed onto the wall.

From above, he peered down.

A merchant about to be hunted, he thought calmly.

Let's watch how predators talk to each other.

Chapter 484 Tie Niaofei's Scheme

From atop the wall, Dao Xuan Tianzun quietly observed.

The opposite courtyard was neatly divided.

On one side, guards chatted lazily in thick Shanxi accents—laughing, complaining, scratching bellies. Men who believed danger only existed when the pay stopped.

On the other side sat a dozen men who did not speak.

They were taller. Broader. Still as rocks.

Manchu cavalry.

In the Central Plains, speaking was a liability, so they played mutes. Their eyes, however, were loud—sweeping corners, counting exits, measuring shadows. One of them suddenly stiffened, gaze locking onto the puppet perched on the wall.

A low sound escaped his throat.

The others followed his stare.

For a brief moment, twelve pairs of eyes pinned Dao Xuan Tianzun in place.

Ah, Li Daoxuan thought calmly. So this is what it feels like to be decorative.

He froze completely.

Wooden. Silent. Obedient.

After a long inspection, the men relaxed. A puppet, half a man tall. Some Han eccentricity. Probably feng shui. Or a rich man's joke.

They returned to their corner.

Dao Xuan Tianzun almost laughed.

A puppet survives by being underestimated. A useful lesson.

Just then, a knock sounded at the courtyard gate.

A Shanxi guard opened it to see Tie Niaofei, hands clasped, posture respectful.

"This one is Tie Niaofei, a salt merchant," he announced smoothly. "I've long admired Squire Huang Yunfa's reputation and came to pay my respects—perhaps discuss some business."

The word business worked better than a bribe.

The guard didn't hesitate. He went inside at once.

Moments later, Huang Yunfa emerged.

He recognized Tie Niaofei immediately. A small-time smuggler. Dozen men. Sharp eyes. Nothing threatening.

Huang Yunfa's tone was cool, faintly bored.

"So it's you. What brings you here? Enlighten me."

Tie Niaofei glanced around cautiously, then stepped closer and lowered his voice.

"Squire Huang," he said solemnly, "I've come to pledge myself to you."

Huang Yunfa blinked.

"...What?"

From the wall, Dao Xuan Tianzun was entertained.

Ah. The classic maneuver. Kneel first, bite later.

Tie Niaofei continued without pause. "The salt trade is finished for people like me. Shanxi is crawling with bandits. Salt workers hide in cities like rats. I came this time empty-handed—not a single catty to sell."

Huang Yunfa knew this already.

In fact, the salt Tie Niaofei should have had was now sitting neatly in Huang Yunfa's own warehouses.

Tie Niaofei sighed. "I need a new road. I hear Squire Huang does business beyond the passes. Big business. I wish to follow you."

Huang Yunfa smiled thinly.

"And why should I open that road for you? Northern trade eats people. I give you access today—you swallow me tomorrow."

This was the crux.

Tie Niaofei leaned in.

"I can introduce you to a source of arquebuses."

The word landed heavily.

Huang Yunfa's eyes sharpened.

"A few pieces are worthless."

Tie Niaofei smiled.

"Hundreds. And steady production after."

The courtyard felt colder.

Huang Yunfa's voice dropped.

"If you're lying, I don't care where you run. I'll still hang your head at my gate."

Tie Niaofei didn't flinch.

"Squire Huang, I wouldn't dare. Truthfully—I've found a mountain village. Remote. Hidden. Full of blacksmiths who fled government workshops. Starving men. Skilled hands."

He tapped the saber at his waist.

"They made this. They've made weapons for my men before. And yes—arquebuses. Hundreds. Already forged. Looking for buyers."

Huang Yunfa listened carefully.

Artisans fleeing was nothing new. Government workshops were hells without walls. A village of runaway smiths was... plausible.

And the Manchus had asked him for arquebuses.

Repeatedly.

The problem was supply.

The Ming treasury was dead. Soldiers weren't paid. Workshops barely functioned. The few arquebuses that existed were hoarded by elite units. Even corrupt officials couldn't leak them.

Commoners producing them?

In quantity?

That strained belief.

Huang Yunfa hesitated.

Tie Niaofei chuckled softly.

"I also trade iron."

That settled it.

Iron explained everything.

Protection. Supply. Blacksmiths loyal to a patron.

Huang Yunfa nodded slowly—but his caution remained.

"Bring them," he said. "Let me see the goods. Then we talk."

"No trouble at all," Tie Niaofei replied smoothly. "Stay in Hedong a few days. I'll arrange it."

Huang Yunfa frowned.

"Hundreds of arquebuses aren't feathers. You'll carry them with a dozen men?"

Tie Niaofei grinned.

"By boat."

From atop the wall, Dao Xuan Tianzun watched the predator smile at another predator.

Good, he thought.

When sharks trade promises, blood always follows.

Chapter 485 Muskets, So Many Muskets

Tie Niaofei bowed properly and withdrew, returning to his own small courtyard with the humility of a man who had just sold someone a dream and was now preparing the receipt.

The moment he vanished, Huang Yunfa's face shed its courtesy.

Suspicion settled in like a familiar coat.

A trusted subordinate stepped forward. "Master," he said carefully, "I don't believe him. Hundreds of muskets? A pack of runaway blacksmiths couldn't pull that off even if they hammered day and night."

Huang Yunfa nodded slowly. "I never said I believed him."

His fingers tapped the armrest. Once. Twice.

"Let him perform," he continued coolly. "When the goods arrive, you inspect them. Until then, he gets nothing from me. I've eaten too many traps to mistake bait for meat."

From his perch, Dao Xuan Tianzun heard every word.

He almost approved.

Good, Li Daoxuan thought. A predator who doubts is more interesting than one who rushes.

Tie Niaofei returned to his courtyard and was just about to issue orders when a familiar, calm voice interrupted him.

"No need to send messengers," Dao Xuan Tianzun said evenly. "Qichuan Ferry will already know. A ship will be dispatched shortly. You only need to arrange a place for inspection."

Tie Niaofei froze for half a breath—then smiled.

"As expected of Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Qichuan Ferry, Heyang County

Within a crescent-shaped backwater, ships lay packed together like resting beasts.

As Bai Yuan trained more captains and sailors, Dao Xuan Tianzun had quietly placed more and more ship models into the box. Gunboats. Cargo vessels. Medium transports.

The ferry no longer looked like a village wharf.

It looked like a future.

At that moment, Bai Yuan and Young Master Bai were circling a newly placed "merchant ship."

In the real world, it was eight centimeters long.

In the box, it had become a sixteen-meter vessel—solid, wide-bellied, empty inside like an unanswered question.

Young Master Bai ran his hand along the deck. "Father, there's space here. If I redesign the frame, I think we can install a steam engine."

Bai Yuan's eyes lit up. "Excellent! The Heavenly Lord left this ship without divine propulsion. I was wondering how we'd manage it without turning sailors into draft animals."

Before they could say more, gasps erupted from the docks.

"Greetings, Tianzun!"

The militia knelt in waves.

The silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun stepped down from the fortress platform, waving casually. "You've worked hard."

Bai Yuan and his son immediately straightened.

Orders were coming.

Dao Xuan Tianzun stopped before them, posture slightly crooked, voice calm.

"Take an oar-powered ship. Load two hundred and fifty smoothbore muskets. Send it to Gudu Ferry."

Bai Yuan didn't hesitate. "Your divine decree shall be obeyed."

Young Master Bai blinked. "Why oars? A divine ship would be faster."

"And why smoothbores?" Bai Yuan added. "Shouldn't we send rifled muskets? Or even Chassepot rifles? We've begun small-scale production—"

"No," Dao Xuan Tianzun said flatly. "No rifling. No ammunition. Only the oldest smoothbores."

Both men froze.

They didn't understand.

They didn't need to.

Orders were orders.

The empty-framed merchant ship was chosen. Workers swarmed aboard, carrying muskets from the armory. Two hundred and fifty of them piled together like stacked coffins of iron and wood.

An ugly pile.

A convincing pile.

Dozens of sailors were assigned to row.

To men accustomed to divine engines and gunboat escorts, this felt... humiliating.

Primitive.

But no one complained.

To escort this painfully ordinary vessel, Bai Yuan dispatched three gunboats, bristling with thirty-six cannons.

The contrast was obscene.

Three Days Later — Hedong Circuit

Tie Niaofei stood before Huang Yunfa once more.

"The firearms are ready," he said calmly. "Two hundred and fifty. But they cannot enter the city. If officials see them, they'll call it rebellion before you can blink."

Huang Yunfa waved a hand.

A subordinate stepped forward.

"He will inspect them," Huang Yunfa said. "If the goods are real, we'll talk."

Tie Niaofei nodded. "Then we go to Dayu Ferry."

Huang Yunfa's brows lifted slightly.

Dayu Ferry was a major hub. Government-controlled. Busy. Visible.

Too visible.

Tie Niaofei chuckled. "The ship won't dock there. We'll take a small boat upstream."

The explanation was messy.

Which made it believable.

Huang Yunfa nodded. "Go."

They rode hard.

At Dayu Ferry, Huang Yunfa's boat was already waiting. They boarded and pushed upstream more than ten li before spotting it.

A medium-sized ship.

Sixteen meters long.

Quiet.

Tie Niaofei pointed. "There."

As they drew alongside, Huang Yunfa's subordinate noticed the crew.

Sun-darkened skin. Calloused hands. The posture of men born on water.

They watched silently.

No smiles.

No greetings.

The subordinate's stomach tightened—but reason prevailed. No one would go this far just to kill me.

He climbed aboard.

Lifted the tarp.

And froze.

Muskets.

So many muskets.

Layer upon layer.

Enough to arm a regiment.

His breath caught.

"...So many muskets."

From the far bank of the river, unseen and unmoving, Dao Xuan Tianzun watched.

The hook had sunk deep.

Chapter 486 The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun Prank

Night settled over Hedong Circuit.

The ancients worked from sunrise to sunset, and once darkness fell, the city shut down with admirable discipline. Shops closed. Courtyards dimmed. Even gossip seemed to yawn and go to bed early.

Only the night watchman remained awake, his voice long and ghostly as it drifted through the streets:

"Dry weather—beware of fire—"

Li Daoxuan stared at the clock.

Ten-thirty.

Ten. Thirty.

"...This is a crime," he muttered. "Who sleeps this early?"

As a thoroughly modern human, his biological clock refused to cooperate. There was at least another hour before his brain even considered rest. An hour that desperately needed to be wasted.

Gao Family Village had recently developed a proper nightlife—storytellers, street music, small theatrical troupes. After a full day of labor, villagers liked to unwind with noise and laughter. If he switched his view back there, he could probably catch the same opera for the fiftieth time.

Which was precisely the problem.

Watching the same thing every night was how souls withered.

After a brief internal debate lasting roughly three seconds, Li Daoxuan made his decision.

"Let's go bully Hedong Circuit."

With a familiar whoosh, he activated Co-sensing.

The world lurched, perspective snapped into place—and he was once again inside the Puppet Heavenly Lord.

Wooden limbs. Hollow weight. That uncanny sense of being both god and firewood.

The puppet's eyes rolled in their sockets as Li Daoxuan flexed experimentally. Good, he thought. No lag.

Since there was nothing else to do, he figured he might as well eavesdrop on Huang Yunfa and his people. Best case, he picked up something useful. Worst case...

Well. Worst case, he entertained himself.

He grabbed the creeping vines on the courtyard wall and hauled himself up, movements careful, almost stealthy.

Almost.

The instant he peeked over the top, he spotted two guards patrolling below.

Li Daoxuan froze.

Unfortunately, wood had momentum.

His sudden stop threw the puppet off balance, and with all the elegance of a falling wardrobe, it toppled straight off the wall.

Clatter—crack—thud.

Wood smacked stone. Limbs tangled. The sound echoed far louder than dignity allowed.

The two guards jumped, hands flying to their weapons.

"...What the hell was that?"

They squinted.

Then squinted harder.

"...Oh. It's that puppet."

Recognition dawned. They'd seen it sitting on the wall earlier that day, stiff and solemn like some decorative shrine ornament. Wind knocking it down—or a stray cat—made enough sense.

One guard clicked his tongue. "Damn it. Scared me half to death, dropping like that."

The other leaned closer, lantern light flickering across the puppet's face. "...Don't you think it's too realistic?"

"Realistic how?"

"That face. Why does a puppet need eyes like that?"

The first guard shuddered. "Don't know. Don't care. That thing always gives me the creeps."

"...Let's just stay away from it."

They didn't even poke it with a stick. Instead, they gave the fallen puppet a wide berth and continued their patrol.

Silence returned.

The moment their footsteps faded, the Puppet Heavenly Lord twitched.

Then its fingers moved.

With a dry clack, it pushed itself upright.

Its head rotated slowly, joints clicking in a way no living neck should.

Li Daoxuan paused, then thought thoughtfully, Huh. I think I just unlocked a new gameplay mode.

This was obviously not something he could do in his own territory—traumatizing his own people felt... counterproductive.

But here?

Against a nest of Han traitors?

Zero psychological burden.

The puppet's wooden mouth creaked open, producing two hollow, clattering laughs.

Then, very deliberately, it sat down.

Perfectly still.

A short while later, the two guards completed their circuit and came back around.

Lantern light spilled into the courtyard.

The man in front stopped so abruptly the other nearly ran into him.

"...Look," he whispered.

The second guard followed his gaze—and felt his scalp go numb.

"The puppet," he croaked. "Wasn't it lying down just now?"

"...Yes."

"...Then why is it sitting?"

They stared.

The puppet stared back.

Every instinct screamed.

"No, no, no," the first guard said quickly. "We remembered it wrong."

"We absolutely did not remember it wrong."

"...Then someone must've set it upright after we passed."

"...Holy hell."

Their blood ran cold.

"Doesn't that mean someone got inside?!"

They spun and bolted.

The door to Huang Yunfa's room burst open with a bang.

Inside, steel rang as blades were drawn. Someone tripped. Furniture scraped.

Then Huang Yunfa's furious roar shook the room.

"What in the blazes are you two doing? Bursting into my room in the middle of the night?! I thought you were assassins! I nearly took your heads off—and instead you rush in and kneel?! Have you both gone mad?!"

"We—we thought an assassin had snuck in—"

"No one's come in here except you two!"

"There's a puppet outside," one guard whimpered. "It moved..."

"...What?"

"Take me to see."

The commotion woke half the residence.

Servants stirred. Guards poured out. Even the dozen suspicious Manchu cavalrymen rose from their quarters.

A whole crowd surged toward the courtyard.

Li Daoxuan, fortunately, had no intention of sticking around.

He popped up, slipped into the flower bushes, crawled low like a particularly undignified god, and circled back once the mob moved off.

Moments later, he was inside Huang Yunfa's room.

Climbing a pillar with stiff wooden limbs was... difficult. Undignified. Several seconds of careful effort later, he reached the roof beam, looped a rope, and—

Hung himself upside down.

Outside, voices rose.

They hadn't found the puppet.

The two guards were dragged forward and verbally flayed.

"Idiots!" Huang Yunfa snapped. "Losing your minds in the middle of the night! Where would a puppet even come from?!"

"But there really was—"

Excuses earned fists.

By the time the crowd dispersed, the guards were bruised, miserable, and spiritually crushed.

Huang Yunfa stomped back into his room, temper foul. "Keep your eyes open!"

"As you command!"

The door shut.

He turned.

And froze.

A puppet hung upside down from his roof beam, wooden face split in a grotesque grin, eyes locked onto his.

Silence.

Then—

"Aaaaah—!"

Huang Yunfa screamed like his soul had slipped on oil.

He stumbled backward, smashed straight through the thin wooden door, and tumbled into the garden with a crash.

Chaos exploded.

Guards rushed in from every direction, weapons out, lanterns blazing. Even the Salt Administration soldiers were startled awake.

While everyone panicked outside, Li Daoxuan calmly slid down the rope, rolled, and crawled under the bed.

From outside came Huang Yunfa's shaken shout:

"The puppet! It's in my room! Hanging from the roof beam!"

Someone charged in with a lantern.

"...There's nothing here, Master."

"What?! Impossible! I saw it!"

Huang Yunfa was on the verge of hysteria. "It could be fake! A dwarf in disguise! Search the room—now!"

The room was turned upside down.

Then a voice cried out, "Under the bed!"

Hands reached down.

Clatter.

A half-human-sized puppet was dragged into the light.

"It's real."

"Not a person."

"Then it's being controlled!" Huang Yunfa shouted, veins bulging. "Search everything! Someone must be hiding, pulling strings!"

Under the bed, Li Daoxuan lay still.

Wooden face frozen in a grin.

Heh.

Chapter 487 Respect the Gods and Spirits, But Keep Them at a Distance

A large group of people began rummaging through everything, continuing their frantic search. Some felt all over Dao Xuan Tianzun's wooden body, trying to find the strings that might be manipulating it.

Others climbed up onto the roof beams, peering into the shadows in case a puppeteer was hiding above.

Still others searched the courtyard, the flower bushes, even the walls—leaving no corner unchecked.

The entire Salt Administration Bureau compound descended into chaos. Soldiers poured in from all directions, completely surrounding the side courtyard, sealing it off so tightly that not even a fly could slip in or out.

It was practically a state of full alert.

Yet their efforts were doomed from the start.

After a long while, someone finally reported, voice trembling,

"No one is controlling this puppet. It doesn't even have any strings attached. It couldn't possibly be manipulated by a person."

"Then how did it get in?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like this."

"I saw it during the day—it was perched on that wall over there."

"That wall... isn't that Tie Niaofei's courtyard?"

"Could it be Tie Niaofei controlling this puppet?"

"But Tie Niaofei and his men have already left. They took our people to inspect the goods and still haven't returned."

"It can't be him. All his people are gone. Could he really manipulate something this strange from dozens of li away?"

"Then how did it get here?"

A moment of silence followed.

Then someone muttered, almost unconsciously,

"It couldn't have... walked in on its own, could it?"

The instant those words left his mouth, everyone felt their scalps go numb.

Huang Yunfa's hair practically stood on end. He stared at puppet Tianzun for a long time, his face pale, utterly unsure what to do.

"Should we... burn it?" a subordinate asked cautiously.

"Don't!"

Almost everyone shouted at once.

"Don't burn it recklessly—who knows what terrifying changes might happen?"

"You might not believe in gods and spirits, but you must not disrespect them!"

"If you leave it alone, it might simply toy with you and then go away. But if you burn it and offend it, things could turn truly disastrous."

Huang Yunfa felt the same dread in his heart.

It absolutely could not be burned.

As the ancients said:

Respect the gods and spirits, but keep them at a distance.

He swallowed hard and said quickly,

"Escort this puppet out of the city. Take it far, far away."

He didn't even dare say throw it out. He only dared to say escort.

So, under the watchful eyes of many, two subordinates carefully lifted Dao Xuan Tianzun. A group of guards surrounded them as they moved through the night, all the way to a small grove outside the city walls.

They placed the puppet among the trees, bowed repeatedly, and whispered,

"Esteemed puppet Lord, please don't trouble us anymore."

Then they turned and fled at full speed, terrified it might suddenly rise and chase them.

Only after they were long gone did Li Daoxuan pat the puppet's backside, stand up, and laugh.

"Didn't that scare the living daylights out of them? Hahahaha!"

That little prank also taught him something important.

In wuxia novels, assassins leapt over walls and rooftops like ghosts, casually sneaking into the homes of powerful figures to take their lives.

But in real history, assassinations of officials and generals were incredibly rare.

Why?

Because getting close was almost impossible.

Even if you succeeded, one shout was enough to summon countless guards and soldiers in an instant. Assassination was never as simple as fiction made it seem.

The prank had gone far enough. Now all he had to do was wait for Tie Niaofei to return.

The only problem—

He was currently standing in a small grove outside the city.

Walking back would be exhausting.

Li Daoxuan stretched Dao Xuan Tianzun's long, stick-like legs and began clack-clack-clacking back toward Hedong Circuit.

Unfortunately, the city gates were tightly guarded.

But that wasn't a problem.

He deliberately wandered around the grove for a bit. Before long, a scout from Zao Ying's unit emerged from the shadows and bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan let out a clack-clack laugh.

"Perfect timing. Pick me up and hurl me into the city."

"...Eh?"

The scout's face went blank. He didn't understand, but a divine command was a divine command.

Grabbing the puppet's arms, he swung hard—like throwing a sack of grain.

Whoosh—

Dao Xuan Tianzun flew through the air like a wooden meteor.

Crash!

He landed inside the city.

No pain—after all, a puppet felt none.

Dao Xuan Tianzun shook his arms, shook his legs, and once again began clack-clack-clacking toward the Salt Administration Bureau.

This time, no sneaking.

He swaggered straight toward the main gate.

The compound had only just calmed down, and the night guards were still on edge, whispering about the earlier chaos.

Then—

Clack. Clack. Clack.

A soldier screamed, pointing down the street.

"Look! The puppet—we threw it away! It's walking back!"

All eyes turned.

Sure enough, Dao Xuan Tianzun advanced down the night street, wooden limbs stiff and eerie, each step echoing loudly.

"Ahhhhh!"

"It's haunted!"

"Run!"

Pandemonium erupted.

Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed—clack-clack-clack—his wooden lips knocking together as he called out in a chilling voice:

"Huang Yunfa... Huang Yunfa..."

Someone rushed inside shouting,

"Master! This is terrible! The puppet is back! It's walking toward the main gate—and it's calling your name!"

"Ahhhhh!"

Huang Yunfa was truly scared out of his wits.

In the end, Dao Xuan Tianzun stopped short of entering the compound. Pushing people too far could make them desperate enough to burn the puppet—and that would be a waste of fine craftsmanship.

After swaying ominously in the street, he turned into a side alley and vanished.

Only then did the guards—and Huang Yunfa—dare to breathe again.

Whether anyone actually slept that night... was another matter entirely.

The next morning.

Master Zhan Seng had barely woken up when frantic knocking shook his door.

Opening it, he found Huang Yunfa himself—eyes dark, face haggard.

"Master," Huang Yunfa stammered, "do you... by any chance... know how to exorcise demons and evil spirits?"

Zhan Seng nearly laughed.

"Amitābha," he said calmly.

"Patron Huang... do you wish to drive away puppet Lord?"

Huang Yunfa clasped his hands desperately.

"That thing is terrifying, Master. Please—save me!"

Chapter 488 "The Cowardly Cavalry of the Central Plains?"

When Tie Niaofei returned to Hedong Circuit with Huang Yunfa's men, he walked straight into a scene that could only be described as spiritually bankrupt.

Huang Yunfa sat rigidly at the center of the room, back straight, hands folded, sweat soaking through his inner robe. Across from him, Master Zhan Seng sat cross-legged, prayer beads clicking softly in his left hand while his right formed a solemn mudra. His lips moved without pause.

"Amitābha... Amitābha..."

Tie Niaofei blinked.

When I left, he thought, this monk was one sentence away from being thrown out the gate. Now he's practically running a full exorcism business.

Before he could ask, one of Huang Yunfa's subordinates hurried over and whispered urgently:

"Master, I personally inspected the shipment with Tie Niaofei. It's real. Hundreds of flintlock rifles. All first-rate."

Huang Yunfa's eyes lit up.

Fear evaporated instantly—like dew under the sun of profit.

"Any tricks?" he asked sharply.

"No ammunition. No powder. Just guns," the subordinate replied. "Exactly as Tie Niaofei said. Runaway blacksmiths. No channels for lead or saltpeter."

That was all Huang Yunfa needed to hear.

His heart started counting silver on its own.

Selling salt was good.

Selling salt licenses was better.

But selling weapons to the Later Jin?

That was drinking blood from a golden cup.

He turned to Tie Niaofei, smiling for real this time. "I like your goods."

Tie Niaofei grinned. "As long as you're satisfied, Master Huang. Then let's talk price."

Huang Yunfa produced a stack of salt warrants from his sleeve and pressed them into Tie Niaofei's hand. "You want salt? Take it. And once this deal is done, I'll introduce you to friends beyond the passes."

Tie Niaofei bowed deeply. "This humble man thanks you."

"Where do we exchange?" Huang Yunfa asked.

"On the river—"

"No." Huang Yunfa cut him off instantly. "Too dangerous. Zhouqing Village. Six li west of Dayu Crossing."

Tie Niaofei's smile didn't change, but inwardly he sighed.

So the cannon ships really won't get to eat tonight.

Huang Yunfa trusted cavalry. Flat land. Horses. Speed.

He didn't trust water.

"Very well," Tie Niaofei agreed. "Zhouqing Village it is."

Deal struck.

As Tie Niaofei rose to leave, his gaze flicked briefly toward Master Zhan Seng.

The monk's eyelids remained lowered—but one eyebrow rose, just a hair.

That was enough.

Outside the Salt Administration residence, Tie Niaofei turned into a narrow alley.

A half-man-tall wooden figure stepped out silently.

Tie Niaofei clasped his hands. "Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The puppet's jaw knocked together in a dry laugh.

No words needed.

A black cloth bag appeared. The Dao Xuan Tianzun obligingly climbed inside.

By the time night fell, everyone who needed to know was already gathered at Xiao Lake. Xing Honglang, Gao Chuwu, Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng—listening as Tie Niaofei laid out the plan.

"Zhouqing Village?" someone laughed. "Flat land, no cover, nowhere to hide. He picked our favorite battlefield."

"Good," Zao Ying said calmly. "Let him believe cavalry decides everything."

Two days later.

Zhouqing Village lay exposed beneath a pale sky.

No crops. No trees. Just cracked earth stretching to the horizon.

Perfect terrain for horses.

Huang Yunfa arrived cautiously, Later Jin cavalry riding loose formations around him. Scouts fanned out first, sweeping the surrounding li until they reported back: clean.

Only then did the main force enter.

Tie Niaofei was already waiting. Dozens of men. Several carts. Flintlock rifles stacked openly, almost carelessly.

Huang Yunfa didn't approach. He sent men to inspect first.

Authentic.

Only then did he wave his hand. "Take them."

Tie Niaofei smiled. "Then I'll be on my way. I'll cash in the salt warrants, make a little profit, and return to do business beyond the passes."

"Of course," Huang Yunfa said magnanimously.

Tie Niaofei left without looking back.

Only after he vanished did Huang Yunfa finally relax.

"So it really was business," he chuckled. "Lads, move the goods."

As rifles were transferred, a subordinate suddenly froze.

"Master—there's paper stuffed inside one of the guns."

"What?"

The man handed it over.

Three words.

Your time has come.

Huang Yunfa inhaled sharply.

Before he could speak, hooves thundered.

From the east.

From the west.

From the north.

A Later Jin soldier shouted, "Cavalry! Three directions!"

Three hundred riders closed in, forming a tightening arc.

To the south—only the Yellow River.

Huang Yunfa's face went white. "That bastard Tie Niaofei... where did he get cavalry?!"

"Government troops?" someone cried. "They found out!"

"Break through!" Huang Yunfa shouted. "Now!"

A Later Jin cavalryman laughed, teeth flashing. "Central Plains cavalry?" he scoffed. "Cowards. One of us can kill ten. Stick close to us, Mr. Huang—we'll smash through."

Above them, unseen, the Dao Xuan Tianzun observed in silence.

History loved moments like this.

Moments right before confidence turned into obituary text.

Trivia:

Why Steppe Cavalry Still Died to Infantry (A Short Lesson Written in Blood)

Later Jin cavalry loved to boast that one rider could slaughter ten men of the Central Plains.

It wasn't entirely false.

But it also wasn't the whole truth.

Steppe cavalry were terrifying in open pursuit, raids, and broken formations. Speed, composite bows, and lifelong horsemanship made them natural predators of panic. Once an infantry line collapsed, the killing became effortless.

The problem was this:

Infantry did not always collapse.

When infantry stood still—properly—cavalry died.

History recorded this lesson again and again, usually at great expense.

A disciplined infantry formation, armed with long spears, halberds, pikes, or early firearms, turned horses from weapons into liabilities. A charging horse would not willingly impale itself. If forced forward, it would rear, twist, or fall—crushing its own rider beneath several hundred jin of panicked flesh.

Once a cavalryman was unhorsed, the battle ended for him.

Steppe warriors were excellent riders. They were not trained to fight on foot in dense formations.

Firearms made the situation worse.

Early matchlocks and flintlocks were slow, inaccurate, and unreliable—but against cavalry, they didn't need to be perfect. Horses were large targets. Smoke startled them. Noise disrupted charges. Even a wounded horse could break an entire assault by throwing riders into chaos.

This was why cavalry hated choke points, riverbanks, villages, muddy fields, and prepared ground. It was why they preferred maneuver over collision, encirclement over frontal assault.

And it was why every general who underestimated infantry formations eventually learned the same lesson:

Cavalry ruled the battlefield only when infantry allowed it.

Those who mistook arrogance for invincibility often discovered—far too late—that the Central Plains did not lack courage.

They merely required the enemy to come close enough to die properly.

Chapter 489 Master, I've Reformed

The Manchu cavalryman's words steadied Huang Yunfa's heart like a cup of strong wine.

That's right.

He had elite cavalry from beyond the passes—real cavalry. Men born on horseback, raised with reins in their hands and bows in their arms. Compared to the soft riders of the Central Plains, these were predators. Their horsemanship wasn't better by a margin—it existed on an entirely different plane.

Even if the enemy had numbers, what of it?

To encircle them, they had spread themselves thin. A loose net always had weak points. All Huang Yunfa needed to do was concentrate his elite riders, punch through one section like a blade through silk, and escape.

Once momentum was built—

The Central Plains cavalry would never catch them.

The warhorse beneath him snorted, powerful muscles coiled beneath its hide. A fine steed from beyond the passes. Huang Yunfa was certain that once it ran, no local horse could match it.

"Enough hesitation," he barked.

"Prepare to break through!"

The Manchu riders grinned, blood rising. Hands tightened on reins. Spurs dug in.

Then—

All three hundred riders surrounding them dismounted.

Cleanly. Calmly. As if rehearsed a thousand times.

For a heartbeat, the Manchu cavalry froze.

"...What?"

Then, in perfect unison, the three hundred men reached behind their backs and drew out flintlock rifles.

The sound was unmistakable.

Click.

Steel against steel.

Locks primed.

Huang Yunfa's mind went blank.

The Manchu riders, however, felt something far worse than confusion.

They felt fear.

"Wait—" someone shouted hoarsely.

"These aren't cavalry... they're riflemen who rode horses!"

In the blink of an eye, cavalry became infantry.

Three hundred riflemen spread into a pocket formation, spacing precise, muzzles steady, barrels angled inward—every sight calmly trained on Huang Yunfa and the cluster of men around him.

The Manchu veterans felt a chill crawl up their spines.

They had fought Central Plains cavalry before. That didn't frighten them.

But Central Plains riflemen?

Surrounding them?

This was a different story.

At that distance, there was no clever maneuver, no riding skill, no ancestral blessing that mattered.

Only lead.

Surrender?

A joke.

That left only one option.

"CHARGE—!"

The Manchu cavalry howled, voices wild, driving their horses forward in a desperate, suicidal rush.

And thus, history repeated itself.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The flintlocks roared.

The Gao Family Village militia—whether wielding smoothbores or rifled guns—all used flintlock mechanisms. No slow-burning matchcords. No fuss. Pull the trigger, and death answered.

Lead tore through the air.

Horses screamed.

Men flew from saddles.

There was no suspense, no heroic struggle—only physics doing its job.

In an instant, riders and mounts were riddled like sieves, collapsing into twisted heaps of flesh and steel.

Bodies hit the ground one after another.

From afar, Zao Ying exhaled slowly.

"What a waste," she muttered. "Such good horses. My cavalry battalion should've gone in—we could've captured them."

Lao Nanfeng shrugged.

"Did you see that charge? Those riders were the real deal. If we'd fought them horse to horse, they might've broken out. Losing brothers over pride isn't worth a few dozen fine steeds."

He glanced at the smoking barrels.

"Rifles are cheaper than funerals."

Zao Ying nodded.

"True. Horses can be bought. Lives can't."

Behind the scenes of the slaughter, an unspoken truth lingered—one written into blood across centuries of warfare:

Steppe cavalry ruled open fields and broken formations.

But once infantry stood firm, chose ground, and held fire—

Horses stopped being weapons.

They became liabilities.

A charging horse would not willingly impale itself. And once one fell, its rider followed. A cavalryman on foot was no terror—just a man carrying too much pride and not enough cover.

This was why steppe warriors despised riflemen more than rival cavalry.

Cavalry could be out-riden.

But riflemen only needed you close enough to regret it.

With the Manchu cavalry wiped out, Huang Yunfa's remaining household guards might as well have been scarecrows.

They knew it.

Everyone did.

Then Huang Yunfa suddenly burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha! Don't celebrate yet!" he shouted.

"Do you really think you've won? No! I'm not Huang Yunfa—I'm only his body double! You can't kill him!"

Silence.

Everyone stared.

"...Damn," Tie Niaofei muttered from behind a distant slope. "That slippery bastard."

Even Dao Xuan Tianzun paused, eyebrows lifting.

"Like Let the Bullets Fly?"

Miles away, hidden in dense woodland, the real Huang Yunfa lowered a Western telescope with a sneer.

"As expected," he said coolly. "Good thing I prepared a backup."

He sighed.

"Shame about the body doubles. I'll need to be even more careful now."

Turning to his ten personal guards, he said,

"Withdraw. We'll regroup, bring in our Jin merchant allies, and capture Tie Niaofei. I want answers."

As he turned—

"Amitabha."

A calm chant echoed nearby.

"Donor Huang, if one commits evil, others will always wish for his death. You escaped today—but what of tomorrow? And the day after?"

Huang Yunfa's eyes narrowed.

"Master Zhan Seng. You followed me?"

"I follow those who have lost their way."

"I don't kill monks," Huang Yunfa said coldly. "Get lost."

"Amitabha. Turn back."

One guard snapped.

"Didn't you hear him? Get lost!"

Steel flashed.

The monk's staff moved.

Thud.

The guard dropped.

Huang Yunfa's heart skipped.

This monk...?

Suspicion bloomed.

"Kill him."

Ten guards rushed forward.

Ten against one.

Zhan Seng wielded only a staff, refusing to kill, stubbornly clinging to his so-called Divine Martial Art of Non-Killing. He retreated, deflected, stumbled—overwhelmed.

"Donor!" he cried. "Turn back—!"

"Kill him," Huang Yunfa snapped. "He's annoying."

A blade slashed.

Blood spilled.

The monk looked down.

His eyes turned red.

"...Who," he growled softly, "drew my blood?"

The air changed.

"Haven't you heard of He Ping," he snarled, "the Man-Eating Salt Owl?"

Huang Yunfa: "???"

The guards: "???"

The gentle monk vanished.

The staff struck like thunder.

Skulls cracked.

Bodies fell.

One blow, one death.

Moments later, only Huang Yunfa remained.

He shook violently.

"I—I've reformed! Immediately! I'll never sell to the Manchus again!"

"Heh."

He Ping grinned.

"Reform? What does that have to do with me?"

The staff came down.

Crack.

Red and white splattered across the earth.

Chapter 490 Shi Kefa Arrives

Censor Wu Shen felt as if someone were splitting his skull open with a dull chisel.

His head throbbed.

Thirty thousand people—old men, women, children—were now crammed into the small county town of Hequ like beans poured into a cracked jar. They weren't soldiers. They weren't rebels anymore. They were dependents.

And dependents, inconveniently, still needed to eat.

For one unguarded moment, an extremely un-Confucian thought flashed through Wu Shen's mind:

Wang Jiayin, you shameless bastard. When you rebelled, why didn't you bring your wives and children with you? Why dump them on me? Am I supposed to raise them for you?

The thought escalated.

If we just killed them all...

He froze.

That line of thinking belonged to generals, not scholars. It was strictly forbidden territory for a man who had memorized the sages since childhood. Wu Shen inhaled deeply, strangled the thought in its cradle, and put his official face back on.

No. These people had to be resettled.

And not here.

They were all from Shaanxi. If he dared suggest settling them in Shanxi, Governor Song Tongyin would immediately sour. Once cooperation collapsed, these thirty thousand souls would be dumped into some desolate ravine, given no land, no grain, and left to starve politely.

Then what?

They'd rebel again.

And this time it wouldn't even be embarrassing rebels—just old men, women, and children waving hoes and sticks. Suppressing that would make the court look like a butcher shop. Kill them again? Send up thirty thousand severed heads of the helpless?

Wu Shen shuddered.

If that happened, the Emperor would explode—and Wu Shen's head would roll first.

"There's no choice," he muttered. "They must go back to Shaanxi."

Which immediately brought one place to mind.

Chengcheng County.

A place that, recently, had begun performing miracles.

"...But would Chengcheng really accept thirty thousand mouths that can't fight, can't farm yet, and can only eat?" Wu Shen sighed.

"Report!"

A subordinate rushed in.

"Your Excellency! Shaanxi Judicial Commissioner Shi Kefa seeks an audience!"

Wu Shen's headache vanished.

"Shi Kefa is here?" he exclaimed. "Excellent! Invite him in—quickly!"

Moments later, Shi Kefa entered.

Twenty-nine years old—an age brimming with ambition but not yet dulled by compromise. His official post was Judicial Commissioner of Xi'an, Shaanxi. On paper, his job involved trials, prisons, and rituals.

In reality?

He had spent most of his tenure doing one thing:

Relief.

Because starving people became criminals faster than paperwork could be stamped.

Shi Kefa had learned early that preventing crime was far easier than judging it. A true judicial official, he believed, should be like a master swordsman—so skilled that he never needed to draw his blade.

The instant Wu Shen saw him, his eyes reddened.

"My dear Shi!" he cried, as though greeting a long-lost cousin. "You've come at exactly the right moment!"

He grasped Shi Kefa's hands tightly.

"These thirty thousand displaced families from Shaanxi must be escorted back. If the official handling this pockets even a fraction of the funds, they will rebel again. I can only entrust this matter to you."

Shi Kefa straightened, expression calm but resolute.

"Your Excellency, if I embezzle even one copper coin of relief funds, may I be reborn as a paving stone in my next life—trampled endlessly by the common people."

Wu Shen exhaled in relief.

"Good. Only you can put my heart at ease."

He waved. A chest was brought forward.

"Take this silver. Escort the people back to Shaanxi and hand them over to Magistrate Liang Shixian of Chengcheng County."

Shi Kefa opened the chest—and sucked in a sharp breath.

"...Your Excellency," he said carefully, "this is... at most three thousand taels."

Wu Shen nodded.

"Yes."

Shi Kefa hesitated.

"Three thousand taels... for thirty thousand people?"

"For travel expenses," Wu Shen said. "Only travel expenses."

Shi Kefa blinked.

"And after arrival?"

Wu Shen looked away, expression heavy.

"There will be no funds for that. Nor could you manage it even if there were."

He sighed.

"I brought one hundred thousand taels to Shaanxi. Hong Chengchou demanded twenty thousand immediately for overdue military pay. After relief here and there, I have less than fifty thousand left. These three thousand—I scraped them together with clenched teeth."

Shi Kefa's scalp went numb.

Wu Shen squeezed his hand again.

"Everyone else would steal this silver. Only you won't."

Shi Kefa bowed deeply.

"I understand. I will do my utmost."

Soon after, Shi Kefa departed—leading one thousand soldiers and thirty thousand displaced souls toward Chengcheng County.

The fastest route should have been by river.

But the upper Yellow River was violent, the currents unruly, and the court lacked sufficient transport boats. Thirty thousand people couldn't be moved that way.

So they walked.

From Hequ to Taiyuan.

From Taiyuan to Pingyang.

From Pingyang to Hejin.

Across the Yellow River at Dragon Gate Ferry.

Then through Han City and Heyang—finally reaching Chengcheng.

Hundreds of miles.

Shi Kefa knew it would be brutal.

But fear had never been his habit.

Days later, they reached Taiyuan Prefecture.

Their provisions were gone.

Children cried. Elderly collapsed. Women clutched empty bowls. The mood frayed like rotten rope—one spark away from chaos.

Shi Kefa had no choice but to enter the city and buy grain.

At the granary, he learned the price.

Eight hundred copper coins per dou.

His temples throbbed.

At that price, three thousand taels would barely buy fifty thousand catties of grain—laughably insufficient for thirty thousand people traveling hundreds of miles.

Still, he pressed on.

Invoking his authority, arguing, negotiating, grinding teeth—he forced the price down to seven hundred copper coins per dou. He spent fifteen hundred taels, buying just over twenty thousand catties of grain.

Enough for one meal.

One half-full meal.

But it worked.

Restlessness subsided. Hunger quieted. People remembered they were human again.

Then they marched south.

Along the way, they dug roots, gathered wild greens, stripped bark from trees—boiling everything together with scraps of grain. They pinched every coin until it screamed.

After several hundred miles—

The grain was gone.

"Your Excellency," a subordinate reported grimly, "our supplies are nearly exhausted. We must buy more."

Shi Kefa frowned.

"Which city is next?"

"Pingyang Prefecture."

Shi Kefa's heart sank.

Pingyang.

Recently attacked by ten thousand rebels of the Southern Camp Eight Great Kings. Brigadier General Li Huai had barely held the city. Only reinforcements under Shi Jian—now promoted to Commander—had saved it.

Grain prices there would be—

He sighed deeply.

"Pingyang has just tasted war," he said softly. "Grain will not be cheap."

He looked at the endless column of people behind him.

"...What are we to do?"