

Great Ming 501

Chapter 501 I Can Do It

Everyone stood obediently in place, necks craned upward, eyes fixed on the sky.

No one dared speak.

Thirty thousand refugees—old men with bent backs, women clutching children, hollow-eyed youths—waited silently. Even the ten thousand former bandits undergoing labor reform stood straighter than usual, fear pressing their shoulders down harder than any shackle ever had.

They were all waiting.

Waiting to see how Dao Xuan Tianzun would arrange their fates.

Just then, Gao Yiye stepped forward. She raised both hands high, her voice cutting through the air like a ceremonial blade.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived!"

The words had barely left her mouth when the sky itself responded.

The clouds tore apart.

Not drifted. Not parted politely.

They split like rotten silk ripped open by brute force.

From the gaping heavens descended two colossal golden hands, vast enough to blot out the sun. The air screamed as pressure crushed downward. Knees buckled across the crowd—some people fell flat without even realizing it.

One of the golden hands clutched an enormous slab of black iron.

The plate came down.

SCRRRRAAAAAAPE—

It gouged into the earth like a god dragging a blade across flesh. Soil and stone peeled away in waves as a straight, brutal road was carved clean through the terrain, cutting toward the mouth of a neighboring valley.

Before anyone could even process what they were seeing, the second hand slammed down into that valley.

BOOM—!!!

The sound wasn't loud.

It was absolute.

The ground collapsed inward as if the valley itself had been kneaded by an invisible giant. Trees vanished. Jagged slopes flattened. In a single heartbeat, a wild, uneven basin was pressed into a wide, habitable plain.

A valley—manufactured.

Gasps rippled through the crowd, then died as terror smothered them.

But Dao Xuan Tianzun was clearly unimpressed.

Perhaps thirty thousand people was more than that small valley could bear. People needed space. Housing. Workshops. Textile sheds. Dye vats. Roads.

So the golden hand shifted again.

Another valley.

Another merciless strike.

BANG—!

Flattened.

The iron plate descended once more, scraping and screaming as another road was gouged into existence.

Again.

And again.

The earth was treated like clay on a potter's wheel.

When the dust finally settled, three entire valleys had been forcibly reshaped and connected. Together with the original basin, four valleys now spread outward, linked by straight roads that converged at the center.

From above, the layout resembled a four-leaf clover.

A lucky shape.

An unlucky place.

Before anyone could entertain thoughts of escape—or even understand the sheer scale of what had happened—walls began to fall from the sky.

They were tall. Smooth. Painted in bright, almost cheerful colors.

One by one, the walls slammed into place, sealing off each valley with merciless precision. No gaps. No weak points. No climbing holds.

Within moments, the four valleys were completely enclosed.

A vast, sealed city had been born.

Someone whispered it without realizing.

"A... labor reform city..."

No one corrected them.

Because that was exactly what it was.

Every single soul present saw it.

The thirty thousand new arrivals.

The ten thousand reformed bandits.

Every militia member.

Every official.

This was power beyond heaven and earth.

This was authority made physical.

Those who had secretly measured distances, counted guards, and dreamed of running? Their courage evaporated on the spot.

Running?

Run where?

Finally, something else descended from the sky.

A fortress.

Brilliantly colored, imposing, and utterly alien to Ming architecture, it settled at the central intersection where the four roads met. Its foundations slammed into the earth, rising like a throne hammered into the world.

Gao Yiye climbed its steps and stood at the highest platform. Her voice carried effortlessly, sharp and clear.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun rewards good and punishes evil."

Every ear strained to listen.

"Those whose crimes were unforgivable have already been struck down by divine punishment. You do not see them here because they no longer exist."

A shiver ran through the crowd.

"The reason you are still alive—standing here, breathing—is because your sins have not yet warranted death."

She paused, letting the words sink in.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is merciful. He has spared your lives. But mercy is not free."

Her gaze swept across the valleys.

"You will labor. You will work. You will repay your debts with sweat. When your term of reform ends, that day will be your rebirth."

Silence.

Then—

Lao Nanfeng stepped forward.

The former Guyuan rebel leader slammed his fist to his chest and shouted hoarsely, "We will turn over a new leaf! We will become new people!"

The reformed bandits followed instantly.

"Become new people!"

"Become new people!"

The chant rolled like thunder.

The refugees, shaken and frightened, felt something inside them finally settle. Fear remained—but order had been imposed. Boundaries drawn. Purpose assigned.

They followed the militia's instructions obediently.

Three groups.

Three valleys.

Settlement underway.

From the sky, rows upon rows of temporary plastic houses descended neatly, snapping into place like toys laid out by an unseen child. Permanent cement housing would come later. For now, survival was enough.

Shi Kefa watched it all.

Thirty thousand unruly lives.

Stabilized in less than a day.

Through fear, mercy, and overwhelming power.

His throat felt dry.

So this is governance...

By the time he turned around, Gao Yiye had already led the militia deep into the population, conducting grassroots work with frightening efficiency.

No one remained to speak with him.

Shi Kefa gathered his thousand men and began the long walk back, shoulders heavy, thoughts heavier.

Then someone shouted.

"Sir! Look ahead—the sky!"

Shi Kefa looked up.

Dao Xuan Tianzun was flying toward them.

Of course, Dao Xuan Tianzun himself wasn't flying.

This was Li Daoxuan, holding the silicone statue aloft with one hand. Without the Infinite Gauntlet, he had to improvise. Since no one could see the hand, all they saw was a god soaring freely through the air.

The figure descended and landed before Shi Kefa.

The invisible hand withdrew.

The statue's eyes shifted. Its expression subtly animated. Its mouth stretched into a stiff, uncanny smile.

"Shi Kefa," it said. "We meet again."

Shi Kefa dropped into a deep bow immediately. "This humble official greets Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Li Daoxuan laughed softly. "So. What you've seen today—interesting?"

Shi Kefa sighed from the depths of his chest. "Dao Xuan Tianzun's blessings have shattered this official's understanding of the world. But... if your power is so boundless, why not bestow it upon all under heaven?"

Li Daoxuan snorted.

"Is this world yours—or mine?"

The question hit like a slap.

"If you humans can't even manage your own affairs, why should I clean up everything for you? I give when I wish. What I don't give—don't ask."

Shi Kefa froze.

Then bowed even lower. "This humble official overstepped."

Li Daoxuan's smile returned. "Still. I've already given you quite a lot."

Shi Kefa looked up, confused.

Li Daoxuan tapped the statue's forehead. "Right here."

Something stirred.

A faint itch. A subtle pressure.

Shi Kefa's eyes widened.

Memories clicked together. Observations aligned. Patterns emerged where chaos had been.

Understanding bloomed.

He bowed deeply once more. "This humble official understands."

"Good."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "As I said before—you may report what you've seen to the imperial court. That's your duty as Jinyiwei. I won't stop you."

He leaned forward slightly.

"But think carefully. What should be reported... and what shouldn't. Otherwise, the court will invite trouble it cannot survive."

With that, Dao Xuan Tianzun shot skyward and vanished.

Shi Kefa bowed until his forehead nearly touched the ground.

When he rose, his heart felt unbearably heavy.

He thought long and hard.

Finally, he decided.

The matter of Dao Xuan Tianzun—not reported.

The court would only scream "White Lotus!" and send troops to die.

But the grain?

That could be reported.

He would purchase Celestial Fertilizer from Gao Family Village, present it as a local innovation, and push for nationwide replication.

More grain meant fewer disasters.

More grain meant stability.

More grain meant hope.

Shi Kefa clenched his fist.

I'm still young, he thought.

And I can do it.

Chapter 502 Rounding Up Laborers

Fourth year of Chongzhen.

Fifth month.

1631, by the Western calendar.

Yongji. Gudu Ferry.

The Yellow River surged endlessly, muddy and violent, its surface glittering under the afternoon sun like molten bronze.

By the riverbank sat Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Or rather—the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The wooden figure dangled its legs off a stone, holding a thin bamboo stick, lazily poking at the river. Each tap sent up a small splash, droplets catching the light before vanishing back into the torrent.

Tap.

Splash.

Tap.

Splash.

On the surface, it looked like a god idly playing by the river, bored with eternity.

In reality—

Li Daoxuan was sprawled comfortably in his Shuangqing City home, fingers on his mouse, back against his chair, eyes half-lidded in bliss.

Thanks to Co-sensing, everything the puppet felt, he felt.

The river wind brushing the puppet's wooden face? Cool against his own skin.

The spray of river water? A faint chill against his fingertips.

Even the rhythmic clack of wooden legs against stone echoed pleasantly in his mind.

"This is amazing..." Li Daoxuan muttered. "Peak retirement gameplay."

Why touch grass when you could touch the Yellow River remotely?

This—this—was the ultimate cheat code for a reclusive gamer.

Just as he was about to flick the bamboo stick harder and send up a proper splash, a shout rang out from the river fort's watchtower.

"Fast rider incoming!"

A beat.

"Huh? Wait—I recognize him! He's an emissary from Wang Jiayin!"

The puppet's bamboo stick froze mid-air.

Li Daoxuan perked up instantly.

Below the watchtower, things stirred. Xing Honglang burst out of her quarters first, followed by Gao Chuwu, Lao Nanfeng, Zao Ying, and several others. Without exchanging words, they all headed straight for the council hall.

That posture?

Negotiation mode.

Li Daoxuan's fingers tapped his desk. His attention snapped back to his computer. A quick search:

"Chongzhen 4th year Wang Jiayin"

Scroll.

Scan.

Cross-reference.

His lips curled upward.

"Ohhh." He grinned. "So that's how it is."

The puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun rose to its feet.

Clack. Clack.

Its wooden legs knocked against the stone as it marched toward the council hall with surprising urgency.

Inside the hall, the leaders of the Shanxi "Expeditionary Force" were already assembled, sitting upright with stern expressions. The atmosphere was heavy—formal, watchful, bristling.

The emissary stepped in cautiously.

Last time he'd come here, the clay sculpture Dao Xuan Tianzun had scared him so badly he'd tripped over his own feet and nearly pissed himself fleeing the tent.

So this time, his eyes swept the hall first thing.

No clay statue.

He exhaled in relief—

Then he saw it.

On a nearby table sat a wooden puppet, staring straight at him, its painted eyes curved into a stiff, knowing smile.

The emissary's heart skipped violently.

What in the ancestors' graves is that thing?!

He forced himself not to react. Official business. Professional dignity. He clasped his fists and bowed.

"Chief Xing," he said quickly, "His Majesty Wang Jiayin sends word. He intends to gather forces from all sides and take Jincheng in one decisive strike. One hundred and sixty thousand troops are already assembled."

He paused, gauging reactions.

"Chief Xing's forces are also part of the righteous army. His Majesty requests that you lead your troops to join the assault. Once the city falls, rewards will be distributed by merit. Chief Xing will not be treated unfairly."

Xing Honglang's fingers tightened slightly.

Her first instinct was rejection.

Attacking a city meant slaughter. Chaos. Suffering for civilians. It wasn't something she wanted her people involved in.

But—

Last time, Dao Xuan Tianzun had personally agreed to align them with Wang Jiayin, at least in name. Refusing outright now would only stir trouble.

She hesitated.

Then—

"Good."

The word came from the table.

From the puppet.

Wooden lips clacked together as Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke.

The hall went silent.

No one moved. No one blinked.

Internally, every person present screamed some variation of What? or Are you serious?

Outwardly?

Perfect composure.

When Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke, there was only obedience.

Xing Honglang immediately clasped her fists. "Very well. We will go. Please inform His Majesty that I will lead my troops to assist shortly."

The emissary nearly laughed from joy.

This had gone far too smoothly.

Xing Honglang's force had always been a headache—nominally allied, practically independent, stubborn as a mule. He'd expected resistance. Bargaining. Excuses.

Instead?

Immediate agreement.

He bowed repeatedly, all smiles, and left in high spirits.

Once the tent flap fell closed, everyone turned as one toward the puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun and bowed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," Xing Honglang said respectfully, "what is your plan this time?"

The puppet's wooden mouth opened and closed, producing a rhythmic, chant-like cadence.

"A quick calculation reveals," it intoned,

"Jiayin is doomed.

His subordinates will scatter.

Jincheng will descend into chaos."

Everyone exchanged glances.

Understanding spread like wildfire.

Lao Nanfeng stroked his beard, eyes gleaming. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun is revealing a heavenly secret. Since Wang Jiayin is fated to die, we'll pretend to help him."

He leaned forward, voice lowering conspiratorially.

"We bring our troops close—but not too close. We watch. We wait. Once the government army finishes him off and his rebels scatter, we swoop in."

Zao Ying raised an eyebrow. "Swoop in... how?"

Lao Nanfeng grinned. "Round up a batch of them, of course. Young. Strong. Able-bodied. Perfect labor reform candidates."

He chuckled darkly.

"Their elderly, women, and children were separated back in Hequ County. Now they can reunite in our labor reform camp."

He slapped the table.

"A family that reforms together—stays together!"

Silence.

Xing Honglang rolled her eyes so hard it was a miracle they didn't get stuck. "Lao Nanfeng, where did you learn such shameless nonsense?"

He replied without hesitation, chest puffed out. "Dao Xuan Tianzun taught me."

Everyone: "..."

No one dared say it out loud, but a collective cold sweat broke out.

Just what exactly is Dao Xuan Tianzun teaching this old fox?

"Enough," Xing Honglang said briskly. "We move out. Pretend to assist Wang Jiayin, watch the show, then collect able-bodied men afterward."

Gao Chuwu laughed. "Sounds entertaining."

Preparations were swift.

They left behind the newly formed New People's Militia to guard the fort—fresh recruits still deep in ideological training, armed mostly with melee weapons. They weren't fit for offense, but defending a large wooden stockade was well within their capabilities.

Besides, Zhao Sheng and Zhan Seng remained behind.

And if things truly went south?

Dao Xuan Tianzun could always summon warships from Qichuan Ferry.

Safety guaranteed.

Thus, Xing Honglang, Gao Chuwu, Zao Ying, and Lao Nanfeng set out together—three hundred cavalry, three hundred infantry—marching toward Jincheng.

As they passed through Hedong Circuit, a massive banner bearing the character "Xing" fluttered high.

The government troops inside Hedong took one look at the disciplined formation and gleaming armor and promptly shut their gates.

No engagement.

No probing attacks.

Just terrified soldiers huddled behind city walls, praying the "bandits" would pass by.

They did.

Skirting county towns, avoiding civilian disturbance, the force advanced steadily until Yangcheng County came into view—territory under Jincheng's control.

According to the emissary, Wang Jiayin's main camp was on Xicheng Mountain.

When they reached Chihong Fortress, roughly twenty kilometers from the mountain, Lao Nanfeng suddenly raised his hand.

"We stop here."

Everyone frowned. "This far out?"

Lao Nanfeng shook his head. "It's close enough."

He tapped his temple. "Dao Xuan Tianzun said Wang Jiayin will die soon. That means government troops are already on the move. When officials pursue rebels, they camp ten to fifteen kilometers out."

He pointed ahead. "If we advance further, we might bump into them ourselves. Twenty kilometers is perfect. Close enough to watch. Far enough not to get dragged into the mess."

Xing Honglang considered it—then nodded. "Camp here."

Scouts were sent ahead immediately.

Not long after, they returned with confirmation.

Deputy General Cao Wenzhao, leading three thousand Guanning Iron Cavalry, was already positioned several kilometers ahead, eyeing Xicheng Mountain like a wolf stalking prey.

The only reason he hadn't attacked yet?

Not enough troops.

Everyone let out a breath.

"...Having Lao Nanfeng with us really is reassuring," someone muttered.

The old fox merely smiled.

The net was tightening.

And they were here not to fight—

—but to harvest.

Chapter 503 Zhang Liwei's Scheme

Xing Honglang's forces released scouts like spilled beads.

One team after another fanned outward—north, south, east, west—riding hard, eyes sharp, blades loose at the waist. The land around Yangcheng County quickly became a living web of hoofprints and dust trails.

Cao Wenzhao was doing the same.

His Guanning Iron Cavalry might have been few in number, but when it came to reconnaissance, they were veterans who'd been killing enemies since before breakfast was fashionable. His scouts moved with discipline, overlapping routes, hand signals crisp, retreat paths planned in advance.

And up on Xicheng Mountain, Wang Jiayin's rebels weren't idle either.

They sent out wave after wave of riders, half-trained but numerous, buzzing like locusts down the slopes.

Yangcheng County—normally quiet, provincial, forgettable—suddenly became a battlefield without banners.

Scouts collided everywhere.

A flash of movement in the trees.

A whistle of arrows mid-gallop.

A brief clash—steel ringing once or twice—then someone fell, someone fled, and blood soaked into the dirt before the wind could carry the screams away.

Each side fought to compress the others' vision.

Whoever saw farther... lived longer.

Before long, the difference became painfully clear.

Cao Wenzhao's scouts were monsters.

They didn't just repel Wang Jiayin's men—they pinned them, pressed forward, and forced both rebel scouts and Xing Honglang's people to retreat again and again.

Xing Honglang's scouts were driven so far back they had no choice but to make a massive detour, circling wide around Cao Wenzhao's perimeter just to catch a glimpse of Xicheng Mountain's lower slopes.

Even Lao Nanfeng personally went out.

Disguised, alone, riding light, he crept all the way to the mountain's foot.

He studied it.

And frowned.

Xicheng Mountain was a nightmare.

Steep slopes. Dense forests. Natural choke points everywhere. Rebel generals guarded every pass, every ridge, every trail. Camps dotted the hillsides like ants clinging to a mound.

One hundred and sixty thousand men.

You could see them.

And down below?

Cao Wenzhao had three thousand Guanning Iron Cavalry.

Three thousand.

Against a mountain fortress stuffed with rebels.

No matter how you calculated it, the numbers screamed one thing:

Impossible.

Unless—unless—the Ming court sent a massive force to encircle the mountain the way they had at Hequ County, slowly choking it to death.

But—

Dao Xuan Tianzun had said Wang Jiayin was about to die.

Dao Xuan Tianzun did not lie.

Which made this entire situation deeply strange.

Lao Nanfeng spat into the dirt.

"Well," he muttered, "guess I'll just watch."

If heaven had written the script, the ending would reveal itself soon enough.

The main peak of Xicheng Mountain—Shengwang Flatland—rose to 1,889.5 meters.

High. Forested. Cruel.

The climb alone would kill half an army.

Wang Jiayin's main camp sat right at the top, commanding the slopes below like a hawk on a cliff. His subsidiary forces spread down the mountain in layers, forming a defensive ring thick enough to grind attackers into paste.

One hundred and sixty thousand rebels.

They were already sharpening blades, preparing to descend and swallow Yangcheng County, Jincheng County, and Zezhou Prefecture whole.

Below, the prefects of Zezhou and Jincheng, along with the Yangcheng magistrate, had no illusions. They armed local militias, stockpiled arrows, and prepared to die in place if necessary.

Up top, before a massive rock overhang that shielded it from wind and rain, stood Wang Jiayin's command tent.

Magnificent.

Inside, Wang Jiayin lounged at the head seat.

A white tiger skin draped over his shoulders, making him look every bit the bandit king he fancied himself to be. One arm hung lazily around the waist of Zhang Shi, his captive wife.

She sat stiffly, eyes lowered.

"Gentlemen," Wang Jiayin said lazily, "our scouts report Cao Wenzhao is on our tail again."

He chuckled. "Three thousand Guanning Iron Cavalry. Camped about twenty li from the mountain."

Zijing Liang, the Left Prime Minister, frowned deeply but said nothing.

Bai Yuzhu, the Right Prime Minister, laughed aloud. "Three thousand? Without support? He's got guts, I'll give him that—but he can't do a damn thing to us."

Wang Jiayin nodded. "Exactly. Cao Wenzhao is brave, but bravery doesn't feed soldiers."

His eyes hardened. "Our food stores are shrinking. If we don't take cities soon, we starve. Plans to attack Yangcheng, Jincheng, and Zezhou remain unchanged."

Nearby, Zhang Liwei—Wang Jiayin's brother-in-law—cast a complicated glance at his sister.

Zhang Shi's smile was stiff. Wrong. Forced.

Zhang Liwei clenched his jaw, then looked back to Wang Jiayin. "Brother-in-law. Xing Honglang has arrived as well. Her forces are camped at Chihong Fortress—forty li behind Cao Wenzhao."

At the mention of her name, Bu Zhan Ni sneered.

"Useless," he spat. "Cao Wenzhao blocks the road. She can't even get close."

Chuǎng Wang—Gao Yingxiang—shook his head. "Bu Zhan Ni, are you still stuck on that Old Zhang Fei nonsense?"

Bu Zhan Ni's eyes flashed. "She killed my subordinate!"

Chuǎng Wang spread his hands. "Yongji is her hometown. Old Zhang Fei raided it. Anyone would've reacted the same. If she marched troops into your Luochuan County, would you smile and offer tea?"

Bu Zhan Ni snorted and looked away.

Wang Jiayin waved dismissively. "Enough. Discuss the assault plans among yourselves. I'm tired."

He tugged Zhang Shi closer, grinning. "Come, my dear wife. Let's drink."

"Hehehe."

Zhang Shi followed him into the inner tent, her smile tight, eyes dull.

Zhang Liwei watched them go.

Something twisted violently in his chest.

He said nothing. Walked out. Sat at the cliff's edge, the wind at nearly two thousand meters ripping through his hair like knives.

That was when a soldier approached.

Just a patrolling grunt.

Zhang Liwei didn't look at him.

Then the soldier stopped beside him and murmured, very softly:

"General Zhang... you seem displeased with Chief Wang."

Zhang Liwei's head snapped around.

The soldier smiled faintly. "The Yaomao Zhang clan was once a respected family. Forced to give up Miss Zhang. Forced into rebellion. Forced into blood."

Zhang Liwei's face darkened. "Who are you?"

"I serve General Cao Wenzhao."

The world tilted.

Zhang Liwei's hand slid to his saber.

One cut. One shout. Merit. Reward.

But what then?

Bandit lord instead of bandit chief.

Still a bandit.

Slowly—slowly—his hand fell away.

The soldier relaxed imperceptibly.

Zhang Liwei exhaled. "Speak."

The soldier whispered the plan.

Stir ambition.

Gather those who wanted more.

Use Zhang Shi's access.

Enter the tent.

Kill Wang Jiayin.

Set fire.

"When the flames rise," the soldier finished, "General Cao will attack. Your merit will shake the court. The Zhang clan will rise again."

Zhang Liwei stared into the distance.

Death waited either way.

At least this path meant something.

Finally, he nodded.

"Tell General Cao," he said quietly, "that I will do it."

The wind howled.

And fate shifted.

Chapter 504 They Won't Come Down to Bathe

The next day, Zhang Shi indulged Wang Jiayin thoroughly, keeping him entangled in the bed curtains until his bones felt soft and his spirit felt drained, leaving him sprawled there afterward, breath stolen and limbs unwilling to move, as though his soul itself had been wrung dry by pleasure.

Zhang Shi leaned close, her warm breath brushing his ear, her voice soft and tender, carrying that sweet, clinging tone that men found hardest to resist. "My Lord, my Lord," she murmured, half coquettish and half aggrieved, "my elder brother Zhang Liwei holds such a low position in your army. He is your own brother-in-law, and yet you will not even grant him a proper official post. Doesn't that mean you no longer cherish me?"

Wang Jiayin lay there in a daze, his mind still floating, his will weakened by indulgence. A man in such a state was most vulnerable to whispered persuasion. He waved his hand vaguely and muttered, "Fine, fine. Promote him. Promote him, promote him, promote him."

Zhang Shi did not let the moment slip by. She pressed closer, her voice lowering further. "I want my brother to be promoted, but I am also afraid he might die in battle. I've thought it through carefully. This would be best. Promote him to be your personal commander. If he stays by your side every day, that will surely be the safest place."

Wang Jiayin chuckled lazily. "Such a small matter. Very well. Starting tomorrow, Zhang Liwei will be my personal commander."

A personal commander was nothing more than the captain of the personal guard, yet the moment Zhang Liwei obtained that position, Wang Jiayin's head was, in truth, already placed into his hands.

June 2nd, the fourth year of the Chongzhen reign, 1631.

At Chihong Fortress, inside Xing Honglang's main tent, Xing Honglang, Gao Chuwu, Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng, and several others were sitting around a table, listlessly playing mahjong. This was a novel

pastime taught to them by the Dao Xuan Tianzun, the tiles carved neatly from bamboo, and when there was nothing to do, playing a few rounds was surprisingly addictive.

They had been watching Xicheng Mountain from afar for several days now, yet Wang Jiayin's forces had not moved, and Cao Wenzhao's army was just as still. Nothing happened, day after day. Boredom had seeped into their bones, and mahjong had become their only distraction.

Just then, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, who had been lying limp and unmoving for several days like a discarded doll, suddenly clacked and stood upright.

Almost at the same moment, the four players stopped what they were doing, rose to their feet, and bowed deeply. "Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun gave a knowing chuckle, the bamboo boards in its mouth clacking rhythmically as it spoke in verse.

"Tonight the tide shall turn at last,

Jiayin's end will come up fast.

Make your ready, gather all,

When fortune calls, do not stall."

The four were instantly overjoyed, leaping up from their seats at the same time.

Xing Honglang, Zao Ying, and Gao Chuwu all rushed to their gear. Only Lao Nanfeng remained behind for a moment. He calmly took out a canvas bag, opened it, and placed it beside the table. With a sweeping motion of his hand, he gathered all the mahjong tiles and poured them neatly into the bag.

"Don't rush into battle so eagerly," he said with a grin. "Fights will never end, but mahjong is a treasure from the mortal world. It must be properly safeguarded."

After tying up the bag, he finally began to put on his armor and fasten his saber. His movements were fluid and efficient, the habits of a veteran border soldier ingrained into his muscles. Even though he started later than the others, he finished first, fully armored while Gao Chuwu and the rest were still fumbling with straps.

As he swung himself onto his horse, Lao Nanfeng began humming a tune from the Celestial Realm, light and carefree.

"In this bustling mortal land, blossoms bloom in every place,

Here I wait and drift and dream, lost within this worldly space..."

After humming a couple of lines, he glanced sideways at the others and laughed. "Why are you all so slow?"

Then he continued humming as if nothing in the world concerned him.

"I cannot leave this colorful realm behind,

Turns out I'm just a drunken butterfly, lost in its design..."

Watching him, the others could not help but feel secretly impressed. Few in Gao Family Village could remain so relaxed on the eve of battle. Even He Jiu, the militia's chief instructor, was always nervous before a fight, muttering about his great grandmother as if seeking ancestral protection. Compared to that, Lao Nanfeng looked as though he were heading out for a stroll.

At that moment, a scout galloped into the tent and reported loudly, "Cao Wenzhao's forces are moving. They are forming up and appear ready to attack the mountain. Eh? All the commanders are already prepared?"

Lao Nanfeng burst into laughter. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun truly sees all. One calculation, and everything is known. Since Cao Wenzhao has moved, Wang Jiayin's end is sealed. Come, come. It's time for us to fish in troubled waters."

Three hundred cavalry rode out in advance, with the infantry following close behind.

Scout reports continued to arrive from the front. Cao Wenzhao's forces were advancing.

Wherever Cao Wenzhao went, the others followed, always keeping several miles of distance.

As they marched, Xicheng Mountain gradually emerged in the distance. By then, night had fallen, and the mountain stood like a massive black shadow against the deep darkness, silent and oppressive.

Cao Wenzhao's army halted at the foot of the mountain, ready to attack at any moment.

Xing Honglang's forces naturally stopped as well, waiting quietly.

They waited until the dead of night, when the moon hung bright and the stars were few.

Suddenly, a burst of fire exploded from the mountaintop with a thunderous boom. Immediately afterward, hundreds of voices roared together from above, shaking the night.

"Wang Jiayin is dead! Wang Jiayin is dead!"

Cao Wenzhao was overjoyed. "Attack!"

Three thousand Guanning Iron Cavalry surged forward, charging straight up Xicheng Mountain.

Seeing this from behind, Xing Honglang and the others were momentarily stunned. "What exactly happened on the mountaintop?"

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled knowingly, its bamboo boards clacking once more.

"A common girl he seized by force,

His wife's own kin then set the course.

Drunk and blind, his head was claimed,

By wicked deeds, his fate was named."

They listened, confused for a brief moment. Then, as the meaning of the verse sank in, understanding dawned all at once.

Three pairs of eyes turned toward Lao Nanfeng.

Lao Nanfeng scratched his head. "What? Why are you all staring at me like that?"

Gao Chuwu said seriously, "Lao Nanfeng, I feel like you might end up following Wang Jiayin's path someday. You always look like you're drooling when you see a pretty woman. If one day you forcibly seize a common girl, then it'll be 'those who commit many evils will meet their end.'"

Lao Nanfeng's expression stiffened. "That's not right. I, Lao Nanfeng, do like beautiful women, but I have no interest in mortal women. In my heart, there are only celestial maidens."

The others were rendered speechless.

Lao Nanfeng added earnestly, "Even if you gave me a hundred times more courage, I wouldn't dare to forcibly seize a celestial maiden."

Xing Honglang nodded solemnly. "That's true."

Zao Ying nodded as well. "Agreed."

Only Gao Chuwu broke into a wide grin. "You can't steal a celestial maiden, but you can steal her clothes. Didn't the Cowherd succeed by stealing a celestial maiden's clothes?"

Lao Nanfeng's eyes widened. "What? There's such a trick? How did I forget about that? Gao Chuwu, you're a genius. I'll go guard a mountain pond and try my luck."

Everyone was horrified.

Xing Honglang kicked Gao Chuwu hard, sending him sprawling. "What nonsense are you teaching him? That idiot will actually do it."

Gao Chuwu looked aggrieved. "Huh? Would anyone really do something like that?"

Xing Honglang replied coldly, "Anyone else wouldn't. But Lao Nanfeng definitely would."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun watched from the side, laughing so hard that its entire wooden frame clacked and rattled. "Everyone, rest assured. Those celestial maidens will not come down to bathe. Lao Nanfeng will not find them, much less steal their clothes."

Lao Nanfeng froze. "Wait, wait. They really won't come down to bathe?"

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded decisively. "No. Never. There are plenty of places to bathe up there. Why would they bother coming down here?"

Lao Nanfeng collapsed onto the ground with a heavy thud, lying there in utter despair, his spirit completely crushed.

Chapter 505 Xing Honglang of Yongji Is Here!

At the foot of Xicheng Mountain, the night was almost peaceful.

Almost.

Xing Honglang and her people lounged beside their horses, voices low, moods relaxed—as if they were waiting for a market to open rather than the collapse of a rebel empire.

Above them, however, the mountain burned.

Flames clawed at the sky.

Screams tore through the dark.

The night wind carried the stench of blood and scorched canvas.

The chaos had begun hours earlier.

That evening, Zhang Shi had smiled.

She poured wine with gentle hands, her sleeves brushing Wang Jiayin's arm, her voice soft, her laughter light. Cup after cup, she coaxed him, praised him, toasted him.

Wang Jiayin drank like a man who believed tomorrow belonged to him.

By the time his head lolled back against the pillow, consciousness long drowned, Zhang Liwei entered the tent.

He wore the insignia of personal commander.

That single title dismissed the guards at once.

Inside the tent, Zhang Liwei did not hesitate. He drew his blade and swung.

The sound was dull. Heavy.

When Wang Jiayin's head rolled across the carpet, history quietly turned a page.

Zhang Liwei had already prepared everything.

The moment the head was secured, torches were lit.

Orders flew.

Flames erupted.

The mountaintop encampment became an ocean of fire in the blink of an eye.

Zhang Liwei led his personal guard straight through the inferno. Whenever a familiar face appeared—a man loyal to Wang Jiayin—he would stride toward them with urgency, shout a few words of false camaraderie, then slash.

Clean. Fast.

The betrayal was perfect.

Soon, several hundred soldiers gathered behind him, shouting with all the strength left in their lungs.

"Wang Jiayin has been decapitated!"

The roar rolled down Xicheng Mountain like thunder.

Every one of the one hundred sixty thousand rebels heard it.

At the foot of the mountain, Cao Wenzhao's eyes lit up.

"Attack!"

Three thousand Guanning Iron Cavalry surged forward.

Steel climbed the mountain.

It was textbook.

Inside and out. Above and below.

In the darkness, rebel units smashed into one another, screaming accusations, cutting wildly. No one knew who was who. No one knew whom to trust.

Morale collapsed before blades even met.

Bu Zhan Ni took one look and laughed inwardly.

Rescue the commander?

Not a chance.

Cao Wenzhao only had three thousand men. He couldn't seal the mountain.

Bu Zhan Ni turned and fled, slipping down a side path with his followers, vanishing cleanly into the night.

Others followed.

Right Prime Minister Bai Yuzhu surrendered outright.

Left Prime Minister Zijing Liang fought his way out with brutal discipline.

Chuang Wang scattered.

The Southern Camp Eight Great Kings scattered.

The Western Camp Eight Great Kings scattered.

Cao Cao—Luo Rucai—ran.

Lao Huihui—Ma Shouying—ran.

Leaders vanished into the dark, and the men beneath them dissolved into screaming, directionless masses.

At the southern foot of the mountain, Lao Nanfeng squinted.

"They're coming," he said cheerfully. "Time to recruit."

"Not recruit," Zao Ying corrected with a grin. "Harvest."

Xing Honglang nodded once. "Raise the banner."

With a sharp snap, a massive flag unfurled in the darkness.

The character XING blazed white against black cloth.

Torches flared deliberately beside it.

Six hundred voices thundered together:

"Xing Honglang of Yongji is here!"

"Brothers with nowhere to go—come quickly!"

Gao Chuwu blinked. "Won't this attract government troops?"

Lao Nanfeng laughed. "Cao Wenzhao only wants Wang Jiayin's head. He doesn't care about anyone else tonight."

He gestured uphill. "He doesn't even have time for Zijing Liang or Chuang Wang. Why would he bother with a salt smuggler?"

"Oh," Gao Chuwu said sincerely. "That makes sense."

Sure enough, far above, Cao Wenzhao heard the shouting.

He glanced downhill.

Dismissed it.

And continued upward.

Xing Honglang was not a priority.

She hadn't slaughtered cities. She hadn't burned prefectures. To the court, she was a negotiable problem—someone to pacify later.

The Iron Cavalry pressed on, carving a bloody path up the mountain.

Below, panic reigned.

Rebels tumbled into forests, slid down slopes, broke ankles, dropped weapons. Units shattered. Leaders vanished.

The night swallowed them.

Then—voices.

"Xing Honglang of Yongji is here!"

Lost men looked up, eyes wide.

She's one of us.

She'll take us in.

They ran toward the torches like moths.

By dawn, five thousand routed rebels stood beneath Xing Honglang's banner.

Among them was a minor chieftain—Cui Shanhu—who somehow still had a hundred men intact.

After catching his breath, Cui Shanhu straightened his back and swaggered over.

"Boss Xing," he said loudly, "we've got five thousand again. Rescuing Boss Wang is impossible now. So what's next? Say the word—I, Cui Shanhu, will follow you."

Xing Honglang laughed once. "We're leaving."

"Leaving?"

"Back to Yongji."

Cui Shanhu frowned. "Not finding Zijing Liang? Chuang Wang? The Eight Great Kings? Cao Cao? Lao Huihui?"

"In the dark?" Xing Honglang replied. "Scattered in every direction? You think we have divine sight?"

She mounted her horse. "We go home first. Then we look."

Cui Shanhu considered it.

Reasonable.

He nodded and fell in line.

Five thousand able-bodied men moved out—but discipline was nonexistent. Drinking while marching. Shouting. Wandering into abandoned homes and stealing junk.

On Gao Chuwu's shoulder, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun watched silently.

Gao Chuwu whispered, furious. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, look at them! Drinking on the march! I want to punch them!"

The puppet hummed darkly.

"And that group just looted an oil lamp from a village!" Gao Chuwu continued. "If people lived there, they'd be robbed clean!"

"Remember their faces," Dao Xuan Tianzun said calmly. "When they enter labor reform, give them to Lao Nanfeng's old units."

Gao Chuwu's eyes lit up. "Oh! I get it! Road construction!"

"The heaviest sections," Xing Honglang added sweetly.

"The heaviest," Dao Xuan Tianzun confirmed.

Lao Nanfeng frowned. "Five thousand men. We only have six hundred. Can we really control them?"

"How do we disarm them safely?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled.

"At Gudu Ferry," he said. "Once we reach Gudu Ferry... they'll put the weapons down themselves."

The night wind howled.

Behind them, Xicheng Mountain burned.

Ahead, Yongji waited.

Chapter 506 The Disobedient Are Pulverized

Li Daoxuan had chosen Gudu Ferry in Yongji as the place to confiscate these men's weapons for a very concrete and practical reason, one that had nothing to do with impulse and everything to do with distance and control.

Quite simply, Gudu Ferry in Yongji had already entered his field of vision.

Measured in a straight line, the distance from Gao Family Village to Dragon Gate Ferry was sixty-five kilometers, while the distance to Gudu Ferry in Yongji was only fifty-seven. When Li Daoxuan had extended his power to establish the Yellow River Bridge at Dragon Gate Ferry, Yongji Ferry had long since fallen within his reach as well. The only reason he had not acted there earlier was because his reach had been stretched too wide, his resources spread thin, and he could not afford to attend to every single point at once.

That was all.

His followers, however, had no way of knowing this.

But now, it was time for them to understand.

The moment Li Daoxuan spoke, a quiet confidence settled over his followers. With renewed resolve, they began leading the five thousand ragged bandits forward, advancing slowly toward Gudu Ferry in Yongji.

In order to avoid causing trouble for the common people, Xing Honglang deliberately claimed that they needed to evade the imperial army, guiding the mass of men through desolate paths and abandoned stretches of land. Along the way, she kept them firmly under control, preventing them from harassing even a single upright civilian.

As they pressed onward, the outline of Gudu Ferry in Yongji gradually appeared ahead of them, growing clearer with every step.

At that moment, the Dao Xuan Tianzun's puppet let out a soft chuckle and said, "There's no need to coddle these people anymore. You can be more forceful now."

Hearing this, his followers straightened their backs and lifted their spirits.

Within the rebel ranks, Cui Shan Hu, their self-styled leader, also began to feel a surge of vigor. After walking for so long and putting a good distance between himself and Xicheng Mountain, he had already fallen into the familiar state of "forgetting the pain once the wound healed." The memory of being beaten senseless by Cao Wenzhao faded into the background, replaced by arrogance. He put on the airs of a leader, stretched out his arm, and pointed toward a water fortress visible in the distance, laughing loudly as he shouted, "Look, brothers. There's a big water fortress ahead. I can see people moving around inside. Doesn't that look like a rich place? We can make a huge haul!"

"Rob what, you idiot!" Xing Honglang snapped angrily. "That's my fortress!"

Cui Shan Hu sneered. "Huh? Boss Xing, you're a salt smuggler, yet you built yourself a water fortress for defense? Isn't that just begging the imperial court to come down on you?"

He still clearly remembered how Wang Jiayin had grown too ambitious, no longer content to roam as a bandit, insisting on declaring himself king in Hequ County and defending the county seat like a legitimate ruler. The result had been inevitable. The authorities hunted him down without mercy, and sure enough, he was now dead.

At this time, the six hundred members of the Gao Family Village militia had quietly fallen back, putting some distance between themselves and the five thousand men. This maneuver had been carried out discreetly ever since the Dao Xuan Tianzun issued his command. Because the rebels marched in a chaotic, disorderly mass, none of them noticed the shift.

By now, the water fortress loomed close, and everyone arrived at the open ground outside its walls.

Xing Honglang suddenly turned around and raised her hand high. Her three hundred cavalry and three hundred infantry halted at once, stopping in perfect unison and standing as still as carved statues.

This abrupt action startled Cui Shan Hu and the five thousand men behind him. Many froze where they stood. Cui Shan Hu hastily widened the distance between himself and Xing Honglang, retreating into the middle of his own people, and ordered his last hundred loyal subordinates to close ranks around him for protection. With his voice booming, he shouted, "Boss Xing, what the hell are you doing?"

Xing Honglang replied loudly, "Cui Shan Hu, weren't you just asking whether I was afraid of the imperial army coming to besiege my fortress? Let me tell you clearly. I'm not afraid."

Cui Shan Hu's heart skipped a beat. "Could it be that you've also surrendered to the imperial army?"

Xing Honglang burst into laughter. "Me, Xing Honglang of Yongji, surrendering to the imperial army? Do you only know how to spew filth? Can't you say a single sensible thing?"

Cui Shan Hu frowned and asked, "Then what do you mean by this?"

Behind him, the five thousand disorganized rebels quietly began to draw closer, instinctively gathering at his back.

Xing Honglang raised her voice and declared, "I'll tell you now the best way to avoid being surrounded and wiped out by the authorities. That way is..."

She deliberately dragged out the final word, letting the tension stretch until everyone strained their ears to listen. Then she shouted, loud and clear, "Stop burning, killing, and looting. Stop doing evil. Become good people, and seek a new life."

Cui Shan Hu stared blankly. "What?"

He rubbed his ears, half convinced that he had misheard. "Damn it, Xing Honglang. You're a salt smuggler. Why are you suddenly talking like some sanctimonious old monk, spouting nonsense about virtue and goodness?"

From the watchtower of the water fortress, a bald head poked out. Zhan Seng looked down and said, "Amitabha. To speak of a monk's compassion in such crude terms makes this poor monk quite displeased."

"Shut up!" Cui Shan Hu roared. "Where did this stupid monk come from? Do you believe I won't chop you into pieces?"

"Goodness, goodness," Zhan Seng replied calmly.

He was a monk, and he sought no quarrels. Even when threatened, he did not argue back, merely repeating his quiet invocation.

Xing Honglang took over once more, shouting, "I met you under Xicheng Mountain not to help you continue burning villages and slaughtering people, but to make you fools put down your weapons and change your ways. I know every one of you is a vicious ruffian, not easily persuaded by words. But listen carefully. I am fiercer than any of you. From today onward, every single one of you will obey without exception. Anyone who dares utter even one word of defiance, I will summon the Dao Xuan Tianzun to crush him into a paste of flesh and bone."

Standing to the side, Gao Chuwu whispered, awed, "Wow. My wife just became terrifying."

Lao Nanfeng let out a soft laugh and said, "With people like this, you have to be fierce. If you try to be polite and reason with them, they'll draw their blades and cut you down. Only by being fiercer than them can you make them submit."

"Hahahaha!" Cui Shan Hu laughed uproariously. "Xing Honglang, what kind of act are you putting on? Look at how few men you have, just a handful of weaklings, and you dare threaten me? Open your eyes and take a good look. These five thousand men, whose orders do you think they'll follow, yours or mine?"

At his laughter, the hundred-plus loyal subordinates behind him stepped forward together, striking intimidating poses. The five thousand wandering rebels, stirred by his words, also shouted toward Xing Honglang several times in a show of bravado.

Cui Shan Hu continued, full of arrogance, "Not only will I refuse to change my ways, I'll make an example out of you. I'll chop this ugly woman to pieces right now, then loot this broken-down water fortress clean. Hahaha. Brothers, who's with me?"

His hundred loyal followers shouted first, "We are!"

The five thousand men hesitated. To follow or not to follow? The temptation to follow was strong.

Just as they were still wavering, Xing Honglang sneered coldly. "Very well, Cui Shan Hu. You may die now."

Cui Shan Hu scoffed. "Oh? I'd like to see how you plan to..."

Before he could finish the sentence, the clouds above suddenly split apart. A colossal golden hand descended from the heavens, accompanied by roaring wind and thunder, crashing downward with an earth-shaking sound.

Boom!

The massive palm slammed straight down onto Cui Shan Hu's head, engulfing him and his hundred-plus loyal subordinates in an instant, pressing them into the ground with a dull, crushing impact.

The earth trembled violently, mountains and ground quaking together.

Then the immense hand lifted again, swiftly withdrawing back into the sky.

All that remained on the ground was a vast, pulpy smear of flesh and blood.

The five thousand rebels behind them screamed in terror. Some immediately pissed themselves. Others were so frightened that they lost control of their bowels, a foul stench spreading through the air.

Those at the front stumbled backward in panic, while those at the rear turned and fled.

They did not get far.

The colossal golden hand descended once more, slamming down with a thunderous crash across their escape route.

With no path left, their legs gave out. One by one, they collapsed to their knees, trembling on the ground.

Chapter 507 Benevolence and Power

That enormous palm descending from the heavens did not merely stun the five thousand rebels. Even many of the Gao Family Village militia soldiers felt their scalps prickle as they stared upward in shock, their hearts pounding as the scene burned itself into their memories. In their minds rose the same thought, almost in unison: they had only ever read of such a palm strike in The Dao Xuan Tianzun's Epic of Demon Slaying, lines of text inked onto paper, distant and unreal, and yet today they had witnessed it with their own eyes, vast and merciless, crushing living men into nothing.

The residents of Gudu Ferry were no less shaken.

Many of them stood frozen where they were, secretly murmuring to themselves, vowing in trembling voices that from this day onward they would never again commit even the smallest wrongdoing. If one did, surely the Dao Xuan Tianzun would descend with divine punishment, and who in this mortal world could possibly withstand a blow like that?

As for the five thousand rebels, who moments ago had been shouting and clamoring without restraint, they had now fallen into a deathly silence.

In that oppressive quiet, Xing Honglang's voice rang out once more, clear and cutting. "Ah. Just a moment ago, you all looked quite defiant. I rather liked that."

The rebels shuddered as one. Defiance? What defiance? Anyone who still dared act defiant now would be nothing more than a fool who had lost all sense of fear.

Xing Honglang gave her next order without hesitation. "Throw all your weapons onto that hillside."

Who would dare disobey? What use was keeping a weapon now? What blade, spear, or bow could possibly contend with that golden giant hand? The rebels scrambled into motion, each afraid of being the slowest. One by one, they rushed to toss their weapons onto the slope, metal clattering and thudding as piles of swords, spears, bows, and arrows quickly grew.

It was almost amusing that while most of them were frantically discarding their arms, a handful of men remained seated on the ground, unmoving. When Xing Honglang's gaze fell upon them, those few instantly burst into tears, wailing as they tried to explain themselves.

"Boss Xing, we're not disobeying you. Truly, we're not. It's just that our legs are weak from fright and won't listen to us. Please give us a little more time. Once our legs stop shaking, we'll throw them away too. Waaah. My legs. Why won't they move?"

"We're obedient. We're very obedient. Please don't kill us. Don't summon that great hand again."

"We'll follow every order. Every single one."

Xing Honglang watched them coldly, her expression unreadable, neither confirming that she would kill them nor that she would spare them. This uncertainty terrified the men even more. Tears and snot streamed down their faces as their sobbing grew louder. The more frightened they became, the weaker their legs seemed to grow, and the weaker their legs grew, the more impossible it was for them to stand.

After a long while, when she felt she had enjoyed herself enough, Xing Honglang finally looked away.

Only then did the men feel as though a mountain had been lifted from their chests. Their legs suddenly found strength again, and they scrambled to their feet, stumbling toward the hillside to throw away their weapons. They dared not keep anything hard on their bodies, fearing it might be mistaken for a hidden weapon and bring disaster down upon them.

Watching from the side, Lao Nanfeng chuckled and said to Gao Chuwu, "See that? Look at how your wife has terrified these scoundrels. Hahaha. She really is a salt smuggler who's lived on the fringes of society. She knows far better than you how to deal with wretched bandits like these."

Gao Chuwu stared, eyes wide. "Wow. My wife is really amazing."

Lao Nanfeng slung an arm around his shoulders and laughed. "How did someone like you manage to marry such an incredible woman? Forgive my bluntness, but you're leagues beneath her. This match really isn't fair."

Gao Chuwu blinked in confusion. "Huh? Didn't I just have to beat her in a fight to marry her?"

Lao Nanfeng fell silent, suddenly unsure how to respond.

By this point, all five thousand rebels had been disarmed and stripped of their armor, leaving them in nothing but coarse linen clothes, empty-handed and trembling. They were not allowed to enter the fortress. Instead, they were herded to a stretch of the Yellow River outside the walls and ordered to sit and wait.

They all knew that some sort of arrangement awaited them, though none knew what it would be. Even so, whatever lay ahead had to be better than being crushed into pulp by that golden giant hand. They could only wait obediently.

Before long, three massive gunboats appeared, sailing upriver. Each vessel carried twelve gleaming silver cannons, their cold metal reflecting the light. The mere sight of them made the rebels' hearts sink into terror.

"Just who is this Xing Honglang?" they thought in despair. "How can she command three gunboats like this?"

The cannons of the gunboats slowly turned, their muzzles aimed directly at the seated rebels. Soon after, numerous flat-bottomed cargo ships followed, gliding toward the shore and mooring firmly in place. Xing Honglang's expression hardened.

"Get on board," she barked.

The crowd dared not hesitate. They meekly boarded the cargo ships and sat down, shoulder to shoulder, filling the vessels to capacity. Hundreds were crammed onto each ship, and more than a dozen ships were packed full before all five thousand rebels were loaded. Escorted by the three gunboats, the fleet began moving upstream, heading toward the upper reaches of the Yellow River.

After an indeterminate stretch of time, a dock came into view ahead.

Suddenly, one rebel cried out, "Ah? Qichuan Ferry? More than a year ago, Leader Bai Yuzhu led us to attack this very place. We were beaten back by flintlock volleys and strange bombs."

At his shout, others quickly joined in.

"I was there too."

"So was I."

"So these ships are from Qichuan Ferry."

"Then what's Boss Xing's connection to this place?"

As their murmurs spread, a figure clad entirely in white appeared atop Qichuan Fortress on the shore. His bearing was striking enough that the moment he stepped forward, many rebels recognized him at once.

"That's him," they exclaimed. "The militia instructor who defeated us back then at Qichuan Ferry. I'd recognize those white robes anywhere."

Bai Yuan accepted a tin megaphone from a subordinate and addressed the fleet in a loud, steady voice. "Gentlemen, welcome to your new lives as labor reform prisoners. I am Bai Yuan, current Master of Bai

Family Fortress, General Instructor of the Chengcheng County Militia, and concurrently the Admiral of the Gao Family Village Navy."

He deliberately recited his long list of titles, allowing their weight to sink in. Then he unfolded a fan in his hand with a practiced flick, revealing the character for "gentleman" written upon it. Only then did he continue.

"You will disembark here and then walk several dozen li to Huanglong Mountain Prison. I advise you not to make any rash moves. The Dao Xuan Tianzun is watching from above."

The rebels did not truly understand who the Dao Xuan Tianzun was, but the words "from above" made them instinctively raise their heads.

What they saw made their hearts seize.

The clouds had parted, and beneath them hovered that same golden giant hand. It was not descending now, but its presence alone was enough.

Bai Yuan's meaning became instantly clear. Any rash movement, and that hand would fall.

At once, every rebel became exceedingly docile.

Yet Bai Yuan was different from Xing Honglang. He did not rely solely on intimidation. He also understood how to pacify hearts. The blending of benevolence and power was the mark of a superior leader, a skill he had honed through years of governing Bai Family Fortress, and it stood in sharp contrast to Xing Honglang's more unorthodox methods.

A gentle smile appeared on his face. "When you broke through the encirclement in Hequ County, most of you left your families behind, didn't you? Your parents. Your wives. Your children. Do you miss them?"

At his words, sorrow flickered across many faces.

They were human beings, not wood or stone. How could they truly be without feeling?

Even the most brutal among them had soft places in their hearts. When they fled, abandoning their loved ones, they had done so under the desperate assumption that the imperial court would not dare slaughter tens of thousands of old people, women, and children all at once. It was not that they were utterly heartless or devoid of conscience.

Bai Yuan continued calmly, "Your wives and children have already been brought here by us. They are settled in a valley within Huanglong Mountain. If you are obedient, you will be reunited with them. But if you harbor thoughts of wrongdoing, then..."

He let the sentence trail off, leaving the rest to imagination.

How could the rebels not misunderstand? The moment his words landed, a single thought surged through them. If they disobeyed, their wives and children would be slaughtered.

In truth, Gao Family Village would never do such a thing. The Dao Xuan Tianzun did not permit the killing of the old, the weak, women, or children. But the rebels did not know that. They believed Bai Yuan was capable of it, and that belief terrified them far more than any shouted threat ever could.

From that moment on, not a single one of them dared to cause trouble.

Chapter 508 Futures Are Built Through Hard Work

With the terrifying golden giant hand hanging in the sky like an unblinking eye, the militia's flintlock rifles trained steadily upon them, and Bai Yuan's calm yet chilling reminders about their parents, wives, and children now firmly lodged in their hearts, the five thousand former rebels no longer dared harbor even the faintest thought of resistance. They moved exactly as instructed, marching where Gao Family Village told them to march, stopping when ordered to stop, their once unruly bodies now obedient almost to the point of numbness.

They passed through the fertile farmlands of Heyang County, where orderly fields stretched outward beneath the sun, crops growing in neat rows that spoke of careful planning and abundant labor. They then marched past the flourishing Gao Family Village itself, where solid houses, busy workshops, and well-fed villagers offered a glimpse of prosperity so far removed from their former lives that many could only stare in stunned silence. Finally, after hours of walking, they arrived at the Labor Reform Valley nestled deep within the Huanglong Mountain range.

And there, what followed could only be described as a deeply stirring reunion.

"Husband, you're finally here!"

"Wife, are you well? Is our son safe?"

"You unfilial little beast!" an elderly woman shrieked as she brandished a rattan cane. "How dare you abandon your old mother in Hequ County and run off with Wang Jiayin. Kneel down right now. If I don't break your legs today, I won't deserve to be called your mother!"

The entire valley erupted into chaos. There were tearful embraces and choking sobs, but also sons fleeing in panic while furious mothers chased after them, swinging canes with astonishing vigor. Shouts, cries, laughter, and scolding overlapped until the air itself seemed to tremble. It took a full two hours before the storm of emotions finally settled and the valley gradually returned to order.

Once the initial shock and joy of reunion faded, the former rebels began, one by one, to take stock of their surroundings.

The valley was vast and open, dotted with rows of brightly colored houses that looked nothing like prison barracks. The living conditions were, to their astonishment, not merely tolerable but genuinely decent.

Their parents, wives, and children, who had arrived earlier, had not been mistreated in the slightest. On the contrary, everyone received food daily and could eat until they were full. Aside from the youngest children, however, everyone was expected to work. Most of the women had been assigned to operate strange machines known as steam powered textile machines. With the steady clatter and hiss of these devices, raw cotton was transformed into high quality fabric at an astonishing speed, bolts of cloth rolling out endlessly before being packed up and transported away.

Other women were tasked with bookbinding. They brushed paste along the spines of neatly stacked pages, wrapped them with covers and backing sheets, stitched them tight with cotton thread, and laid them out to dry. Once finished, the books were loaded onto carts and sent out in batches.

The elderly who could not manage weaving or fine work were given lighter duties. Some washed vegetables, some cooked meals, and others drove carts, hauling cloth or bamboo materials to workshops where simple household items were made for daily use.

Yet the most shocking arrangement of all concerned the children.

In this Labor Reform Valley, the children were sent to study.

Study.

The former rebels could scarcely believe their eyes. They stood there dumbfounded, watching their children sit neatly in clean, orderly classrooms, reciting the Three Character Classic, the Hundred Family Surnames, and something called Elementary Math in clear, youthful voices. For a moment, many of them wondered if they were dreaming, or if they had somehow wandered into the wrong place.

Was this really how prisoners were treated?

"This place isn't normal," one man muttered under his breath. "Even the government wouldn't give us living conditions like this."

He glanced again at the tall, brightly painted walls encircling the valley, at the soldiers patrolling the ramparts with flintlock rifles resting on their shoulders. "Aside from not being free to leave," he thought, "everything else feels like a dream."

"Hey, newcomer. Over here."

The man turned toward the voice and saw a distinctive looking labor reform inmate beckoning to him, surrounded by a cluster of followers who clearly deferred to him in all things.

The newcomer's heart tightened. This was obviously someone important here, someone he absolutely could not afford to offend.

He hurried over and lowered his head respectfully. "Big Brother, do you need something from me?"

The man laughed and said, "I'm from the Guyuan border army. Everyone here calls me Chen Baihu. I'm in charge of this area. All you newcomers should listen to me properly, understand? If you don't, my men will help you understand with their fists."

The newcomer jumped in fright and immediately bowed. "Boss Chen, my name is Liu Bawan. From today onward, I'll follow you."

Chen Baihu nodded with satisfaction. "Clever. You were quick to recognize who to call boss. Alright, you can go for now."

Liu Bawan bowed again and turned to leave, but after a few steps he hesitated, then turned back. "Boss, there's something I really don't understand, and I have to ask."

Chen Baihu waved a hand. "Ask."

Liu Bawan swallowed and said, "Isn't this a prison? Then why are they teaching our children to read and write? I really can't make sense of it."

Chen Baihu burst into laughter. "Isn't that obvious? From now on, young and old, men and women, all of you will work for the Dao Xuan Tianzun. The Dao Xuan Tianzun spared your lives, so this is how you repay him. Since that's the case, the more capable you are, the better. Let your children read more books. When they grow up, they'll be able to contribute even more."

Those words struck Liu Bawan like a hammer.

This place was thinking that far ahead. It was already planning for what their children would do once they grew up. Compared to this, his former bosses never thought beyond tomorrow's meal. On a good day, they might think about what to eat the day after. Only when they felt particularly far sighted would they consider what they might eat three days from now.

After a long pause, Liu Bawan asked quietly, "Boss, this isn't government land, is it?"

Chen Baihu snorted. "Of course not. Could the government ever be this good?"

"Then this is Great Boss Xing Honglang's territory?" Liu Bawan asked.

Chen Baihu laughed again. "Great Boss Xing is only a minor leader here. The true great boss is the Dao Xuan Tianzun. Beneath him are the Thirty Six Heavenly Spirits and the Seventy Two Earthly Fiends, together forming the One Hundred and Eight Generals of Gao Family Village."

Liu Bawan was stunned. "That powerful? Xing Honglang alone is already famous. Who are the other one hundred and seven?"

Chen Baihu shrugged. "I don't know them all either. I just know there's Old Devil of Guyuan, Lao Nanfeng of Guyuan, and Dian Dengzi from Qingjian."

Liu Bawan did not recognize the first two, but when he heard the name Dian Dengzi, his eyes widened. "I know that man. A truly formidable boss."

"Formidable?" Chen Baihu scoffed. "Here, he doesn't even rank high."

Far away, at Gudu Ferry, Zhao Sheng, who was overseeing the construction of the water fortress, suddenly sneezed loudly. "Who's talking behind my back?"

Back in the valley, Liu Bawan asked hesitantly, "Anyone else?"

Chen Baihu waved him off. "I'm a prisoner just like you. How would I know all the leaders? Don't ask so much. You'll find out sooner or later."

The newcomers were soon shown the rules and routines by the older inmates. Early the next morning, before the sun had fully risen, they were marched out to join the road building teams.

With the arrival of five thousand able bodied laborers, the manpower of the Gao Family Village labor reform camp became extraordinarily abundant.

Because labor reform inmates were managed far more strictly than ordinary workers, who could choose when to work, take leave, or even resign, they had no such freedoms. They were assigned the dirtiest and most exhausting tasks without complaint. Anyone caught slacking off was immediately beaten and disciplined by Chen Baihu and the other veteran inmates.

As a result, the efficiency of the labor reform camp soared to a frightening degree.

Even the elite construction teams of Gao Family Village could not match their output. From dawn until dusk, the valley echoed with their work chants, rough voices rising and falling in unison.

"Deep in the mountains, treasures lie concealed.

We break the stone, a new road revealed.

Hammers strike rock, hard against hard.

Hoes bite the earth, row after row.

Each callus marks a step ahead.

Our future is forged by the work of our hands."

Chapter 509 Giving You Some Celestial Fertilizer

Xi'an Prefecture.

Governor's Yamen.

Inside the main hall, Wang Shunxing, Governor of Shaanxi, sat beneath the official plaque like a man slowly drowning in paperwork.

One report after another landed on his desk.

He read.

He frowned.

He sighed.

Then he sighed again, longer.

Good news?

None worth mentioning.

The much-vaunted pacification strategy spearheaded by Yang He, Supreme Commander of the Three Borders, had collapsed into something between a farce and a curse.

After the main rebel force crossed the Yellow River into Shanxi, the largest remaining rebel group within Shaanxi was the northern faction led by the Shen brothers—Shen Yikui and Shen Yiyuan.

Yang He had dispatched Zhou Riqiang, Magistrate of Ningzhou, along with several others, bearing amnesty documents and fine words.

Shen Yikui agreed.

On the ninth day of the third month, over sixty rebel leaders—including Sun Jiye and Ru Chengming—were paraded into Ningzhou.

They returned Magistrate Jiang Yingchang of Heshui.

They handed back the official seal of Bao'an County.

To ensure maximum theatrical effect, Yang He ordered a dragon pavilion erected atop the city wall.

The surrendered rebels were marched forward, pressed to their knees, and made to shout:

"Long live the Emperor!"

Afterward, they were escorted to the yamen to bow to Yang He, then collectively dragged to the Guandi Temple, where they swore oaths loud enough to shake the roof tiles.

The performance was flawless.

On the sixteenth, Shen Yikui himself arrived in Ningzhou to meet Yang He.

Yang He played his part expertly.

First, he solemnly listed ten crimes committed by Shen Yikui.

Then, with a dramatic pause, announced an imperial pardon.

Shen Yikui was granted a garrison command.

Famine relief tickets were distributed.

The surrendered men were ordered to disband and return home.

Following this, other rebel leaders—Shang Tianlong, Wang Laohu, Duxinglang, Hao Lin'an—lined up to accept amnesty.

For a brief moment, Shaanxi appeared peaceful.

False peace.

As soon as the "return home" phase began, everything fell apart.

Pacified rebels turned feral.

They robbed villages.

They murdered.

They burned homes.

Petitions flooded in like spring floods.

Yang He tried desperately to hold the line with Shen Yikui, but the rest spiraled out of control. Li Laochai and Duxinglang, freshly "pacified," rebelled again and seized Zhongbu County.

One fire extinguished—another erupted.

Pacification had become a bottomless pit.

Wang Shunxing put down the last report and leaned back.

"...What are we to do," he muttered, staring at the ceiling like it might answer him.

At that moment, a clerk hurried in.

"Governor," he announced, "Judicial Commissioner Shi Kefa requests an audience."

Wang Shunxing straightened. "Commissioner Shi? Show him in."

Moments later, Shi Kefa entered.

He was still in official robes—but in his left hand, he held a fistful of wheat stalks.

In his right, a filthy burlap sack.

The contrast was so jarring it nearly offended the furniture.

Wang Shunxing blinked. "...Commissioner Shi. Care to explain why you look like a traveling scarecrow?"

Shi Kefa's eyes shone. "Governor, please—look closely at these wheat stalks."

Wang Shunxing leaned forward, squinted, then stared for a long moment.

"...They're green?"

Shi Kefa's mouth twitched.

As expected, he thought bitterly. Years of officialdom rot one's farming instincts.

Forced to spell it out, he said, "Governor—these stalks are thick. The nodes are dense. The leaves are broad. This year's yield will at least double."

"Oh?" Wang Shunxing's interest finally stirred. "Double grain output? That is worth noting."

Shi Kefa lifted the burlap sack like a treasure chest. "And this—this is the reason."

Wang Shunxing eyed it warily. "You're telling me dirt can do that?"

"Celestial fertilizer," Shi Kefa said reverently. "Made from a mineral treated with sulfuric acid—details aside, artisans know how to produce it. Apply this, and wheat grows like that."

He shook the stalks for emphasis.

Wang Shunxing sucked in a breath. "Then it must be promoted immediately! Mobilize artisans—produce it en masse!"

Shi Kefa nearly beamed. "The Governor agrees?"

Then—

Wang Shunxing froze.

He slapped his forehead.

"Wait," he said slowly. "Artisans need wages. Mining needs miners—also wages. Producing this fertilizer costs silver."

Shi Kefa's shoulders sagged.

"And once produced," Wang Shunxing continued mercilessly, "farmers won't trust it. We'd have to distribute it for free at first. Only after results can we sell it."

He spread his hands.

"In short—huge upfront costs."

Shi Kefa exhaled heavily. "Yes."

Wang Shunxing sighed. "This official has no money."

Shi Kefa tried one last angle. "We could petition the court—"

"Impossible," Wang Shunxing cut in instantly. "For years, every tax demand from the capital has been met with the same reply from Shaanxi: no money. If I ask now, what do you think His Majesty will say?"

Shi Kefa thought for a moment. "...'No money, only my life.'"

"Precisely."

Silence fell.

Shi Kefa clenched his fists. "Such an opportunity—and we let it slip?"

Wang Shunxing sighed again. "As Governor, I want increased yields more than anyone. But wanting doesn't mint silver."

Just then, another clerk rushed in.

"Governor! A letter from Liang Shixian, Magistrate of Chengcheng County."

Wang Shunxing blinked. "Chengcheng?"

Shi Kefa's eyes lit up. He had just come from there. The sights were still vivid in his mind.

The letter was brought forth.

Both men read.

Then froze.

It was an offer of aid.

Liang Shixian wrote that Chengcheng, being part of Shaanxi, could not bear to see its people suffer. They were willing to provide a large batch of celestial fertilizer—for free.

They would even send instructors to teach its use.

One year only. A trial.

After that—ahem—future use would require purchase.

Neither Wang Shunxing nor Shi Kefa had any concept of "free samples" or "market cultivation."

To them, this was pure benevolence.

Shi Kefa slapped the table. "Governor! Heaven has opened a door! With this fertilizer, grain yields will soar—perhaps even quell the unrest!"

Wang Shunxing felt ten years younger. "Excellent! Commissioner Shi—you just came from there. Go again. Bring it back."

Shi Kefa bowed deeply. "This official will not fail."

Far away, unseen—

Somewhere under the amused gaze of Dao Xuan Tianzun,

a very modern business model quietly entered the Ming Dynasty.

Chapter 510 Wang Guozhong Is Coming to Attack

July, Chongzhen Year Four.

Summer had fully settled in.

The Yellow River breeze, once cool and refreshing, now carried a dry heat that clung to the skin. Even the river itself looked languid, its surface shimmering lazily under the sun.

At Gudu Ferry, an utterly unthinkable sight was unfolding.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun—in puppet form—was crouched by the riverbank, flicking pebbles across the water.

Tap.

Skip.

Skip.

Skip—

Another stone skittered away in neat arcs.

Li Daoxuan seemed... pleased.

Nearby, villagers pretended not to stare. No one dared comment on the fact that a divine existence was clearly killing time like a bored kid.

Then—

Hooves thundered.

A horse burst into the water fortress at full gallop. The rider didn't even dismount before shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Disaster! Disaster! Wang Guozhong has been appointed Deputy Commander of Puzhou by the imperial court! He'll take office any day now!"

The shout hit the fortress like a dropped gong.

Villagers froze.

Militia heads snapped up.

Someone nearly dropped a basket of grain.

Within moments, Xing Honglang, Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng, and the rest were already striding toward the council hall, expressions tight.

Only Gao Chuwu remained behind.

He stared at the river, glanced at the Dao Xuan Tianzun, then bent down, picked up a stone, and carefully mimicked the puppet's motion.

Flick—

Skip.

Skip.

Skip.

The stone bounced three times before sinking.

Gao Chuwu clapped like a child who'd discovered fire. "Haha! Dao Xuan Tianzun, did you see that? Three skips!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Very good. Now go to the council hall."

Gao Chuwu blinked. "Huh? Why?"

"Because," Li Daoxuan said mildly, "Wang Guozhong is about to attack."

"...Huh?"

The words took a moment to land.

"...WHAT?!"

Gao Chuwu finally snapped awake.

Yongji belonged to Puzhou.

Gudu Ferry fell under Puzhou's jurisdiction.

If Wang Guozhong was now Deputy Commander of Puzhou, his arrival was only a matter of days.

He scooped up the Dao Xuan Tianzun, planted the puppet on his shoulder, and bolted for the council hall.

By the time he arrived, the meeting had already begun.

Xing Honglang stood at the head of the table, arms crossed, her tone sharp.

"Wang Guozhong betrayed Wang Jiayin and defected to Cao Wenzhao. The court rewarded him with the post of Deputy Commander of Puzhou. Puzhou City is less than thirty li from us. Once he's stationed there, it's impossible he won't notice Gudu Ferry."

She paused.

"He can attack us at any time."

Zao Ying followed up immediately. "The intelligence says he commands three thousand elite troops. Handpicked. Many are former border soldiers and garrison veterans. These aren't starving bandits. If they target our water fortress, it will be trouble."

Xing Honglang nodded. "We have a bookstore in Puzhou. Multiple merchants supply us through the city. And our salt from Xiao Lake must pass through Puzhou."

Her lips curled slightly. "If Wang Guozhong cuts that route, we'll be strangled."

Gao Chuwu listened, brow furrowing harder by the second.

Finally, he blurted, "Wait—he's just one traitor, right? Why don't we just kill him?"

The room fell silent.

Lao Nanfeng sighed and patted Gao Chuwu's shoulder like one might soothe a confused child.

"Killing him isn't difficult," he said gently. "The problem is what comes after."

He glanced around the table. "We've stayed hidden at the Shanxi–Shaanxi border. Quiet. Low-profile. That's why the court hasn't fixated on us like they did with Wang Jiayin."

He leaned closer. "If we openly strike an imperial deputy commander... that silence shatters. Then it's not Wang Guozhong we're facing—it's the full attention of the court."

Gao Chuwu finally understood.

They weren't afraid of Wang Guozhong.

They were afraid of becoming visible.

The room sank into heavy silence.

Instinctively, several people glanced toward the corner where the Dao Xuan Tianzun usually sat.

Outside the box—

Li Daoxuan was already scrolling.

A quick search confirmed everything.

Historically, after Wang Jiayin's death, Wang Guozhong was indeed appointed Deputy Commander of Puzhou. And once he donned official robes, he became more imperial than the empire itself.

Former rebel.

Newly loyal dog.

He spent years zealously suppressing peasant uprisings, currying favor, slaughtering former comrades without blinking.

He never defected again.

Until years later, when Li Guo, Li Zicheng's nephew, defeated him and executed him in Suide.

Which meant—

This was not someone who would conveniently switch sides again.

Li Daoxuan frowned.

Then—

"I've got it."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke.

Inside the box, every head snapped up.

"Send an envoy to Yang He," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "Tell him Xing Honglang wishes to accept imperial amnesty."

The room froze.

"...Huh?"

"Yang He will come personally to pacify her," Li Daoxuan continued. "On his way—Wang Guozhong must escort him."

A pause.

"Intercept Wang Guozhong. Defeat him."

Silence.

Then—

Lao Nanfeng burst out laughing. "Hahahaha! The Dao Xuan Tianzun truly enjoys toying with mortals! This move—clean, elegant, and perfectly aligned with court behavior."

Xing Honglang's eyes gleamed. "Excellent. Let's do it."

Meanwhile—

Supreme Commander Yang He was drowning in misery.

Every day brought new rebellions. Every night brought new headaches.

Pacification had become a cruel joke.

Shen Yikui was barely stable. Other pacified rebels rebelled again almost on schedule. Counties fell, petitions piled up, and the court demanded answers he didn't have.

His temples throbbed.

"Report!"

A subordinate rushed in. "A rugged man seeks audience. Claims to be a messenger from Xing Honglang of Yongji."

Yang He searched his memory. "...Ah. The salt smuggler. Small force. Never attacked cities. Never burned or looted."

He frowned. "Why would she contact me?"

The subordinate lowered his voice. "He was extremely polite. Possibly... seeking amnesty."

Yang He's fatigue evaporated.

"Seeking amnesty?" He laughed aloud. "Excellent! Truly excellent!"

He stood. "Bring him in immediately!"

The envoy entered—Old Zhu, weathered, sharp-eyed, respectful.

He bowed deeply. "Supreme Commander. My leader, Xing Honglang, wishes to abandon the dark path, accept an official post, and bring honor to her ancestors."

Yang He smiled like a man offered water in the desert.

"If Chieftain Xing is willing to reform," he said warmly, "how could I refuse?"

He turned sharply. "Prepare an escort! We go to Yongji!"

Then paused. "Notify Imperial Censor Wu Shen—have him bring funds and provisions—"

"No need," Old Zhu said smoothly. "My leader has traded salt for years. She has silver. No relief required."

Yang He nearly laughed in relief.

No resettlement funds.

No budget nightmare.

"Very well!" he declared. "We proceed with the pacification ceremony at once."

Far away—

Under the amused gaze of Dao Xuan Tianzun,

a loyal imperial butcher was about to walk straight into a carefully arranged ambush.

And he wouldn't even realize it.