

## Great Ming 491

### Chapter 491 I've Squandered It

Shi Kefa did not dare let the thirty thousand displaced families enter Pingyang Prefecture.

If even a single spark of disorder ignited inside the city walls, the situation would spiral out of control instantly. He ordered the people to camp outside the gates, strictly forbidding entry. Then, dressed plainly and accompanied by only a small group of household guards, he went into the city himself.

The sight of thirty thousand figures pressed outside the walls was impossible to ignore.

Pingyang Prefecture Magistrate Dou Wenda had already rushed to the city gate the moment he received word.

Shi Kefa, whose official rank was lower, immediately stepped forward and bowed deeply.

"This humble official acts under the direct command of Imperial Censor Wu Shen," he reported. "I am escorting thirty thousand surrendered rebel dependents from Hequ County back to Chengcheng County. As we pass through your esteemed jurisdiction, I must trouble you for temporary passage."

Dou Wenda nodded coolly.

"As long as they behave, there will be no issue. But should they dare stir trouble—"

His tone hardened slightly.

"—Pingyang Prefecture has its own means of maintaining order."

With that, he turned and gestured to the officer beside him.

"This is Squad Commander Wang Xiaohua, a trusted general under Grand General Wang Cheng'en of Shaanxi. The defense of Pingyang currently rests in his hands."

"Wang... Xiaohua?"

Shi Kefa twitched internally.

What kind of parents burden a grown man with a name like that?

Outwardly, he clasped his hands politely.

"Squad Commander Wang, your efforts in safeguarding the prefecture are deeply admirable."

Bai Mao's soul nearly left his body.

Every time someone said that name aloud, he felt a powerful urge to hurl himself from the city wall and end it all with dignity.

He returned the salute stiffly and leaned over the parapet, scanning the vast sea of refugees outside.

As he looked, his mind automatically began calculating.

Tianzun will be delighted...

No young men, but that's fine. The elderly can weave bamboo goods, press tofu, ferment soy. The women can run sewing machines, print books, bind manuals. The children can go straight into the Prison Valley schools...

While he was deep in this extremely heretical mental arithmetic, Shi Kefa spoke up.

"My provisions have run out."

The moment the words left his mouth, Dou Wenda reacted as though stung.

"Pingyang has no grain either!" he declared loudly. "Not a single kernel!"

Shi Kefa gave a tired, helpless smile.

"I am not asking for charity. This humble official has silver. I wish to purchase grain."

"Oh!" Dou Wenda's face instantly relaxed. "If you're buying, that's a different matter."

He laughed.

"Master Shi comes on orders from Imperial Censor Wu Shen—surely you carry disaster relief silver? A full hundred thousand taels, no less! Hahaha!"

Shi Kefa sighed inwardly.

Everyone knows Wu Shen carries a hundred thousand taels.

No one knows he's already been bled dry.

Aloud, he asked carefully,

"May I ask... what is the current grain price in Pingyang?"

Dou Wenda spread his hands.

"It isn't cheap."

Shi Kefa's heart clenched.

Dou Wenda raised three fingers.

"Three hundred copper coins per dou."

"What?!" Shi Kefa gasped. "Three hundred?!"

He had just come from Taiyuan, where grain sold for eight hundred per dou. He had nearly destroyed his throat bargaining it down to seven hundred.

And here?

Three hundred?

"What sorcery is this?" he blurted out. "Why is Pingyang so cheap?"

Dou Wenda chuckled and gestured toward Bai Mao.

"It's thanks to Xiaohua."

"Pfft—!"

Bai Mao nearly coughed blood.

"Please," he cut in urgently, "address me as Squad Commander Wang."

Dou Wenda pretended not to hear.

"Xiaohua's family is well-off," he continued cheerfully. "They transported massive quantities of grain from Shaanxi and sold it to the prefecture at a low price. Thanks to that, Pingyang has stabilized nicely. Hahahaha!"

A vein throbbed violently on Bai Mao's forehead.

"I beg you," he hissed, "call me Squad Commander Wang."

Shi Kefa heard none of it.

His ears rang with a single phrase:

Three hundred copper coins.

Overjoyed, he spun around.

"Quickly!" he ordered. "Bring all remaining silver! Buy every grain sack available!"

He had fifteen hundred taels left.

He wagered it all.

The result?

Fifty to sixty thousand catties of grain.

Shi Kefa laughed aloud, eyes shining.

"With this," he declared, "we will reach Chengcheng County! We will make it!"

He ensured the refugees ate a full meal, stabilized morale, then bade farewell to Dou Wenda and Bai Mao and resumed the journey south.

With grain in hand, his steps felt lighter, his spine straighter.

Several days later, they reached Hejin County.

Or rather—what remained of it.

The city walls lay broken. Half the houses were burned to the ground. No living soul remained.

Shi Kefa dismounted and wept openly.

"Hejin is destroyed..." he murmured. "If there were even one refugee left, I could offer relief—but there is no one."

He wiped his tears.

"...Let us go on."

Beyond Hejin lay Dragon Gate Ferry. Once crossed, they would re-enter Shaanxi.

Hope returned to Shi Kefa's heart.

When they reached the ferry—

He froze.

Before him rose not a ferry, but a vast water-city, walls packed with tens of thousands of people, bustling with life.

"So... Hejin's people all fled here?" he breathed.

Encouraged, he hurried to the gates.

Standing guard was Shi Jian—the very commander who had relieved Pingyang. Formerly a centurion, now promoted.

Shi Kefa greeted him warmly.

"I have long heard of General Shi's deeds! Two hundred men holding off ten thousand rebels—truly peerless!"

Shi Jian waved it off.

"No, no. The credit belongs to Major Li Huai."

Shi Kefa smiled knowingly.

"Only officials in the capital believe that."

Shi Jian chuckled awkwardly.

Lowering his voice, Shi Kefa gestured at the crowded city.

"With so many refugees, have provisions been arranged? I can recommend Pingyang—grain there is only three hundred copper coins per dou."

Shi Jian laughed softly.

"Three hundred? That's expensive."

Shi Kefa stiffened.

"Here," Shi Jian continued calmly, "grain is one hundred fifty copper coins per dou."

"...What?"

"One hundred fifty."

Shi Kefa made a strangled sound.

"Pfft—!"

He staggered.

His guards rushed forward.

"Master! Are you unwell?"

Shi Kefa beat his chest and stomped his foot like a ruined scholar.

"Why—why did I spend everything in Pingyang?! I should have saved a thousand taels! Imperial Censor Wu... I have squandered your silver! Squandered it completely!"

He clutched his sleeves, face pale.

"I am a fool... a useless fool..."

Chapter 492 Preparing to Build a Grand Bridge

Beside Dragon Gate Ferry, atop a massive riverside boulder, stood the towering statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun, arms spread wide as if embracing heaven and earth, basking in the gentle sunlight.

Before the statue knelt a vast crowd of refugees from Hejin County, their prayers simple and earnest.

They prayed for good weather next year.

For bandits to stay away.

For a son after five daughters.

For a daughter after five sons.

At that moment—

The eyes of Dao Xuan Tianzun moved.

They blinked.

The statue came alive.

His first action was to lower his outstretched arms, muttering with mild irritation,

"Who was the genius who insisted on designing this pose? Arms stretched all day like this—do they have any idea how tiring it is?"

The instant the statue moved, the kneeling villagers erupted in shock and ecstasy.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has descended!"

"I've seen it with my own eyes!"

"Tianzun! Tianzun!"

Li Daoxuan had no choice but to raise his silicone arms again, returning to the original divine posture.

"Quiet."

The single word fell like a stone.

The crowd fell silent instantly.

"I'm only observing," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "Keep your voices down. Don't alarm the newly arrived official."

The villagers hurriedly acknowledged the command and retreated.

Only then did Li Daoxuan turn his gaze outward, toward Shi Kefa, who was stationed outside Dragon Gate Ferry, carefully organizing the surrendered refugees for the river crossing.

Information surfaced naturally in Li Daoxuan's mind.

Shi Kefa—

A famous general of resistance against the Qing.

A man celebrated for loyalty and integrity.

A man who... almost never won.

He lost again and again, until he died with the Ming Dynasty itself.

His abilities were limited. Sometimes painfully so.

But his moral spine was unbreakable.

He reminded Li Daoxuan of a certain archetype—

"I know I'm weak. But I still have to stand here."

Shi Kefa was precisely that kind of man.

Li Daoxuan sighed softly and sat down at the edge of the dock.

The first group of refugees soon reached the riverbank.

Iron chains had already been anchored across the Yellow River, with pontoons lashed together to form a floating crossing. Soldiers pulled on the chains, stabilizing the pontoons enough to allow passage.

For trained troops, this was manageable.

For thirty thousand refugees—

It was a nightmare.

The pontoons swayed constantly. A single misstep meant falling straight into the river. Many of the elderly could barely walk on level ground, let alone a shifting surface. Children clung to adults, terrified.

The refugees hesitated, stalled at the river's edge.

Shi Kefa watched, heart burning with anxiety, yet utterly at a loss.

From a distance, Shi Jian glanced toward Dao Xuan Tianzun seated by the dock.

The Tianzun has descended... and is watching the crossing?

A thought struck him.

Is he about to intervene?

He guessed correctly.

Li Daoxuan had come to Dragon Gate Ferry for precisely this reason.

In recent days, the continuous relief operations by the Shanxi expeditionary "little people" had driven the Salvation Index soaring. The diorama's observable range had expanded dramatically—now encompassing Dragon Gate Ferry itself.

And this place—

Was perfect.

Because the river here was narrow.

At its narrowest point, the Yellow River spanned only 120 meters.

Inside Li Daoxuan's box—

That was just 60 centimeters.

More than manageable.

Better yet, the materials were already prepared.

When Li Daoxuan had purchased the electric toy train, the shop owner had convinced him to buy several bridge components as well. They had sat unused ever since.

He had hesitated before.

Building bridges felt... too miraculous. Too intrusive.

But now?

Tens of thousands of elderly, women, and children faced the Yellow River. Boats were risky. Pontoons were worse.

One slip. One scream. One body swept away.

For someone less than a centimeter tall, falling into a river wasn't just dangerous—it was fatal. Even Li Daoxuan might not be able to retrieve them in time.

So he stopped hesitating.

Let it be miraculous.

Better spectacle than silent drowning.

Decision made.

Build the bridge.

Dao Xuan Tianzun rose and waved toward Shi Jian.

Shi Jian sprinted over immediately, posture reverent.

"Tianzun, what are your commands?"

From afar, Shi Kefa watched in bewilderment as Shi Jian abandoned his post and rushed toward a strangely dressed figure, treating him with profound respect.

Li Daoxuan said calmly,

"Clear both riverbanks. I'm going to build a bridge."

"Not a pontoon," he added.

"A real bridge."

Shi Jian froze.

A hundred and twenty meters was a short span to the Tianzun—but to an ordinary man, it was unimaginable.

Still, he didn't question it.

He turned and shouted,

"Everyone, retreat from the riverbanks! Move back! Dao Xuan Tianzun is about to bestow a grand bridge!"

The soldiers from Gao Family Village scattered instantly.

They knew better than anyone—when the Tianzun acted, the heavens and earth moved. Standing too close was asking for terror.

The refugees from Hejin County, however, stared blankly.

"A bridge?"

"We thought the Tianzun only bestowed grain..."

"He builds bridges too?"

Shi Jian barked,

"What are you standing around for? Move!"

The soldiers hurried to drive everyone back—Shi Kefa's refugees included.

Shi Kefa, now thoroughly confused, stepped forward.

"General Shi!" he called out. "Why are my people being driven away? They're about to cross!"

Shi Jian snapped back,

"What use is a pontoon? Dao Xuan Tianzun has decreed—he's building a real bridge!"

Shi Kefa stiffened.

"Dao Xuan... Tianzun?"

Li Daoxuan turned toward him and smiled.

It wasn't intentional—but silicone faces were never very good at smiling.

The result was... unsettling.

Shi Kefa swallowed.

"You... are Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

Trivia:

Shi Kefa — A Loyal Man Trapped in a Losing Dynasty

Shi Kefa was not a great general.

History does him no such kindness.

He was cautious, rigid, bookish, and often indecisive. On the battlefield, he lost more than he won. When decisive brutality was required, he hesitated. When compromise was needed, he stood firm. He possessed integrity in an age that demanded ruthlessness.

And yet—

He remains one of the Ming Dynasty's most revered figures.

Shi Kefa was a jinshi, a scholar-official molded by Confucian orthodoxy. He believed, with an almost painful sincerity, that moral conduct could stabilize the world. He trusted systems, rituals, memorials, and righteousness—long after those things had stopped working.

When the Qing armies advanced south, Shi Kefa defended Yangzhou.

He knew the city could not hold.

He knew reinforcements would not come.

He refused to surrender.

The Qing commander offered him high office. Shi Kefa rejected it.

When Yangzhou fell, Shi Kefa was captured. He was urged again to submit. Again, he refused.

He was executed.

What followed was the Yangzhou Massacre—ten days of slaughter that scarred the memory of an entire civilization.

Later generations praised Shi Kefa as a martyr of loyalty, a symbol of unyielding righteousness. Temples were built to honor him. His writings were preserved. His name became synonymous with moral resistance.

But history is unkindly honest.

Shi Kefa's virtue did not save Yangzhou.

His loyalty did not save the Ming.

His death did not stop the massacre.

And yet—

People remembered him.

Not because he was strong.

But because he refused to stop being upright in a world collapsing sideways.

If the Ming Dynasty had more men like Shi Kefa earlier, it might have survived.

By the time it had men like him in abundance—

It was already too late.

Chapter 493 Building a Bridge

Unease crept up Shi Kefa's spine like a cold finger.

It started with the title.

Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Any man in the Great Ming who called himself that either had real divine backing—or was about to ask you for donations, incense money, and possibly your firstborn son. Add to that the man's strange attire, his stiff posture, and that unsettling expression that looked carved rather than grown, and Shi Kefa's instincts screamed a single phrase:

White Lotus.

Or one of its cousins. Same poison, different label.

The Dragon Gate Ferry, moments ago merely crowded and noisy, now felt like a trap laid with smiling faces. The river roared below, the dock creaked beneath his boots, and suddenly Shi Kefa became keenly aware that if this turned ugly, his corpse would feed fish before any report reached the capital.

Calm, he told himself. You've faced corrupt officials and armed bandits. A cult leader with good posture is still just a man.

Then Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled.

It was not a warm smile.

It was the kind of smile that made one wonder whether the face underneath was still human.

"Shi Kefa," the Tianzun said pleasantly. "You're quite famous. I know all about you."

Shi Kefa's heart skipped once, very professionally.

"This humble official," he replied, tone flawless, "is but a minor judicial commissioner. 'Famous' would be an exaggeration."

Dao Xuan Tianzun tilted his head, as if amused by the attempt. "Oh? Then let me jog your memory. Hereditary Embroidered Uniform Guard centurion. First year of Chongzhen, passed the imperial examination. Civil and military paths, both walked."

Shi Kefa froze.

For a heartbeat, the world narrowed to the sound of his own pulse.

The jinshi part was public knowledge. Anyone with a mouth and a tea shop could recite that. But the Embroidered Uniform Guard lineage? That was buried deeper than corpses in old cases.

His voice dropped, instinctively. "This information is classified. It must not be spoken of lightly."

Inside the diorama, Dao Xuan Tianzun was smiling.

Outside it, Li Daoxuan had already flicked on Focus, scanning Shi Kefa like a ledger. Sleeve. Seam. Inner lining.

Found you.

Back inside the puppet, Dao Xuan Tianzun continued, tone almost conversational.

"You're a judicial commissioner, yet the court sends you to oversee disaster relief. Odd, isn't it? Unless relief is merely the surface... and intelligence gathering the true task."

Shi Kefa's back dampened with sweat.

"Bandit movements. Refugee concentrations. Grain prices." The Tianzun's finger lifted and pointed lazily. "All of which are far more interesting to the Embroidered Uniform Guard than sacks of rice."

A murmur rippled through nearby militia.

"Did the Tianzun just—"

"Shh, don't breathe too loud."

Shi Kefa's hand slid, almost without thought, to his weapon.

He hadn't brought the xiuchundao. Too obvious. Instead, a foreign blade hung at his waist — a Japanese katana. Scholars wore them for show. He wore his for blood.

"You speak boldly," Shi Kefa said, eyes sharp now. "Are you planning to silence me here?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun spread his hands. "Good heavens, no. I'm not some villain who kills people for knowing things. Besides—" he leaned closer, voice lowering conspiratorially "—your talent may be... average, but your integrity is excellent. That's rare these days."

That hurt more than a threat.

Before Shi Kefa could retort, the Tianzun winked.

"Still," he said, "I wonder if you'll keep writing that secret report after what you're about to witness."

Shi Kefa stiffened. "Witness what?"

"Don't blink."

He didn't plan to. His thumb pressed lightly against the guard of his blade. If this man so much as twitched—

A shout cut through the air.

"LOOK AT THE SKY!"

"The Tianzun is moving!"

"Heavens above—IT'S COMING!"

Shi Kefa looked up.

The clouds split.

A golden hand descended from the heavens.

It was vast beyond reason, dozens of zhang across, fingers like pillars of a palace gate. Sunlight poured off it in blinding sheets. The river seemed to shrink beneath it, reduced to a decorative stream in a god's garden.

Shi Kefa's knees nearly buckled.

Around him, the Gao Family Village militia erupted.

"It's been ages!"

"The Tianzun's hand!"

"Kneel, kneel, don't be idiots!"

The refugees followed suit in a heartbeat. Skepticism died faster than hunger when confronted with physics-defying divinity.

The surrendered bandits did not kneel.

They screamed.

"DEMON!"

"NO, A GOD!"

"DO DEMONS HAVE HANDS THAT BIG—"

Chaos exploded among the thirty thousand men. Some dropped weapons. Some dropped themselves. One fainted standing up.

The golden hand struck the eastern riverbank.

Boom.

The ground shuddered. Dirt compacted like kneaded dough. Another strike. And another.

Villagers fled backward, tripping over each other. Shi Kefa staggered, barely keeping his balance.

Then the hand crossed the river and repeated the motion on the western bank.

Bridge foundations, Shi Kefa realized numbly. He's... preparing the piers.

The hand withdrew.

Silence fell — thick, expectant.

Then it returned.

This time, it held a bridge.

A colossal, multicolored structure, impossibly intact, spanning dozens of zhang. Painted beams gleamed like lacquered jade.

Someone whispered, "Mother of mercy..."

The bridge descended.

BOOM.

The piers sank perfectly into place, as if the earth itself had rehearsed this moment. The hand shook the bridge once. Twice. Like a carpenter checking his work.

Then it scooped mud and stone, packing them tight.

Satisfied, the hand vanished into the clouds.

Less than half an hour had passed.

A bridge now crossed the Yellow River.

No chants. No rituals. No blood sacrifices. Just construction — divine, efficient, terrifyingly practical.

Shi Kefa stood frozen, his worldview quietly collapsing.

"Shi Kefa."

He flinched.

Dao Xuan Tianzun stood beside him, smile unchanged.

"Walk with me," the Tianzun said lightly. "Someone needs to go first. Otherwise, the people will stare at it until the next dynasty."

Shi Kefa swallowed.

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "This official... will go."

And as he stepped onto the bridge, one thought echoed in his mind:

The court is going to have a very bad headache.

Chapter 494 The Longmen Yellow River Bridge

Dao Xuan Tianzun and Shi Kefa were the first to step onto the Longmen Yellow River Bridge.

Which sounded dignified in hindsight.

In reality, it was anything but.

Because while the bridge itself was majestic, the approaches to it were... let's generously call them "unfinished." No stairs. No ramp. No stone steps engraved with dragons. Just two slopes that had been violently compacted by a divine palm, still smelling faintly of crushed earth.

Shi Kefa lifted the hem of his official robe with one hand and climbed like a man scaling a muddy embankment after a flood.

Slip. Step. Slip again.

By the time he reached the deck, the bottom of his robe was coated in yellow mud, and any illusion of elegant officialdom had long since drowned in the Yellow River below.

Yet strangely—

He was smiling.

A bridge, his heart whispered. An actual bridge.

Not a creaking pontoon. Not a rope crossing. Not a "close your eyes and pray" ferry.

A real bridge.

The moment Shi Kefa stepped fully onto the deck and looked down, his breath caught.

The Yellow River surged far beneath his feet, muddy and furious, like a dragon forced to bow under stone. The people on either bank now looked no bigger than ants. Wind rushed past his ears, tugging at his robes as if urging him onward.

His chest tightened.

Even men of later ages, strolling across steel bridges for leisure, felt this thrill. How could a Ming official—who had grown up believing rivers were boundaries ordained by Heaven—possibly resist?

"This bridge..." Shi Kefa breathed, then laughed outright. "This bridge is magnificent!"

He threw all restraint aside.

A civil official of the Ming Dynasty promptly ran across the bridge deck, boots slapping against the surface, laughing like a boy who had just discovered the world was larger than his village.

He ran one full length.

Then another.

Then hurried back to Dao Xuan Tianzun, grabbing the railing with both hands as if afraid it might vanish if he let go.

"You are no mortal," Shi Kefa said earnestly. "Are you a celestial being?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled, the same unreadable curve of lips. "If I'm honest, I usually try very hard not to be noticed by officials."

The words landed softly.

But their meaning struck like thunder.

Shi Kefa's excitement drained away at once. His spine straightened, expression turning solemn.

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued calmly, "Think about it. The more I interact with the Embroidered Uniform Guard, the more trouble I invite. Logic dictates I should avoid you."

Shi Kefa inhaled, then bowed deeply. "Then... what is your intention?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun didn't answer immediately.

He pointed instead.

Toward the mass of people waiting anxiously on the eastern bank—thirty thousand elderly, frail, women, and children.

"They must cross the river," he said.

Shi Kefa's eyes widened.

"These are not young men who can swim if they fall," Dao Xuan Tianzun continued. "They crossed from Shaanxi to Shanxi once already. On shaking boats. In flood season. You know what that means."

Shi Kefa did know.

It meant bodies.

Quiet ones. Forgotten ones.

"I don't want them to cross like that again," Dao Xuan Tianzun said simply.

Understanding dawned.

"So even if it meant revealing yourself..." Shi Kefa murmured, "...you would still build this bridge."

Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded. "Heaven shows benevolence to humanity. Humans should at least attempt the same."

Shi Kefa found himself unable to speak.

"Take care of them," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "Escort them safely to Chengcheng County. See it with your own eyes. Then decide whether that letter in your sleeve deserves to be sent."

Shi Kefa stood frozen, thoughts colliding like waves.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had already turned away.

He went beneath the bridge, retrieved several thick cloth ropes from Shi Jian, and twisted them together with practiced ease, forming an absurdly thick cord.

The crowd stared.

No one dared ask.

After securing the rope, Dao Xuan Tianzun casually climbed onto the railing.

Then—

He jumped.

Straight down.

Tens of thousands of people screamed.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun fell like a stone, even letting out a bizarre, joyous howl mid-air.

"Oh—wa—ha—ha—!"

Just before impact, the rope snapped taut.

The Tianzun rebounded.

Dropped again.

Bounced.

Swung.

Finally came to rest, dangling a couple of chi above the river, laughing loudly.

"Shi Jian!" he shouted. "Pull me up!"

Shi Jian nearly dropped the rope in panic. "T-Tianzun—what in Heaven was that?!"

They hauled him back up amid stunned silence.

Dao Xuan Tianzun grinned. "That is called bungee jumping. A recreational activity from above. Extremely fun. Extremely dangerous. Death rate... let's not discuss."

The crowd collectively forgot how to breathe.

Shi Jian stared at the bridge. Then at the rope.

Without saying a word, he tied it around his waist and jumped.

His scream echoed magnificently.

Then another militia soldier.

Then another.

"WAIT FOR YOUR TURN!" "YOU IDIOTS TIE THE KNOT PROPERLY!" "HEY—THAT ONE'S LOOSE—"

Chaos erupted.

Meanwhile, Shi Kefa began organizing the crossing.

The elderly stepped cautiously onto the bridge, hands gripping railings, eyes shining. The wind cooled their faces. The bridge did not sway. It did not creak.

"It's solid..."

"We're really crossing..."

"We're going home."

Some laughed. Some cried.

Music began to play.

Gentle. Familiar.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun had changed the tune.

"Clouds from my hometown drift across the sky..."

Tears flowed freely now.

"I wonder if my husband is still alive..."

"Even if he isn't... at least we're returning."

Shi Kefa led them to the western bank.

When he turned back, Dao Xuan Tianzun stood far away, waving.

Shi Kefa bowed deeply.

His fingers brushed the letter in his sleeve.

I will see first, he thought. Then decide.

And the bridge stood firm between Heaven and Earth.

Chapter 495 A Sound Calculation

After crossing the Longmen Yellow River Bridge, the procession advanced smoothly toward Han City, a key hub within the Tongguan Circuit.

Han City was no small town.

It sat astride one of the most important military and transportation arteries linking Guanzhong to the Central Plains. Garrisons were strong, defenses intact, and the imperial banners still flew from the walls. Unlike many regions ravaged by chaos, Han City remained firmly under court control.

Which made what Shi Kefa saw next all the more striking.

He deliberately detoured to a grain store.

There was no need to announce his rank. He asked like an ordinary traveler, inquiring about prices, availability, and recent fluctuations.

The answer confirmed his suspicions.

"A dou of grain—one hundred and twenty wen."

Shi Kefa paused.

That price was astonishingly low.

Not famine-low, not panic-low—but normal-year low. Barely higher than prices in years untouched by flood, drought, or rebellion.

And the pattern held true everywhere he checked.

The closer they drew to Chengcheng County, the cheaper grain became.

The effect of this abundance was immediately visible.

Markets were lively. Workshops had reopened. Peddlers called out cheerfully from street corners. Even the poor looked less hollow-eyed, their shoulders no longer bent under constant dread.

A city that had exhaled after holding its breath for too long.

As Shi Kefa walked through the streets, his attention was drawn to a small teahouse by the roadside.

A storyteller stood at its entrance, fan in hand, voice rising and falling dramatically as he addressed a gathered crowd.

"...Now this fellow, Shi Jian, traveled all the way to Gao Family Village in Chengcheng County! He worked himself half to death, earned a bit of copper, and then thought to himself—'Is this all there is? A lifetime of labor for a handful of coins?'"

The crowd leaned in.

"So he made up his mind! Packed a sack of flour, two ounces of cured meat, and set out to apprentice under a blacksmith! But just as he stepped past the bamboo grove—thwack! A sharp pain at the back of his head, and down he went! Knocked clean unconscious!"

Even Shi Kefa stopped.

Against his will, curiosity hooked him.

"And then?" someone urged.

The storyteller snapped his fan shut with a sharp clack.

"For the rest of this thrilling tale," he declared smugly, "you must return for the next telling!"

Groans erupted.

Shi Kefa frowned. "You stop there? Just as it becomes interesting? Is this how performers earn a living—by tormenting their audience?"

The waiter hurried over, bowing apologetically. "Please, noble sir, have some tea to soothe your temper."

Shi Kefa accepted the cup absentmindedly and took a sip.

His hand froze.

His eyes widened.

This was... Longjing.

Not just any Longjing—pre-Qingming Longjing, the highest grade imaginable. Even in Jiangnan, such tea would only appear at the tables of high ministers or wealthy clans.

Yet here it was.

In a roadside teahouse.

"Where," Shi Kefa asked slowly, "did this tea come from?"

The waiter smiled proudly. "Our owner's younger brother! He teaches at the Gao Family Village School in Chengcheng County. This tea was a 'comfort gift' for the teachers—bestowed by the Dao Xuan Tianzun Himself! He doesn't care much for tea, so he sent it back. The owner thought it'd be a shame not to serve it."

At the words Dao Xuan Tianzun , everything clicked.

Shi Kefa nearly laughed.

A man who could bestow a bridge across the Yellow River—what was a little tea to him?

He gently patted the waiter's shoulder. "Tell your owner this tea is extremely precious. Even in Jiangnan, it is not easily obtained. He should not serve it carelessly."

The waiter blinked. "Is it really that valuable?"

Before Shi Kefa could answer, the storyteller had vanished.

Disappointed, Shi Kefa asked, "What was the rest of the story?"

"Oh, that?" the waiter chuckled. "It's from Gao Piao. Most folks have already read the comic. The storyteller just adds flair."

"Comic?" Shi Kefa echoed.

"Yes, sir. There's a bookstore just around the corner."

Shi Kefa went.

Inside, shelves stretched wall to wall.

About half the books were familiar: the Four Books, the Five Classics, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Water Margin.

The rest were utterly baffling.

Chinese. Mathematics. Physics. Chemistry.

He understood the first two titles. The latter two might as well have been spells from a Daoist scripture.

Then he saw the illustrated volumes.

Chronicles of the Dao Xuan Tianzun, Dao Xuan: Demon Slayer.

His heart skipped.

Recalling the golden hand, the bridge, the casual defiance of Heaven and Earth—Shi Kefa bought all six volumes without hesitation.

Further in were more illustrated works: Generals of the Yang Family, Legend of Yue Fei, Romance of the Three Kingdoms—and finally, Gao Piao.

On impulse, he bought everything unfamiliar.

By the time his attendants staggered out under the weight of books, Shi Kefa was already flipping pages.

Mounted on horseback, he read as they traveled toward Heyang County.

Volume after volume.

Slowly, the image sharpened.

Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The bridges. The fertilizer. The rain. The strange tools. The casual reshaping of fate.

A chill ran through him.

So it was truly him, Shi Kefa thought. The deity from the pages... standing before me at Dragon Gate Ferry.

"My lord," an attendant reported, "the crops in Heyang County... they're growing unusually well."

Shi Kefa closed the book and looked.

The fields were lush beyond reason. Thick stalks, heavy heads of grain. Not merely healthy—abundant.

Calmly, he said, "Celestial Fertilizer."

The attendant stared.

"The third volume explains it," Shi Kefa added. "Yields double. Sometimes more."

He withdrew his confidential report and reread the line: 'Grain prices are suspiciously low.'

He sighed.

"During the Tianqi reign, Chengcheng and Heyang together supported roughly two hundred thousand people. In good years. Now, with doubled yields, they can sustain four hundred thousand. With reclaimed land... half a million."

He folded the letter.

"I feared their ability to absorb refugees was unnatural," he murmured. "But now I see—it is merely sound calculation."

Heaven had intervened.

But humans had risen to meet it.

And that, Shi Kefa realized, was the most unsettling truth of all.

Trivia:

Court vs. Reality in the Late Ming Dynasty (Why the System Was Already Cracking)

1. Paper Governance vs. Ground Truth

By the late Ming, the imperial court increasingly ruled by memorial, not by observation.

Officials were evaluated on how good their reports sounded, not how accurate they were.

Disaster reports were routinely softened:

"Localized difficulty" = mass starvation

"Bandit disturbance" = full-scale rebellion

Grain output, population numbers, and tax capacity were systematically inflated to avoid blame.

Result: The court believed stability existed because paper said so, while reality burned.

## 2. The Tyranny of "Precedent"

Late Ming officials were trapped by precedent.

Even when conditions changed drastically (climate cooling, floods, famine),

Policy responses were expected to match earlier dynastic solutions, regardless of relevance.

Example:

Famine relief quotas were based on old population registers, many decades outdated.

Counties that had lost half their people were still taxed as if fully populated.

Reality adapted. The court refused to.

### 3. Silver Economy Collapse

The Ming tax system depended almost entirely on silver, not grain.

Taxes were paid in silver.

Soldiers were paid in silver.

Transport and logistics required silver.

But:

Global silver inflows dropped in the 1630s (Japan & Spanish Americas).

Rural China ran out of currency.

So peasants had:

Grain, but no silver → couldn't pay taxes

Officials demanded silver anyway → forced grain seizure

Result: grain existed, people starved, and the court saw "tax resistance."

### 4. Officials Feared Being Correct

Telling the truth was dangerous.

Reporting "grain is abundant" → higher tax quotas next year.

Reporting "grain is scarce" → accusation of incompetence or corruption.

Reporting "local order has collapsed" → dismissal or worse.

So most officials reported:

"Barely stable, but under control."

Which meant:

No emergency response.

No troop redeployment.

No real reform.

The system incentivized lying conservatively.

## 5. Jinyiwei Intelligence Became Theater

By Chongzhen's reign:

Jinyiwei still gathered intelligence,

but reports were filtered multiple times before reaching the emperor.

Sensitive information was softened to avoid panic.

Ironically:

Bandit leaders often knew more about real conditions than the court.

Refugees moved faster than information.

The state knew too late, always.

## 6. Local Solutions vs. Central Suspicion

When local officials did succeed:

Stabilizing grain prices

Absorbing refugees

Maintaining order without military force

The court response was often suspicion:

"Where did the grain come from?"

"Are they hoarding?"

"Are they forming private power bases?"

This paranoia:

Discouraged innovation

Punished competence

Ensured dependency on failing central logistics

A functional county was seen as a political threat.

## 7. Why Shi Kefa Is Historically Believable

Shi Kefa (史可法) historically:

Was methodical, cautious, and morally rigid

Believed deeply in verification by observation

Distrusted exaggerated reports — both good and bad

His hesitation to submit a report until he personally confirmed reality is extremely accurate to late-Ming reformist officials.

Men like him existed — they were just too few and too late.

### Bottom Line (One-Sentence Truth)

The late Ming didn't collapse because nothing worked — it collapsed because the court could no longer recognize what did.

Chapter 496 What? Boiling Water?

Shi Kefa arrived in Heyang County under a sky that looked suspiciously innocent.

The city gates stood open. The streets were clean. The people... calm. Too calm.

That alone made him uneasy.

Before his horse had fully slowed, the Heyang County Magistrate, Feng Juan, was already hurrying out to greet him, sleeves fluttering, smile plastered on like it had been rehearsed in front of a mirror.

They exchanged the usual pleasantries—bows, titles, mutual flattery polished to bureaucratic shine—

—and then Shi Kefa cut straight through it like a blade.

"What's the grain price here?"

No preamble. No warming up. No mercy.

Feng Juan froze.

Just for a heartbeat.

But in that heartbeat, a thousand thoughts screamed through his skull.

So fast? Right at the throat? This is the Judicial Commissioner from Xi'an—famed for flaying corruption alive. Is he probing me? Has the court noticed something? Damn it, I knew the numbers were too neat—

"Eighty wen per dou," Feng Juan answered, forcing his voice steady.

Shi Kefa nodded slowly, eyes sharp.

"Eighty wen," he repeated. "That's basically a normal-year price."

Feng Juan swallowed.

"Grain yields have tripled," Shi Kefa continued, tone calm, deadly calm, "yet prices haven't collapsed. That only happens if the surplus is being shipped out—or if you're feeding an unusually large population."

He looked straight at Feng Juan.

"You've taken in a lot of refugees."

It wasn't a question.

Cold sweat exploded down Feng Juan's back.

He knows. He absolutely knows.

If this turns into an investigation, if troops come down—

His vision blurred.

No, no, no—calm down. The whole family's already here. Worst case? We hide behind Dao Xuan Tianzun's golden hand. No one dares touch that.

"Magistrate Feng?" Shi Kefa said mildly.

Feng Juan jolted.

"Yes—yes, sir?"

"Why is your nose bleeding?"

"...Ah."

Feng Juan lifted a sleeve and wiped briskly. Fresh red smeared, then vanished.

"Old ailment," he said quickly. "Since childhood. Nothing serious. Seasonal. Very... nose-like."

Shi Kefa stared at him for a beat.

Then—

WOOOO—

A deep, thunderous whistle tore through the air.

The ground vibrated.

The city gate guards shouted in alarm.

Shi Kefa nearly leapt out of his boots.

"What—what in the name of the ancestors is that?"

From beyond the gates came a colossal iron beast, belching smoke, wheels screaming against metal rails as it rolled forward with all the subtlety of a charging war elephant.

Feng Juan turned, visibly relieved to change topics.

"Oh, that? That's the local train."

"...The what."

"The train," Feng Juan repeated patiently. "It runs between Gao Family Village in Chengcheng County and Heyang County."

Shi Kefa stared as the iron monster clanked closer.

"You... you built a road for that thing?"

"Yes! Just finished yesterday." Feng Juan's chest puffed up with pride. "Tens of thousands of laborers. Several months of nonstop work. Laying the railway nearly killed us."

Shi Kefa blinked.

Railway. Train. None of these words were present in any classical text he had ever memorized.

Before he could recover, Feng Juan pressed on.

"Sir, about those refugees—more than thirty thousand elderly, weak, women, and children, yes?"

Shi Kefa nodded cautiously.

"The distance to Gao Family Village is over forty li. They could walk it, but—" Feng Juan gestured grandly at the iron beast. "Why not take the train?"

"...Take it?"

"You could load a thousand of the slowest among them," Feng Juan said breezily. "Save time. They won't drag the rest down."

Shi Kefa inhaled sharply.

"What did you say?"

"A thousand."

"...A thousand people?"

"Yes."

"...At once?"

"Yes."

Shi Kefa felt his worldview tilt.

"This... this must be a divine carriage bestowed by—by Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

At the name, Feng Juan's shoulders visibly relaxed.

Ah.

So you know Him too.

Good. Very good.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun once bestowed a divine carriage that could travel one hundred and twenty li per hour," Feng Juan said reverently. "But later, Young Master Bai of Gao Family Village developed something better—something mortals could build."

Shi Kefa's head snapped back.

"Mortals?"

"Yes. Steam trains. A bit slower—only thirty li per hour. From here to Gao Family Village, just over an hour."

Shi Kefa went silent.

A vehicle that could carry a thousand people.

Faster than horses.

Not immortal magic.

Built by humans.

His pulse hammered.

"I must ride it," he said abruptly.

Feng Juan bowed.

"I'll take the first train," Shi Kefa declared. "Load a thousand of the weakest with me. The rest will walk under escort."

Moments later, Shi Kefa found himself aboard the train.

The carriage was massive—iron ribs, wooden benches, packed shoulder-to-shoulder with refugees who stared around in awe, fear, and disbelief.

With a shrill whistle, the train lurched forward.

Chug. Chug. Chug.

It moved.

Not pulled by oxen.

Not drawn by horses.

Just... iron. Smoke. Fire.

Shi Kefa's heart pounded.

His old instincts—sharpened during his years in the Embroidered Uniform Guard—refused to stay seated.

Investigate.

He rose.

At the very front carriage, he pulled open a small door.

Ahead lay the locomotive.

Iron hooks linked carriage to engine. At fifteen kilometers per hour, the motion felt... manageable.

Before sanity could object, Shi Kefa leapt over the coupling and pried open the cabin door.

Heat slammed into him like a wall.

Inside, two shirtless middle-aged men shoveled coal into a roaring furnace. Their bodies were black with soot, sweat pouring, eyes shining like lit coals.

"Ah—!" Shi Kefa exclaimed. "This thing runs on burning coal?"

The men nearly dropped their shovels.

"Unauthorized personnel aren't allowed in here!" one barked—then froze at Shi Kefa's robes. "I—I mean—Sir, it's dangerous. Please leave."

"I'll just look," Shi Kefa said hurriedly. "Just one glance."

The stokers exchanged a look.

"...What's there to look at?" one muttered. "We just boil water."

"...Boil water?"

"Yes. Fire heats water. Steam pushes the mechanism. The mechanism turns the wheels."

He shrugged.

"That's it."

Shi Kefa's brain stopped.

"What?"

"Boiling."

"What?"

"Water."

He stared at the pipes. The furnace. The roaring iron heart.

"This... this terrifying thing..."

"...is just boiling water?"

The train thundered on.

Shi Kefa stood there, mind shattered, watching the future hiss and churn before his eyes.

Chapter 497 Does Master Shi Know Cheng Xu?

The small train rattled onward, carrying Shi Kefa—and his increasingly fragile worldview—straight through the heart of the land.

It passed town after town within Heyang County, crossed cleanly into Chengcheng County, cut straight through Zhengjia Village without slowing, and finally steamed toward Gao Family Village like it owned the road.

Shi Kefa stood by the window the entire way.

He forgot to sit.

Outside, the world unfolded in green.

Not the desperate green of weeds clawing for life, but thick, confident crops—rows upon rows of farmland breathing with abundance. The drought that had ravaged so much of Shaanxi might as well have been a bad rumor here.

The fields were alive.

Grain stalks stood tall. Leaves were full. The soil was dark and worked, not cracked and begging.

As expected... Shi Kefa thought grimly. Heyang and Chengcheng were spared.

Then he saw something else.

Reclamation.

The yellow earth plateau—once barren, once written off as hopeless—was being carved open by plows and human will. New farmland stretched outward in blocks so large they made the horizon nervous.

Corn.

So much corn.

He recognized the crop immediately—he had seen it near Xi'an—but never like this. Here, the cornfields didn't politely exist.

They conquered.

Endless rows marched across the plateau, leaves rustling in the wind like an army drilling in formation.

Shi Kefa sucked in a breath.

Just from what he could see—just this slice—the yield was already in the tens of thousands of jin. And beyond that?

Uncountable.

"No wonder," he murmured, voice low. "No wonder..."

Even if another three hundred thousand refugees arrived—

They could feed them all.

The train slowed.

With a final hiss of steam, it rolled into Gao Family Village's Number Two Station.

Shi Kefa stepped down.

And froze.

Waiting for him on the platform was a young woman dressed in white, red trim embroidered along her sleeves like living flame. She stood straight-backed, composed, eyes calm but sharp—clearly someone accustomed to command.

Beside her was a crowd.

Scholars in plain robes. Soldiers standing at ease. Officials whose faces were hidden behind masks.

It was... an odd combination.

Shi Kefa felt the hairs on his neck rise.

"Oh?" he said cautiously. "You're waiting for me?"

The woman smiled.

"We're waiting for Master Shi," she said, "and for these vulnerable families."

Her voice was gentle. Her words were not.

Shi Kefa inclined his head. "And you are?"

"I am Gao Yiye." She smiled again. "Saintess of the Dao Xuan Tianzun Daoist Sect. I convey Dao Xuan Tianzun's messages to the mortal world—though lately, He's been visiting so often that my role feels... somewhat redundant."

Shi Kefa's eyes widened.

The shock lasted only a moment before discipline snapped into place.

He bowed deeply.

"At Dragon Gate Ferry," he said solemnly, "I personally witnessed Dao Xuan Tianzun's descent. He bestowed a great bridge across the Yellow River—turning an impassable abyss into a thoroughfare. Even the elderly and infirm crossed safely. Such benevolence... shakes heaven and earth."

Gao Yiye nodded.

"Yes. We already know."

She gestured lightly to the side.

"Over there. It's playing now."

Shi Kefa followed her gaze—and stopped dead.

A massive object stood nearby.

A Divine Mirror.

So large it felt less like an artifact and more like a declaration.

Villagers crowded around it, pointing and shouting as moving images replayed endlessly across its surface.

The bridge.

The golden hand.

The impossible descent.

Someone yelled, "Look! Dao Xuan Tianzun jumped off the bridge!"

"There's a rope!" another cried. "That looks fun!"

"Fun my ass—what if it snaps?"

"Then you fall into the Yellow River!"

"...How often do you replace that rope?"

"Replace it if it breaks!"

Silence.

On the screen, Shi Kefa suddenly saw—

Himself.

Wide-eyed. Awestruck. Rushing across the bridge like a country bumpkin visiting the capital for the first time.

At one point, he even closed his eyes, smiling foolishly as the river wind whipped his sleeves.

Shi Kefa's soul nearly left his body.

Gao Yiye laughed softly. "You see? We've known Master Shi for several days now."

He stood there, stunned into immobility.

"...So that's how it is," he muttered.

Gao Yiye turned back to him.

"Please entrust these families to our care," she said. "You may rest—or explore Gao Family Village at your leisure."

Her tone remained polite.

"And Dao Xuan Tianzun said: Master Shi is a Jinyiwei centurion. Your duty is to gather intelligence and report to the Emperor."

Shi Kefa stiffened.

"So feel free to observe," she continued lightly. "Gather whatever you wish."

Then—

"But when you report it," she added, smiling, "Dao Xuan Tianzun advises you to think carefully."

His heart clenched.

"Think carefully... lest I what?"

She tilted her head.

"Master Shi understands the court better than we do. What may be reported. What must not. And what consequences follow."

She paused.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun does not wish to interfere. He only hopes you will avoid... bringing unnecessary trouble to the court and the Emperor."

Shi Kefa inhaled sharply.

The court and the Emperor.

Not Gao Family Village.

Not the Daoist Sect.

Just those few words—and the meaning split wide open.

This wasn't a warning.

It was a knife pressed gently against the ribs.

She's threatening me.

The realization ignited fury in his chest.

Then—

The golden hand flashed in his memory.

The bridge.

The scale.

The impossible certainty of it all.

The anger... drained away.

Anger didn't solve problems.

For the weak, anger was called impotent rage.

I, Shi Kefa, am not that kind of man.

He straightened, jaw tightening.

Facing such an opponent, what could he do?

Fight?

Die?

He searched his mind.

Found nothing.

Against Dao Xuan Tianzun's terrifying might, the only response was martyrdom.

And he was not afraid of that.

More than a decade later, he would die defending Yangzhou—fighting the Qing to the last breath.

Death did not frighten him.

What frightened him was—

Bringing unnecessary trouble to the court and the Emperor.

He lifted his head.

"Very well," Shi Kefa said solemnly. "I will observe carefully. What to report—and what not to—I will judge for myself."

Before Gao Yiye could respond, the masked military official beside her let out a soft chuckle.

"Master Shi," the man said, voice amused, "since you serve in Xi'an as a Jinyiwei centurion, you must know Chengcheng County's former Inspector."

Shi Kefa frowned. "Cheng Xu?"

"Indeed."

Shi Kefa's tone hardened. "A braggart who fabricated military reports. Executed by the Jinyiwei long ago."

The masked official chuckled again.

"Is it possible," he asked gently, "that he wasn't executed for falsifying reports... but because he once aligned himself with the Eunuch Party?"

Shi Kefa stiffened.

"After all," the man continued, "why did so many other commanders who fabricated reports survive—while only Cheng Xu died?"

The question landed like a hammer.

Shi Kefa stood frozen.

A long time passed.

Finally, he exhaled.

"...Factional struggles," he said quietly. "Even I... am powerless before them."

The train station hummed behind him.

And Gao Family Village waited.

Trivia :

The Jinyiwei (锦衣卫): Who and what were the Jinyiwei?

The Jinyiwei were the Ming dynasty's imperial secret police, intelligence service, and political executioners—all rolled into one institution.

They answered directly to the Emperor.

Not the Grand Secretariat.

Not the Ministry of Justice.

Not the Censorate.

Just the Emperor.

That alone made them terrifying.

Were they powerful?

Yes—extremely. At their peak, they were arguably the most powerful internal security force in imperial Chinese history.

Their powers included:

Arresting anyone, including officials of higher rank

Conducting investigations without court approval

Interrogating suspects privately

Using their own prison system

Bypassing normal judicial procedures entirely

If a Jinyiwei officer showed up at your door with an imperial token, legal technicalities stopped existing.

Were they cruel?

Yes—but with nuance.

The Jinyiwei were infamous for:

Torture during interrogations

Fabricated charges (especially during factional purges)

Forced confessions

Political executions disguised as criminal cases

Their prison, the Zhaoyu Prison (诏狱), was notorious. People entered alive and often left as corpses—or not at all.

That said:

Cruelty wasn't random. It was usually political.

They were tools, not free agents.

Their brutality waxed and waned depending on the Emperor.

Under paranoid or authoritarian emperors (like Zhu Yuanzhang or Zhu Houzhao), they were monsters.

Under restrained rulers, they were more like a feared intelligence bureau.

Why were they created?

The founder of the Ming dynasty, Hongwu Emperor (Zhu Yuanzhang), was deeply paranoid.

He:

Rose from poverty

Distrusted scholar-officials

Believed bureaucracy would betray him

So he created the Jinyiwei as:

Personal bodyguards

Internal spies

A counterweight to the civil bureaucracy

In other words:

They existed because the Emperor didn't trust his own government.

Chapter 498 Humiliating the Literati

The masked man withdrew the moment his question landed.

Clean. Precise. Like flicking a pebble into still water and watching the ripples eat someone alive.

Years of bitterness—released. No follow-up. No lingering. He knew better than to hang around. A masked face already attracted enough attention; chatting with Shi Kefa any longer might trigger questions, investigations, or—worse—Dao Xuan Tianzun's casual curiosity.

And nobody survived that kind of curiosity comfortably.

Say what needed saying. Then disappear.

Shi Kefa didn't spare him a second glance.

He couldn't.

Cheng Xu was dead. Flattened by a landslide. Witnessed by an entire detachment of Imperial Guards. Written into official records with ink, seals, and the finality of a coffin lid.

Dead men did not wear masks and ask philosophical questions.

What crushed Shi Kefa wasn't who spoke.

It was what was said.

Among officials who'd survived court politics, who was truly ignorant? Everyone knew. Everyone understood.

Understanding, however, came bundled with helplessness.

Knowing where the rot was didn't mean you could scrape it off. It just meant you learned how to breathe while standing knee-deep in it.

Shi Kefa inhaled slowly.

Enough. If I keep standing here looking stunned, I'll embarrass the ancestors.

He straightened his robes and walked.

And promptly walked out of the Ming dynasty.

Buildings rose in dense, orderly blocks. Streets buzzed with people who looked... unconcerned. Shops overflowed with goods like famine was a myth scholars made up to scare students.

Children laughed. Adults argued about prices. Nobody looked like they were about to starve.

It was horrifying.

This wasn't a village scraping by.

This was a place where tomorrow had already been scheduled.

Is this a Peach Blossom Spring? Shi Kefa wondered.

No.

The Peach Blossom Spring hid from the world.

This place grabbed the world by the collar and demanded rent.

It wasn't transcendent. It wasn't immortal. It was aggressively mundane—and somehow that made it worse.

Then he saw the buildings.

New ones.

So square they looked offended by curves. Walls smooth, pale, smug. Shi Kefa didn't know what "cement" was, but he knew it was laughing at traditional architecture.

A low wall enclosed the compound. A large southern gate stood open, bearing a plaque:

Gao Family Village Vocational Technical School

Shi Kefa stopped.

Read it again.

Slower.

"...Vocational?"

His brows knitted so hard they nearly formed a faction.

Every other strange building here—factories, workshops, shops—he could at least guess. This one?  
Complete nonsense.

Schools taught classics.

Crafts were taught by uncles yelling at you in sheds.

What is this unholy hybrid?

Naturally, he went inside.

Immediately—

DING! CLANG! DING!

Metal screamed like it was being disciplined by Confucius himself.

Shi Kefa peered through a window.

Inside was a classroom.

A real one. Podium. Benches. Order.

Also inside: a collection of men who looked like they ate rebellion for breakfast.

The teacher was built like a battering ram. The students looked like backup battering rams.

And yet—

They sat straight.

They listened.

Attentively.

Shi Kefa's soul tripped.

"...Hm?"

Unlettered men lecturing unlettered men?

In a classroom?

The sages collectively fainted.

On the podium lay blacksmithing tools. Beside it, a furnace roared, heating iron until it glowed like a sin waiting to be confessed.

The teacher grabbed a hammer.

"Watch carefully," he barked. "Your swing goes like this—"

CLANG!

The iron bent immediately.

Ding! Ding! Clang!

In seconds, a cleaver blank appeared.

The teacher laughed. "See? A few more hits, sharpen it, and you can chop vegetables like a civilized man."

Then his face darkened.

"And you useless sacks of bones—stop staring like your brains leaked out! If you don't learn properly, you'll be digging roads for three catties of flour a day."

He sneered.

"Seven coins a catty. Twenty-one coins total. Planning to eat dirt?"

The reaction was immediate.

Those men—arms thicker than Shi Kefa's waist—lowered their heads.

They blushed.

They. Blushed.

Shi Kefa recoiled.

No.

This is forbidden knowledge.

He fled down the corridor, one hand covering his eyes like he'd accidentally walked into a bathhouse.

Once safely away, he leaned against the wall, breathing hard.

A classroom teaching blacksmithing.

In the Great Ming, craftsmen were pitied. Mothers warned their sons about becoming one. Scholars used them as metaphors for failure.

Here?

They were being threatened with poverty if they didn't study hard.

Absurd.

Then memory betrayed him.

Gaojia News.

That article. That man.

Three taels of silver a month.

Shi Kefa's indignation packed up and left without even saying goodbye.

For three taels... I'd hammer iron with a smile.

He moved on.

Second room.

Carpentry.

Another muscular teacher. Another group of attentive giants. The man shaved wood, sawdust floating everywhere.

"Village population's exploding!" the teacher laughed. "Furniture sells like mad! Learn well and your old man here will make you rich!"

Shi Kefa winced.

A teacher calling himself 'your old man'...

The literati have officially lost the Mandate of Heaven.

He walked on.

Tailoring.

Printing.

Papermaking.

Glassmaking.

Sugar refining.

Salt production.

Cooking.

Some rooms were packed to bursting. Others had three students and a teacher desperately pretending that was normal.

Each step felt like another slap.

Then—finally—the last classroom.

And suddenly, dignity returned.

At the podium stood a young man in white. Clean. Elegant. Scholarly.

A human being, Shi Kefa thought with relief.

The man wasn't hammering or sawing.

He was drawing.

Lines. Symbols. Diagrams.

"Observe carefully," he said calmly. "This is how the steam engine integrates with our equipment."

He pinned a massive sheet to the board.

Gears. Shafts. Pistons.

Shi Kefa stared.

Heavenly Book, his mind declared, kneeling immediately.

The students nodded.

One raised his hand. "Young Master Bai—are these the gears from the miniature steam train?"

The man smiled. "Correct."

He tapped the diagram. "Only a few craftsmen can currently make this system."

A pause.

"They've been promoted to senior technical engineers."

A student swallowed. "Their salary?"

"Fifty taels of silver per month."

The universe went silent.

Shi Kefa staggered.

"...Fifty?"

A craftsman.

Out-earning officials who memorized the Four Books until their souls went bald.

Shi Kefa clutched his chest.

"This—this isn't teaching anymore," he whispered. "This is a public execution."

He looked around, dazed.

"The scholars study for decades."

"The craftsmen study for months."

"And the craftsmen win."

He exhaled weakly.

"Humiliating the literati..."

A pause.

"...with extreme prejudice."

Chapter 499: All Is Heavenly Grace, in Thunder and Rain

The classroom erupted.

Not with applause—no, that would've been vulgar—but with the synchronized gleam of ambition igniting behind dozens of eyes.

"We will dedicate ourselves to our studies!" one student declared, chest puffed like he'd already been promoted.

"We will master these techniques as quickly as possible!" another added, voice trembling with hunger.

"We will advance to senior technical engineer!" they roared in unison.

It sounded less like a pledge and more like a sect oath right before a bloodbath.

Young Master Bai nodded calmly, as if fifty taels a month were a perfectly reasonable motivational tool and not a blunt weapon aimed at the heart of the scholar-gentry.

"Very good," he said. "Enthusiasm is precisely what you'll need."

He tapped the chalk against the board.

"You already possess strong blacksmithing foundations. What you lack is theory. Once you understand why the steam engine moves the way it does, you'll no longer be craftsmen—you'll be system builders."

Then he turned back to the board.

"Now, let us examine how steam pressure converts thermal energy into mechanical motion—"

Outside the window, Shi Kefa leaned in.

And leaned.

And leaned some more.

Minutes passed.

Words flew out like arrows—pressure ratios, rotational force, transmission efficiency—and every single one missed him completely.

He understood nothing.

Not "a little nothing."

Not "scholar humbly lacking."

Nothing nothing.

Worse—inside the room, those "unrefined commoners" nodded. Asked questions. Followed along. One even frowned in concentration like a man wrestling destiny itself.

Shi Kefa felt something inside him quietly collapse.

I have memorized the Classics since childhood, his soul whispered weakly.

I can compose policy essays under candlelight.

Why am I losing to men who used to hit iron for a living?

For the first time in his life, Shi Kefa experienced the horrifying realization that his knowledge had a very specific combat range—and this battlefield was not it.

He staggered away from the window.

Left the vocational technical school.

Stood in the sunlight like a man who'd just been informed that the civil service examination now included math.

One thought remained painfully clear:

This place can mass-produce skilled artisans. Quickly. Efficiently. Repeatedly.

Not geniuses.

Not once-in-a-generation talents.

But batches.

If even half of them entered production—

Shi Kefa didn't finish the thought. His chest hurt.

"Lord Shi."

He turned.

Saintess Gao Yiye approached, steps light, expression gentle—the kind of gentle that usually preceded a lecture.

"What do you think of the vocational technical school?" she asked pleasantly.

Shi Kefa hesitated, then answered honestly.

"...Extremely practical," he said. "If such a system could be implemented across the Great Ming, it would certainly—"

He stopped.

Froze.

His face darkened like he'd just walked into a political minefield and realized it was his own proposal.

Gao Yiye smiled.

"It seems Lord Shi has already realized why it cannot be widely implemented."

"...Indeed."

Shi Kefa exhaled heavily.

"Artisans are despised," he said bitterly. "Their status is low. Their wages pitiful. Many sell wives and children just to survive. Who would willingly choose such a path?"

Gao Yiye listened quietly.

Inside, she thought: Dao Xuan Tianzun was right again.

The court was full of intelligent men. Solutions were not absent. What was absent was the freedom to act.

Then—

A voice descended, casual and unarguable.

"Yiye," Dao Xuan Tianzun said, "give him an ideological and political lesson. The classroom version."

Her eyes lit up.

Oh. This? This I'm trained for.

She smiled—the professional smile of a teacher who had just been handed a very stubborn student.

"Lord Shi," she began gently, "have you ever considered this: advanced productive forces require an equally advanced political system."

Shi Kefa blinked. "Oh?"

"When a political system becomes outdated," she continued, "it does not merely fail to help progress—it actively shackles it."

Shi Kefa frowned. "Explain."

She gestured toward the school.

"The artisan system of the Great Ming is the answer. Artisans are impoverished, socially despised, and structurally suppressed. Naturally, fewer people enter the trade. Skills stagnate. Innovation dies."

She met his eyes.

"This is not an accident. This is the political system restraining productive forces."

BOOM.

The words hit like a thunderclap.

Shi Kefa stood rigid, as if struck by lightning mid-argument.

As a loyal minister, he rejected criticism of the dynasty on instinct.

As a rational man—

He had no rebuttal.

Hold firm, he told himself desperately. You've debated entire courts into submission.

He straightened.

"The court can reform!" he said. "We can elevate artisans' status, increase their pay. I will personally submit a proposal. Why does this escalate into criticism of the entire system?"

Gao Yiye laughed softly.

"Lord Shi," she said, voice sweet and sharp, "you know the court better than anyone. How many years of wrangling would such a 'minor reform' take? How many memorials would vanish? How many factions would sabotage it?"

She tilted her head.

"Would it truly be implemented?"

Shi Kefa flinched.

Strike two.

He clenched his jaw.

"Very well," he said, launching a new offensive. "If too many become artisans, farming declines. Grain output falls. How would the empire sustain them? Your village's model cannot scale!"

Gao Yiye nodded. "Then let me ask you this—why can our village sustain more artisans?"

Shi Kefa snorted. "Because you enjoy Dao Xuan Tianzun's favor! Celestial fertilizer doubles yields. One farmer feeds one artisan here. This is divine intervention—irrelevant to the court!"

She smiled wider.

"Oh," she said lightly. "But we produce the fertilizer ourselves now."

"...What?"

"Our factory produced sulfuric acid by accident," she explained cheerfully. "We used it to process phosphate rock. The fertilizer is slightly inferior to Dao Xuan Tianzun's original gift—but still vastly increases yield."

Shi Kefa stared.

She pressed on.

"And who do you think makes this fertilizer?"

"...Artisans," he croaked.

"Correct. Artisans improve agriculture. Improved agriculture supports more artisans. It's a cycle."

She paused.

"A virtuous one."

Shi Kefa made a sound somewhere between a groan and a surrender.

Internally, he already knew the truth.

The enfeoffment system alone drained the treasury dry. Officials had begged reform for years. Princes consumed wealth like bottomless pits.

But loyalty demanded blindness.

With nothing left, Shi Kefa clutched his final argument like a life raft.

"Do not forget," he declared weakly, "Gao Family Village is still part of the Great Ming! Your prosperity exists because of the imperial court. As the saying goes—whether thunder or rain, all are imperial grace!"

Gao Yiye blinked.

Then smiled.

"Lord Shi speaks truly," she said. "All is indeed Heavenly Grace."

"All is Heavenly Grace!" Shi Kefa echoed automatically—

And then stopped.

A chill crawled up his spine.

Because the Heaven she meant—

And the Heaven he meant—

Were very clearly not the same Heaven at all.

Chapter 500: Women Hold Up Half the Sky

Having been thoroughly flattened—morally, intellectually, and spiritually—by Gao Yiye, Shi Kefa wandered into Gao Family Village's commercial district like a scholar who had just lost a poetry duel to a butcher.

His chest was tight. His pride bruised. His loyalty had taken several direct hits.

He needed comfort.

Preferably the kind that involved wine, music, and questionable life choices.

"Hm?"

Ahead of him stood a building whose silhouette was deeply familiar.

Red lanterns. Wide doors. Lively chatter drifting out.

Shi Kefa's eyes narrowed.

Is that... a brothel?

His wounded scholar's heart fluttered.

Perhaps, he reasoned solemnly, only the gentle singing of a courtesan can soothe a man whose worldview has just been dismantled by steam engines.

With that dignified justification, he turned and headed straight toward it—

—and stopped dead.

No silk-clad beauties.

No flirtatious laughter.

No tragic poetry about fleeting youth.

Instead—

The unmistakable smell of food.

Not refined banquet food. Not ritual food.

Just brutally honest, stomach-punching food.

A signboard hung above the door:

Fresh Heluo Noodles — Rice Noodles — Stir-Fries — Snacks

Shi Kefa blinked.

"...Huh?"

He stepped inside.

And blinked again.

Behind the counter were two chefs.

One man.

One woman.

The man was pulling heluo noodles with practiced ease, arms moving like he was wrestling flour into submission.

The woman?

The woman was everywhere.

Stirring, frying, chopping, plating—calling orders, greeting customers, laughing, moving like the absolute center of the operation. Apron tied tight. Headscarf neat. Zero trace of shame or hesitation.

She worked like someone who belonged there.

Shi Kefa stood frozen, his scholar-brain buffering.

He finally turned to the man. "...The head chef is your wife?"

The man laughed loudly. "That's right! Capable, isn't she?"

"That's not what I meant," Shi Kefa said stiffly. "I mean—what is the meaning of this?"

The man scratched his head, still smiling. "Meaning? Oh, that's simple."

He leaned closer, clearly enjoying this.

"We're from Heyang County. I used to sell only heluo noodles. Barely scraped by. Then my wife went to the Women's Vocational School."

Shi Kefa twitched.

There's a WHAT?

"She learned cooking. All kinds. When she came back, she said, 'Our shop's too big. Selling only noodles is wasting space.' So we expanded."

He gestured grandly.

"Upstairs, downstairs—everything's in use now. And just like that, boom—we're the biggest restaurant in Gao Family Village."

Shi Kefa frowned deeply. "But... allowing a woman to work openly like this—won't people criticize?"

The man burst out laughing.

"Criticize?" he said, as if Shi Kefa had just asked whether water was afraid of fish. "Here? In Gao Family Village?"

He lowered his voice dramatically.

"Women hold up half the sky."

Shi Kefa stiffened.

"Textiles? All women. Men can't even get hired. Spinning, weaving, dyeing—if you're not a woman, don't bother lining up."

Shi Kefa felt his brain crack audibly.

Half the sky...

If all women were mobilized into production—

He sucked in a sharp breath.

Productivity wouldn't double.

It would explode.

Suddenly, another thought slammed into him.

The thirty thousand elderly, weak, women, and children.

What are they doing with them?

His feet moved before his brain finished panicking.

He nearly ran back to the main keep.

When he reached Gao Yiye, he didn't bother with pleasantries.

"Saintess," he said urgently, "I wish to see the thirty thousand dependents I sent."

She smiled. "Officer Shi, your timing is impeccable. I was just about to go myself."

As it turned out, the thousand people previously sent by train had already been forwarded to Bai Family Fortress. The remaining twenty-nine thousand had since arrived and were being transferred in batches.

While Shi Kefa had been wandering around Gao Family Village in a daze for days, the logistics machine had been running relentlessly.

All thirty thousand were now assembled near Bai Family Fortress.

Awaiting labor reform.

For an operation of this scale, Gao Yiye needed to personally oversee the ideological education work.

After all—labor was only half the project.

Reform was the real objective.

"Officer Shi," she said, "let us go together."

"...Very well."

They boarded a small train at the North Railway Station.

Shi Kefa stared out the window, silent.

When they arrived, he was immediately startled.

"They're going into Huanglong Mountain?!" he exclaimed. "That place is uninhabitable! Bandits, rebels—it's infamous!"

Gao Yiye waved her hand calmly.

"Those bandits were cleared out long ago. The mountain is safe now. We built a large prison there. Ten thousand former rebels are already housed inside."

She added casually, "Imperial Censor Wu Shen and Governor Hong Chengchou are both aware."

Shi Kefa relaxed instantly.

"Oh. Good. If they know, then it's fine."

The magical healing power of official endorsement.

He followed them inside.

At first, the elderly, weak, women, and children were terrified. Mountains meant hardship. Exile. Death.

Then—

They noticed the roads.

Wide. Smooth. Cement.

Not steep. Not broken. Gently winding upward like the mountain itself had decided to be cooperative.

People who had walked a thousand li over shattered paths stared in disbelief.

This was Huanglong Mountain?

The den of villains?

Shi Kefa was equally stunned.

Why build roads like this... here?

The answer arrived soon enough.

They entered a valley.

And stopped.

Before them—

Factories.

Large ones.

Outside, endless bolts of cloth moved like waves. Dyed fabric hung everywhere, fluttering in the breeze.

The valley looked less like a prison—

And more like the wardrobe of a very ambitious god.

A bullock cart rolled out, stacked high with pristine cotton cloth.

A woman who knew weaving couldn't help herself. She reached out, fingers trembling.

"This... this can't be woven by hand," she whispered. "Every thread is identical."

The carter laughed. "Hey! Don't touch without permission! Wash your hands first!"

He grinned.

"It's machine-made. That's why it's perfect. You'll get it once you're inside."

He flicked the reins.

"Make way! If the ox hits you, I'm not paying compensation!"

People scattered instantly.

As the cart rolled toward the railway station, murmurs spread.

A few sharp-eyed women whispered to the militia, "Will we weave cloth here?"

"No," the soldier said cheerfully. "This valley's full. Dao Xuan Tianzun is preparing a new one for you."

At the name—

Dao Xuan Tianzun—

The crowd fell silent.

They remembered the bridge at Dragon Gate Ferry.

Awe swelled.

Reverence followed.

Thirty thousand lives, standing at the threshold of something terrifying—

And something vast.

Shi Kefa watched it all.

And for the first time, he didn't know whether to be relieved—

Or afraid.