

## Great Ming 521

### Chapter 521 The Arrival of Supreme Commander Yang He

The battlefield still stank of gunpowder.

Not the clean, sharp scent of fireworks—but the thick, choking bitterness that clung to the throat and refused to leave. Dust hung low in the air, mixed with smoke and the iron tang of blood.

Groups of defeated soldiers squatted on the ground in tight knots, hands clasped behind their heads, eyes hollow. Their weapons had already been confiscated and stacked neatly in the distance, forming grim little piles of surrendered violence.

Across the field, children ran like ants.

They darted between footprints and bloodstains, crouching, squinting, poking at clumps of grass and overturned stones. Whenever someone shouted—

"I found one!"

—others swarmed over.

Xing Honglang stood with her arms folded, watching.

She'd issued a simple order earlier: two copper coins for every lead bullet recovered.

That was all it took.

For children who normally counted a single copper as a treasure, this battlefield had turned into a gold mine.

Adults joined in too, though far fewer. Anyone with real strength had already been hired for heavier work—digging graves, dragging bodies, filling pits. That paid better.

Death, after all, always paid better.

"Report!"

A squad leader jogged up, fist to chest.

"Wang Guozhong has been executed. Confirmed dead." He swallowed. "Two hundred and thirteen fierce bandits killed in battle. Two thousand seven hundred and forty-six captured alive."

Xing Honglang nodded once. Calm. Clean.

"Process them the same way as last time," she said. "Able-bodied rebels go straight to the labor reform camp."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The man turned and ran.

As the dust settled, Xing Honglang's brow furrowed—just slightly.

"We didn't hand over a single captive to the court," she said quietly. "Every last one went to Gao Family Village. From the court's perspective, that's no different from killing them all."

She exhaled.

"When Yang He arrives... will this really pass cleanly?"

A head popped into view beside her.

Lao Nanfeng.

He looked far too relaxed for a man standing on a fresh battlefield.

"Boss Xing," he chuckled, "you still don't quite understand how the court thinks."

Xing Honglang glanced sideways. "Enlighten me."

"For a surrendered general like Wang Guozhong?" Lao Nanfeng waved his hand dismissively. "The court couldn't care less if he lived or died. He defected yesterday. He's disposable."

Xing Honglang blinked.

"And his three thousand men?" Lao Nanfeng continued. "Worthless. Worse than worthless—a burden. Feed them, pay them, watch them like hawks in case they rebel again. From the court's point of view, you didn't kill assets. You eliminated a headache."

A pause.

"Privately," he added with a grin, "they'll be delighted."

Xing Honglang frowned. "Privately isn't enough."

"Exactly." Lao Nanfeng nodded. "Which is why appearances matter. On the surface, we still need a story. A reason. That's where our move comes in—sending someone ahead to complain to Yang He first."

He smiled thinly.

"Accuse before being accused."

Realization dawned.

"So that's how it is," Xing Honglang murmured.

She straightened.

"Alright. Before Yang He arrives, hide the cannons. Most of the firelocks too. Leave only a few smoothbore bird-guns out in the open."

She paused, then beckoned.

"flat rabbit. Come here."

The flat rabbit trotted over, ears twitching, grin already loaded with mischief.

"What is it?" he asked brightly. "Need me to take credit for something again?"

"When Yang He arrives," Xing Honglang said, "Chuwu, Daniu, Lao Nanfeng, Zao Ying—all of them are staying out of sight."

flat rabbit froze. "Huh? Why me then?"

"They're not suitable."

"Not... suitable?" He puffed up. "Sister-in-law, that hurts."

"Lao Nanfeng looks like a government soldier even when he's asleep," Xing Honglang said flatly. "The others have lived in Gao Family Village too long. They're missing a certain... quality."

flat rabbit leaned forward eagerly. "Ah! The heroic, wandering aura of the jianghu?"

She sighed.

"No. The unique mix of ignorance and forced bravado you only see in bandits who've never left the mountains."

She looked him up and down.

"You're perfect."

flat rabbit stared.

"...That was not a compliment."

Yang He Arrives

A few days later—

Yang He arrived.

Not from the north, as expected, but by a wide, deliberate loop. From Xi'an Prefecture, eastward through Weinan, past Huayin and Mount Hua, then to Tongguan Pass. There, he boarded a vessel, crossed the Yellow River, and entered the southwestern edge of Shanxi.

Only then did he head north.

He did not go straight to Yongji Gudu Ferry.

Instead, he entered Puzhou City.

The arrival of the Supreme Commander of three border regions was an event that shook the ground. Over a thousand attendants poured into the city, banners fluttering, armor gleaming.

Prefect Qiu Qianfan nearly fainted.

He welcomed Yang He personally, hosted an extravagant reception, and treated every word from the Supreme Commander like an imperial decree.

Yang He accepted it all calmly.

But the moment he stepped into the city—

Something felt wrong.

The streets were... alive.

Thin, yes. Dry, yes. But not desperate.

No corpses by the roadside. No crowds clawing for scraps.

Yang He sipped his tea.

"Prefect Qiu," he said casually, "your Puzhou seems... well governed."

Qiu Qianfan bowed hastily. "Puzhou relies heavily on trade and crafts. Though the drought has harmed us, we fare slightly better than purely agricultural regions."

Yang He nodded, then set his cup down.

"On my way here," he said, "I heard rumors. About Yongji. About Xing Honglang... and Wang Guozhong."

Qiu Qianfan's expression twitched.

Yang He smiled faintly and waited.

After a moment, Qiu sighed.

"Xing Honglang has been stationed at Yongji Gudu Ferry for over a year," he began. "Since the third year of Chongzhen, when the Shaanxi bandits flooded into Shanxi."

Yang He's brows lifted. "A year? Why wasn't this reported?"

"It was," Qiu replied bitterly. "Repeatedly. But the Governor and the General-in-Chief were too busy chasing Wang Jiayin across the province. No one spared attention for a single water fortress."

"And in this year?" Yang He asked softly.

Qiu's voice lowered.

"She didn't harass the people. She destroyed Old Zhang Fei's bandit group. She brought grain. She hired locals, paid wages, built fortifications."

Yang He stared.

"That sounds less like a rebel," he said slowly, "and more like a magistrate."

Qiu hesitated, then added, "She's more salt smuggler than rebel. Puzhou has always been a hub for smugglers. Most are merchants at heart."

Yang He said nothing.

Suspicion flickered—but so did curiosity.

Finally, he asked, "And Wang Guozhong?"

Qiu exhaled.

"After he arrived... conflict was inevitable."

Outside, banners snapped in the wind.

History had already moved on.

And Yang He, whether he liked it or not, had arrived too late.

Chapter 522 He Was Taken Down by Xing Honglang

The instant Yang He mentioned Wang Guozhong's name, Prefect Qiu Qianfan's expression soured as if he'd bitten into a rotten date.

"Bah," he spat. "That rogue thug."

Yang He paused mid-sip, eyebrow lifting slightly.

"Oh? For you to speak so harshly, Prefect Qiu... what exactly did he do?"

Qiu Qianfan slapped the arm of his chair, temper finally unrestrained.

"Ever since Wang Guozhong set foot in Puzhou, nothing good has happened. He surrendered in Yangcheng County, got himself appointed Puzhou Deputy Commander by the court, and then marched in from the east like a plague of locusts."

He leaned forward, voice rising.

"Burning villages. Killing civilians. Looting openly. No different from common bandits."

Yang He's fingers tightened around his teacup.

"When ordinary bandits come," Qiu continued bitterly, "this official can at least organize local militias to resist. But him? He wears an official seal. His banner bears the court's name. What excuse do I have to oppose him?"

Qiu laughed humorlessly.

"Resist him, and suddenly I become the rebel."

Yang He's gaze darkened.

"If Lord Yang has time," Qiu went on, "take a walk through the eastern villages of Puzhou. You'll see it with your own eyes. Those places survived Old Zhang Fei without a scratch—but the moment Wang Guozhong arrived, several villages were burned to ash."

Yang He inhaled sharply.

So it was true.

This wasn't the first time he'd heard such stories. In fact, he'd heard far too many.

"Official bandits."

The phrase echoed in his mind like a curse.

Sometimes, once rebels were "pacified," they became worse than before. Ordinary rebels could be resisted; official bandits could not. To raise arms against them was treason by definition.

No wonder the memorials at court had been piling up.

No wonder his own name appeared more and more frequently—followed by accusations.

His political footing felt thinner by the day.

Qiu Qianfan continued relentlessly, clearly past the point of restraint.

"Xing Honglang has been stationed at Yongji for over a year without causing trouble. Wang Guozhong shows up and destroys villages in days. And then—"

He scoffed.

"The very first thing he does after entering Puzhou City is scream about attacking Xing Honglang's water fortress!"

Yang He's heart sank.

This matches the intelligence perfectly.

"And it didn't end there," Qiu said darkly. "He demanded my cooperation. Forced me to conscript civilians to build siege weapons for him. If I refused, I had every reason to believe he'd lead his troops into the city and loot it himself."

He clenched his fist.

"So I had no choice. I gathered laborers, built his siege engines... and earned the hatred of every family in the region."

Yang He exhaled slowly.

"Alas."

Behind him, a middle-aged man suddenly stepped forward, face rigid with anger.

"Father," the man said coldly, "I told you long ago—these rebels are not worth pacifying. They should all be wiped out."

This was Yang Sichang, Yang He's son.

Forty-three years old. Already deep in officialdom. Currently serving as Military Preparations Commissioner of Bazhou—though lately, he'd abandoned his post to follow his father.

Not out of duty.

Out of fear.

Fear that Yang He's career—and life—were approaching a cliff.

Unlike his father, Yang Sichang belonged firmly to the suppression-first faction. In his eyes, rebels existed for only one reason: to be eliminated.

Hearing of Wang Guozhong's atrocities, he could no longer stay silent.

Yang He shot him a sharp look.

"Suppress, suppress, suppress!" Yang He snapped. "Is that the only word in your head?"

Yang Sichang stiffened. "Suppressing rebels requires troops. We can negotiate peace with the Manchus, stabilize Liaodong, withdraw the elite forces, and then—"

Yang He laughed bitterly.

"You make it sound so easy. Do you think the Manchus are idiots? That they'll smile, shake hands, and politely wait while we redeploy?"

He leaned forward.

"The moment Liaodong troops withdraw, the Manchus will tear up the treaty and pour through the passes like floodwater."

Yang Sichang faltered. "Then... then we strike fast. Overwhelming force. Sweep the rebels clean."

Yang He sneered.

"And if they hide in Huanglong Mountain?"

"We surround it!" Yang Sichang replied quickly. "Ten-sided encirclement!"

Yang He's voice turned icy.

"And Liupan Mountain? The Qinling range? The Qilian Mountains? The Lüliang Mountains?"

Silence.

Qiu Qianfan cleared his throat loudly, eager to escape the argument.

"My lords," he said hurriedly, "perhaps we should return to the matter of Wang Guozhong."

Yang He waved a hand. "Yes. Continue."

Qiu Qianfan's lips curled into a grin he couldn't suppress.

"Well... he went to attack Xing Honglang."

He paused.

"And then—pfft—hahahahaha—he was taken down by Xing Honglang."

The prefect actually laughed out loud.

A dangerous thing to do, discussing a dead imperial officer.

But his stance couldn't have been clearer if he'd shouted it from the rooftops.

Yang He and Yang Sichang exchanged a long look.

After a moment, Yang He spoke carefully.

"Wang Guozhong... is already dead?"

"Yes," Qiu said cheerfully. "Many of Puzhou's people work at Gudu Ferry. They sent word days ago. Wang Guozhong attacked the water fortress and was utterly defeated. His remaining forces surrendered completely."

Yang Sichang rubbed his face.

"So... imperial troops lost to rebels, then surrendered to rebels again?"

He laughed weakly.

"That's rebellion squared."

Yang He shook his head.

"No matter. Xing Honglang already sent envoys seeking pacification. If Wang Guozhong's remnants are absorbed into her forces, it changes little."

He set his cup down.

"We pacify her again. That's all."

Yang Sichang nodded slowly. "...True."

Yang He turned to Qiu Qianfan.

"Have your people at Gudu Ferry send a message. Inform Xing Honglang that this official has arrived in Puzhou City. If she truly wishes to surrender, she should come here."

He paused, then added with measured gravity:

"I will host the surrender banquet personally."

Qiu bowed deeply and withdrew at once.

Within the box, Li Daoxuan watched as over two thousand surrendered troops were escorted into the Labor Reform Camp.

Orderly. Efficient. No chaos. No harm to his tiny people.

Only after confirming everything was under control did he shift his view back to Gudu Ferry.

Just in time to see Qiu Qianfan's envoy deliver the message.

Xing Honglang listened calmly.

Then nodded.

Surrender was surrender. This had always been part of Dao Xuan Tianzun's plan.

Through surrender, her forces would enter the imperial system.

With Wang Xiaohua (Bai Mao), Shi Jian, and now Xing Honglang, Gao Family Village would have three separate footholds inside the court.

A web, slowly tightening.

Still, Gao Chuwu frowned slightly.

"What if Yang He sets an ambush?" he asked quietly. "Two hundred ax-men in the tent, like Hong Chengchou did back then?"

Before anyone could respond—

A familiar, calm voice echoed.

"Don't worry."

Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke.

"I will go with you."

And just like that, fear retreated.

Chapter 523 Accepting Pacification

Li Daoxuan's field of vision spread like a silent tide, radiating outward from Gao Family Village.

Sixty-five kilometers.

Not a poetic number. Not round. But comfortable—the kind of range that didn't strain the mind or blur the edges. Enough to swallow Puzhou City whole and still have room to breathe.

Puzhou.

If Gao Family Village was a chessboard, this city was the hinge. The gate that decided whether Shanxi would open its doors... or slam them shut.

Right now, Gao Family Village had three nails hammered into Shanxi's map.

The first was Gudu Ferry, where Xing Honglang's banner fluttered over the river like a warning flag no one dared test.

The second was Dragon Gate Ferry, including the Yellow River bridge—Shi Jian's domain. A sharp point, useful, but fragile.

The third was Pinelyang Prefecture, where Wang Xiaohua—also known as Bai Mao—had been slotted into the court's vast, indifferent machinery.

And that third nail? Barely stuck.

Pinelyang was too far. Too crowded with old families, veteran officials, and smiling knives. Wang Xiaohua's position there was thin as rice paper. One imperial document, one careless reassignment, and he'd be gone without a sound.

Dragon Gate wasn't much better. Shi Jian was still just a minor commander under Wang Cheng'en in Shaanxi. Same problem. Same leash.

But Xing Honglang?

She was different.

The court didn't know what to do with people like her.

Former bandit chiefs were inconvenient. Dangerous. And deeply unfashionable to move around. Once pacified, the court preferred to nail them to the ground with a title, grant them a banner, and pray they stayed quiet.

If she settled somewhere and didn't rebel again, the capital would clap politely and look the other way.

If she caused trouble in the countryside? Well—civil officials would submit a few memorials, ink would be spilled, voices raised... and nothing would happen.

That was the unspoken rule.

Which meant one thing:

If Xing Honglang could plant herself in Puzhou City, then this city would become Gao Family Village's land.

Solid. Central. Irreplaceable.

Li Daoxuan's gaze followed her.

The road to Puzhou City was alive with hoofbeats.

Xing Honglang rode at the front, her posture straight, reins steady. Behind her followed a small escort—twelve cavalymen, disciplined, quiet.

And beside her mount rode Flat Rabbit.

Not literally beside. He was riding. Somewhat.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun's puppet sat cross-legged on Flat Rabbit's shoulder, wooden limbs clacking softly with each sway of the horse.

"Remember," the puppet said, voice light, almost casual, "Puzhou City. Dig your heels in. If you can secure the position of garrison commander here, that's the best outcome."

Xing Honglang inclined her head from horseback, hands clasped. A martial salute, crisp and clean.

"Understood."

No bravado. No hesitation.

They urged their horses forward.

Thirty li vanished beneath pounding hooves.

Puzhou City rose ahead.

The city walls loomed tall, banners snapping in the wind—bright, orderly, imperial. Soldiers lined the ramparts in proper armor, not the mismatched gear of frontier levies.

And standing at the highest point—

A familiar silhouette.

Broad-shouldered. Arms folded. Expression like thunder refusing to break.

Flat Rabbit squinted.

"...That's him."

Xing Honglang didn't need to ask.

He Renlong.

He the Madman.

The man who had once escorted three thousand surrendered bandits straight into Gao Family Village—  
and lived to tell the tale.

This time, he commanded a thousand regulars. Personal guard to Yang He, Supreme Commander of Shaanxi's three border regions.

Flat Rabbit swallowed.

Quietly.

Very quietly.

"I heard," he muttered, leaning closer, "that when Hong Chengchou hosted a pacification banquet and slaughtered Miao Mei and Liu Liu... He Renlong was the one who swung the blade."

Xing Honglang's voice was low. "That story's spread through the jianghu."

Flat Rabbit's ears—if he had real ones—would've flattened.

"So... hypothetically," he said, forcing a laugh, "when we drink this pacification wine later... he's not going to jump out with two hundred axemen and turn us into historical footnotes, right?"

The puppet chuckled. Wooden joints rattled.

"Where's your My Heaven Rabbit-Rending Overlord Sword?" the Dao Xuan Tianzun asked. "If he tries anything, just cut him down in one strike."

Flat Rabbit's smile froze.

"Of course!" he said loudly. "This—this rabbit's Overlord Sword is unmatched! It doesn't kill nobodies. A famed military scholar like He the Madman is exactly the kind of opponent worthy of my blade!"

By the end of the sentence, his face had turned faintly green.

He knew his own skill.

Defeating He Renlong?

In his dreams. And even there, he'd probably trip.

"Hahaha," the Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed. "Cowardly Rabbit. With me here, what are you afraid of?"

Flat Rabbit hissed back, "You're possessing a puppet! That thing doesn't exactly scream 'combat-ready.'"

Xing Honglang glanced upward. "Look."

Flat Rabbit did.

A low cloud hovered directly above them—unmoving, heavy, wrong in a way that made the skin prickle.

His heart leapt.

"So... the Dao Xuan Tianzun himself is here."

Confidence flooded back into his limbs like cheap wine.

By the time the realization settled, they were already at the city gates.

He Renlong's gaze was sharp. Hostile. He snorted.

"Open the gates."

The massive doors groaned apart.

Xing Honglang dismounted first, calm and composed. Flat Rabbit followed, reins in hand, posture deliberately sloppy.

He Renlong descended the steps beside the gate, eyes flicking over them like weighing stones.

"Xing Honglang of Yongji," he said. "Supreme Commander Yang has been waiting. Follow me."

Xing Honglang clasped her hands. "I am honored beyond measure that the Supreme Commander would personally host this pacification banquet. This humble woman is deeply grateful."

Flat Rabbit clicked his tongue under his breath.

"Ugh. Officials. Always with the mouthfuls of air."

He Renlong didn't hear the words—but he saw the expression.

"And you?" He Renlong asked, eyes narrowing. "Who might this be?"

Xing Honglang answered smoothly. "Flat Rabbit. My general."

He Renlong snorted. "That name fits."

His gaze dropped to the sword at Flat Rabbit's waist. The corner of his mouth twitched.

A sword.

On a battlefield.

Flat Rabbit exploded.

"Hey! What's that look supposed to mean? You glance at my ancestral treasure and curl your lip—are you looking down on this Master Rabbit's swordsmanship?"

He Renlong laughed. Loudly.

Then stopped.

"If Supreme Commander Hong were here," he said coldly, "I'd have already taken your head. Be sincere in this surrender. If you rebel again, I'll personally test whether that sword of yours can save you."

Flat Rabbit froze.

Then puffed up again. "Hmph!"

Inside, he was already writing his will.

But the effect was perfect.

This was Flat Rabbit's gift.

Looking harmless. Loud. Foolish.

The kind of man no one bothered to truly guard against.

No one else in Gao Family Village could pull it off.

They crossed the city.

Ahead, the prefectural office square had been cleared. A raised platform stood there—half altar, half execution stage.

A wine table waited at its center.

Yang He stood behind it, robes immaculate. Qiu Qianfan and several officials flanked him, faces unreadable.

Formalities followed.

Greetings.

Pleasantries.

Sacrificial rites.

Cup after cup of wine.

Words that meant nothing said in tones that meant everything.

Finally—finally—they reached the real matter.

Yang He sighed, face heavy with concern.

"General Xing," he said, "now that you have accepted pacification, you are a valued general of the imperial court. However..."

He paused.

"...your future place of settlement has yet to be determined. You see, the national treasury is... experiencing a slight difficulty."

The air tightened.

The game had begun.

Chapter 524 Turning Them All Into Workers

Yang He's opening remarks landed exactly where everyone expected them to.

Not because he was predictable as a person—no, the man was far too experienced for that—but because the system itself was predictable.

Pacification banquets always followed the same script.

First came courtesy.

Then concern.

Then a long, mournful sigh about the national treasury.

Xing Honglang had heard this tune before.

She lowered her head slightly, posture respectful, expression mild—just enough humility to pass inspection, not enough to look weak.

"Lord Yang," she said softly, "this humble servant dares to make a small request."

Yang He's brows drew together at once.

Here it comes, he thought.

Pacified rebels never failed to ask for something. Land. Titles. Grain. Silver. Troops. Women. Horses. Sometimes all of the above, with interest.

What worried him wasn't the request itself.

It was whether he could afford it.

Xing Honglang continued, voice calm and unhurried. "Everyone in the jianghu knows that I, Xing Honglang, come from Yongji. Now that I have entered imperial service, it is only natural that I wish to return home in glory."

A pause—just enough to let the words settle.

"I humbly ask the court to grant me the post of Puzhou Garrison Commander. From there, I will station my troops to guard my homeland, suppress disorder, and maintain peace. Would that not be a fitting arrangement?"

Yang He's expression didn't change—but his thoughts churned.

The request itself wasn't outrageous.

The position could be granted.

But the timing?

The former Puzhou Deputy Commander—Wang Guozhong—had been killed mere days ago.

By her.

And now she wanted the post overseeing the very same city.

From any angle, it smelled strange.

Did she kill him specifically for this seat?

The suspicion flickered briefly in Yang He's mind.

Then Xing Honglang spoke again.

"Moreover," she added casually, "Your Excellency knows my origins. I was once a salt smuggler. Trade is my specialty. My followers are accustomed to earning their own living. We will not require a single copper coin from the court for resettlement."

The effect was immediate.

Yang He's eyes lit up.

The suspicion evaporated like mist under sunlight.

Money, he thought. She doesn't want money.

Who cared about motives if the treasury was spared?

Whether she killed Wang Guozhong for revenge, territory, or ambition—none of it mattered.

As long as she didn't ask him for silver.

"Excellent!" Yang He said at once, slapping the table. "Then it is settled."

As Supreme Commander of the Three Borders, his authority was immense. Appointing a garrison commander didn't require endless memorials or debates. A stroke of the brush would do.

He was just about to add a few ceremonial words of praise—

When chaos crashed in from the outside.

Hooves thundered.

A lone rider burst through the city gates at full speed, horse foaming, rider half-dead with panic. He barely managed to dismount before collapsing to his knees.

"Lord Yang!" the man gasped. "Disaster! Grave disaster! Shen Yikui has rebelled again! Ningze County City has fallen!"

Yang He's heart dropped.

Shen Yikui.

The most dangerous rebel still active in Shaanxi.

Large numbers. Hardened troops. Many of them former border soldiers—men who knew formations, discipline, and how to kill efficiently.

Yang He had pacified him before leaving.

And now—this.

He exhaled heavily. "What fresh madness is he stirring up?"

"I don't know, Your Excellency," the messenger said rapidly, "but Ningze County has already been taken. If troops aren't dispatched immediately, the surrounding regions will be ravaged again."

Yang He's fingers tightened.

"And Du Wenhuan?" he asked. "Where is he?"

An attendant leaned in, voice low. "Lord Yang... when Shen Yikui slaughtered Du Wenhuan's entire clan, you chose pacification over vengeance. Du Wenhuan was furious. He no longer obeys your orders."

Silence fell.

It stretched.

Then stretched some more.

Finally, Yang He spoke again. "Cao Wenzhao?"

A subordinate stepped forward. "General Cao is currently pursuing Wang Jiayin's remnants south of Jinyang."

"Order him to stop," Yang He said decisively. "Wang Jiayin is dead. His remnants are insignificant. Let them scatter."

He paused, then added, "Recall Cao Wenzhao at once. Have him return to Shaanxi to deal with Shen Yikui."

"Yes, sir!"

The subordinate departed at a run.

Yang He turned back to Xing Honglang, forcing a smile that barely held together.

"General Xing," he said, "you've heard everything. Affairs of state wait for no one. You must never follow Shen Yikui's example—turning fickle after pacification."

His tone hardened slightly. "Remain loyal to the court, and you will be treated with honor."

He cupped his hands briefly. "I must return to Shaanxi immediately. For any remaining matters, please consult Magistrate Qiu."

With that, Yang He mounted up and left in a hurry, He Renlong riding beside him like a drawn blade.

Dust swallowed their departure.

Xing Honglang and Flat Rabbit stared at each other.

"...That was fast," Flat Rabbit said.

Xing Honglang nodded slowly. "Too fast."

Before either could speak further, Magistrate Qiu Qianfan approached, face warm, hands clasped.

"General Xing," he said with genuine enthusiasm, "from today onward, we govern this territory together—one civil, one military. I trust we'll rely on each other often."

His tone was nothing like how he'd treated Wang Guozhong.

That man had inspired fear, resentment, and suppressed rage.

Xing Honglang inspired... relief.

As you sow, so shall you reap.

Those who burn villages earn curses.

Those who feed mouths earn allies.

Xing Honglang returned the bow. "Mutual support, then."

Magistrate Qiu leaned closer, voice dropping. "I've made inquiries," he said conspiratorially. "I hear you're running a textile factory at the dock?"

She smiled. "Yes."

"Well!" he said eagerly. "Why keep it there? Puzhou City has far more people. Labor is abundant. You could employ thousands."

Xing Honglang laughed softly. "Careful, Lord Qiu. I might take you up on that."

He beamed. "Please do! These refugees are driving me mad. If you can take them all into your factories, I'll sleep better at night."

Her voice dropped even lower. "This old woman has... ambitions. Cement plants. Fertilizer works. Mines. Foundries. Carpentry shops. Kilns. I was a salt smuggler, after all—I love making money."

She smiled thinly. "Ideally, every person in this city would be working for me."

Magistrate Qiu's eyes nearly shone.

"Excellent! Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Build whatever you like. Mine, quarry, smelt—everything approved. No crops grow these days. The people have no work. They stare at me waiting for gruel—but I can barely feed myself!"

He spread his hands. "If you can pay wages, take them all. Open arms. Open legs."

They shared a quiet laugh.

And just like that, an unspoken pact was sealed.

The people of Puzhou didn't know it yet.

But a specter had arrived.

Not famine.

Not war.

Not rebellion.

Labor.

When it finally seized them, they felt no pain.

Only relief.

For all its flaws, capitalism was still kinder than starvation.

Far to the south of Jinyang.

Deep in the tangled wilderness of Shennong Mountain.

Li Zicheng ran.

Behind him lay shattered banners, scattered armor, and the broken remnants of his famed Old Eighth Squad—men who had followed him from Mizhi, men forged in blood and hunger.

They had met Cao Wenzhao's Guanning Iron Cavalry.

And they had been crushed.

One charge.

That was all it took.

Steel thundered through their ranks like a storm through dry grass. The Old Eighth Squad broke, helmets abandoned, weapons dropped, men fleeing in every direction.

Li Zicheng barely escaped into the mountains.

But Cao Wenzhao did not stop.

The iron cavalry followed relentlessly.

The hunt had only just begun.

Chapter 525 Puzhou Cotton

Li Zicheng dragged his men up a low hill—then stopped.

They couldn't go any farther.

Every single person behind him was bent double, gasping like fish hauled onto dry land. Some collapsed outright, faces pressed into the dirt, limbs twitching from exhaustion.

Since Wang Jiayin's death, the once-massive rebel host had shattered like a dropped bowl. Bands scattered in every direction, each trying to save itself. Government troops pursued them mercilessly, and Cao Wenzhao—perhaps bored, perhaps unlucky—had picked one target at random.

That target was Li Zicheng.

From that moment on, the chase never stopped.

Day after day, Cao Wenzhao's Guanning cavalry pressed closer, forcing Li Zicheng to flee without pause. There was no time to raid villages, no chance to seize grain. Their provisions dwindled until there was nothing left but dry mouths and hollow stomachs.

Without food, strength drained away.

Without strength, even running became agony.

Li Zicheng looked down the slope.

Below, Cao Wenzhao's troops were regrouping, clearly preparing to push into the mountains and finish the hunt.

Li Zicheng let out a long, bitter sigh.

"I never thought," he said hoarsely, "that I Li Zicheng would die in a place like this."

At that moment, a rider burst from the rear of Cao Wenzhao's formation, galloping hard. He plunged straight into the command group.

Not long after—

The government troops stopped.

They didn't advance.

They turned.

And they left.

Li Zicheng froze. "...What?"

His nephew, Li Guo, poked his head out from behind a boulder. His eyes widened—then lit up like lanterns.

"Uncle! They're retreating!" he shouted. "Cao Wenzhao is pulling back! We're saved! Hahaha—we're saved!"

The mountaintop exploded with sound.

The remnants of the Old Eighth Squad cheered, laughed, cried. Some wept openly. A few tried to dance—managed two steps—then collapsed again, too weak to stand.

Li Zicheng watched the dust trail fade as Cao Wenzhao's forces disappeared.

He exhaled slowly.

"Another rebel force must have caused serious trouble," he said. "Something big enough to force Cao Wenzhao to turn back."

He paused, eyes darkening.

"As the saying goes—tall trees draw the strongest winds. The louder you are, the faster the government notices you."

He looked at the men around him.

"Remember this. Our Old Eighth Squad survives by keeping its head down. Quiet. Careful. Never be the loudest."

"It's raining! It's raining!"

Inside Puzhou City, a farmer burst through the western gate, face wild with disbelief, screaming at the refugees crowding the streets.

"It's raining in the west! Real rain!"

For a heartbeat, hope flared—then died.

"Impossible," someone muttered.

The drought had lasted too long. People no longer believed rain existed.

Then another man ran in.

Then another.

One after another, voices rose.

"It's raining in the west!"

This time, disbelief broke.

Refugees who had been begging for food surged toward the western gate, pouring out of the city like a flood in reverse.

Puzhou had always been famous for one thing:

Cotton.

The Puzhou Prefecture Gazetteer recorded it plainly:

"When floods do not linger and the river holds its course, the land yields abundant warm fibers."

In good years, cotton here was gold.

But the drought had strangled the fields for so long that cotton had vanished from memory.

Now, with rain falling at last, farmers rejoiced like madmen. They ran for home, for fields, for hoes—ignoring seasons, logic, and exhaustion. Even scratching the soil felt like hope.

Along the edge of the fields, under a light drizzle, came an unusual procession.

Two strong porters carried a sedan chair. Resting against its poles sat a man dressed as a scholar. Behind them followed several carts, carefully covered with oilcloth.

The farmers froze.

A scholar.

A sedan chair.

Servants.

An esteemed gentleman.

Such people were trouble.

Farmers lowered their heads, hands clasped, hearts pounding. If the sedan passed, all was well. If it stopped—

It stopped.

The chair halted directly before them.

Fear rippled through the group.

"E-esteemed sir..." one farmer stammered. "D-do you... need something?"

The man spoke gently.

"I ride in a sedan not because I am noble," he said, "but because my health is poor. Walking too much leaves me breathless. These men are merely helping me."

He smiled faintly.

"Do not call me 'sir.' My name is Zhao Sheng. 'Mr. Zhao' will do."

The farmers didn't believe a word of it.

But when great men lied, small people listened.

"Mr. Zhao," they said hurriedly.

Zhao Sheng gestured to the fields. "I hear this area is famous for cotton. These are cotton fields, yes?"

"Yes," they replied.

He glanced at the sky. "It's autumn now. Can cotton still be planted?"

The farmers shook their heads. "Cotton is best planted in April. This rain came too late. We're just... happy. Scratching the soil feels better than nothing."

Zhao Sheng nodded.

Despite his scholar's robe, he clearly understood farming. Years of travel, of working with peasants, had left him with more practical knowledge than most officials ever gained.

He smiled.

"Have you heard this rhyme?" he asked.

Plow deep in winter's cold embrace,

Cotton next year will fill the place.

Irrigate when frost still lies,

Planting comes with little price.

Winter plow and water deep—

Few pests, rich cotton yours to keep.

The farmers blinked. "We... haven't heard it. But we know some of what it says."

Zhao Sheng nodded. "Experience without method," he said mildly. "That's common."

He continued calmly, "I know techniques that can greatly increase your cotton yield next year."

The farmers exchanged glances.

Suspicion lingered.

Zhao Sheng chuckled. "Let's do this properly. I'll sign contracts with you. You farm using my methods."

He raised one finger.

"If your harvest next year doesn't match your usual income, I will compensate you."

Another finger.

"If it exceeds your usual yield, all cotton will be sold to me—at fair market price."

The farmers' hearts raced.

No loss.

Only gain.

Still... trust?

As doubt flickered, Zhao Sheng spoke again.

"We can go to Pujiu Temple," he said. "Let Master Zhan Seng serve as guarantor. We sign before the Buddha."

That ended the discussion.

"Agreed!" the farmers said in unison.

Under the falling rain, contracts were born—

and with them, the future of Puzhou Cotton.

Chapter 526 Gao Yiye Arrives

With Pujiu Temple's senior monk personally acting as guarantor, Zhao Sheng's contracts spread faster than wildfire.

Within days, cotton farmers from every village west of Puzhou City came knocking. One family, then two, then entire hamlets signed their names—or pressed muddy thumbprints—onto neatly prepared agreements.

What followed was nothing less than a new agricultural movement, though no one dared call it that aloud.

Fields were torn open for winter plowing.

Canals were dredged for winter irrigation.

Manure piles were hauled out and spread as winter fertilizer.

From above, the countryside west of Puzhou looked alive again—dark earth overturned, rainwater pooling in furrows, farmers laughing as they worked. The drought had not just ended; it had been beaten back.

The east, however, remained gray and silent.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's gaze had not yet reached that side. No rain fell there. Not a single drop.

Eastern farmers stood at the boundary, staring westward as if watching another world. Their throats tightened with envy and despair.

They didn't know—couldn't know—that as the western farmers were saved, faint motes of light rose from their bodies. One by one, those lights drifted upward, slipping quietly into the diorama box.

And with each light absorbed—

The box's field of view expanded.

Slowly.

Gently.

Relentlessly.

Soon, the eastern lands came into Li Daoxuan's sight.

He spoke calmly.

"Dragon Kings of the Four Seas,"

"heed my call."

Rain fell.

Not violently, not dramatically—just enough. Enough to soak the dust, to darken the soil, to make seeds dream again.

All of Puzhou breathed.

Farmers east and west alike threw themselves into work with renewed fervor, as if afraid the rain might change its mind.

And at that very moment—

A massive warship from Gao Family Village docked at Gudu Ferry.

Planks were lowered.

A figure stepped onto Shanxi soil.

Gao Yiye wore white robes trimmed with crimson patterns, jewelry catching the light with every movement. She walked as if the land itself had prepared for her arrival.

Behind her came Qiu Ju and Dong Xue, composed and sharp-eyed.

At her side—one step back—stood Zheng Gouzi, hand never far from his weapon.

Before anyone could speak, a familiar voice burst out laughing.

"Gouzi! Gouzi!"

Flat Rabbit came bounding forward, grinning ear to ear. "You're finally here! I swear, things just feel incomplete when you're not around."

Zheng Gouzi shot him a look. "Your first words should be greeting the Saintess."

Gao Yiye laughed softly. "Oh, don't be like that. I hate formalities."

Flat Rabbit slapped his thigh. "See? Even the Saintess says you're too stiff."

Zheng Gouzi snorted, then couldn't help laughing as well.

Flat Rabbit turned to Gao Yiye. "So—what brings you all the way to Shanxi this time?"

Gao Yiye puffed out her cheeks slightly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun said Puzhou is famous for cotton. Prime quality, famous across the Central Plains."

She clasped her hands behind her back. "We need to secure the supply, establish plantations, and relocate parts of the textile industry here."

Flat Rabbit blinked. "Huh? But Gao Family Village always has cotton, doesn't it? The village stores are basically bottomless. No matter how much we... borrow."

The word borrow landed like a pebble.

Gao Yiye's cheeks turned pink.

Everyone knew.

Dao Xuan Tianzun knew.

Thirty-Two knew.

Tan Liwen knew.

As inventory records grew more detailed, her "borrowing" had become impossible to hide. And yet—

Every missing bolt of cotton was quietly replenished.

Every ledger balanced itself as if by miracle.

Thirty-Two would report the deficit.

Dao Xuan Tianzun would silently provide more.

No scolding.

No lectures.

Just indulgence.

Enough to make anyone blush.

Qiu Ju cleared her throat sharply. "The cotton in the village stores is a divine blessing from Dao Xuan Tianzun. Relying on it forever is irresponsible."

She fixed Flat Rabbit with a glare. "The Dao Xuan Tianzun has decreed that from now on, cotton must be self-sustained. He should not be burdened with endlessly sending cotton down from the heavens."

She gestured westward. "That's why Puzhou matters."

Flat Rabbit stuck out his tongue. "Got it, got it. So the Saintess is here to manage cotton and textiles?"

Gao Yiye waved her hands. "Oh no, no. I'm terrible at that."

She smiled and looked at Qiu Ju. "She's in charge. I'm just here to keep her company."

Of the four secretaries brought from Chengcheng County—

Chun Hong now oversaw the Heavenly Fabric Manor, coordinating hundreds of women across multiple industries.

Xia Yu remained in Chengcheng, organizing embroidery workshops that extracted silver from Xi'an's gentry with surgical precision.

Now, Qiu Ju was stepping forward as well.

And Gao Yiye—who treated all four like sisters—was never going to let her stand alone.

Zheng Gouzi nudged Flat Rabbit. "Now that the Saintess is here, it's time you stop slacking and return to your post."

Flat Rabbit grinned and moved into position beside him.

Two guards.

One step behind.

With Gao Yiye at the front, two women attendants following, and a hundred armed soldiers marching in disciplined ranks, the procession entering Puzhou City was overwhelming.

Zhao Sheng looked like a country gentleman by comparison—respectable, but modest.

Gao Yiye?

She looked like the wife of a top-ranking grand minister.

When Magistrate Qiu Qianfan received the report, his heart nearly stopped.

He rushed out of the yamen, then froze, watching from afar.

"Who is that woman?" he muttered. "Where did she come from? And why is that fellow from Xing Honglang's camp—Rabbit, was it?—serving as her guard?"

He frowned. "He's an imperial officer now. What decorum is this?"

A subordinate whispered, "If she's the wife of an even higher official, it makes sense. Look at her bearing. Second-rank consort, at least."

Qiu Qianfan's eyes widened. "No... first-rank."

He straightened his robes and hurried forward.

"Greetings, Madam," he said deeply. "This humble official is Qiu Qianfan, Magistrate of Puzhou. May I ask—who might you be?"

Gao Yiye smiled. "I am of the Li clan of Longxi."

Qiu Qianfan's soul nearly left his body.

"The Li clan of Longxi?! That Li clan?! Impossible—there are still descendants?!"

He looked again at the entourage.

...No.

It wasn't impossible.

His gaze snapped to Flat Rabbit.

Flat Rabbit chuckled. "The Li clan has long done business with our Boss Xing—ah, pardon me, General Xing. A major partner in Shaanxi."

He shrugged. "She's here to travel. And do a bit of business."

Qiu Qianfan finally understood. "Ah!"

Flat Rabbit added cheerfully, "Didn't you tell General Xing to build factories, expand trade, and employ refugees?"

He grinned. "Congratulations. All of that just arrived."

Qiu Qianfan's expression changed completely.

So that was it.

Not trouble.

Not danger.

The God of Wealth had walked straight into Puzhou City.

Chapter 527 Will You Sell Me Your Factory?

Qiu Qianfan very decisively abandoned his own work.

After all, as Magistrate of Puzhou, his official duty was to improve the people's livelihood. And this woman before him—this Lady Li—was practically a walking embodiment of prosperity itself.

Staying close to her was not dereliction of duty.

It was public service.

So Qiu Qianfan walked beside Gao Yiye with a broad smile, personally acting as her guide.

"Lady Li, please take a look," he said, gesturing ahead. "That textile factory over there is the finest one in all of Puzhou. It has more than fifty looms—on par with factories in Jiangnan."

He sighed theatrically. "It's just a pity... for the past two years, there's been no cotton to process. The factory's been idle ever since. Still, the looms are intact. Next year, once cotton becomes available again, the owner need only clean them, and production can resume immediately."

Gao Yiye nodded faintly and followed him inside.

The factory owner stood nearby, back bent slightly, smiling so hard his face looked stiff.

Two years without production had drained him dry. His savings were gone, his business hanging by a thread, and his hair had turned noticeably grayer. Yet in front of the Magistrate—and a lady whose wealth and status were impossible to gauge—he didn't dare show even a hint of bitterness.

He smiled.

And smiled.

And smiled—

Until Gao Yiye spoke.

"These looms," she said calmly, glancing around, "are far too outdated."

The factory owner's smile froze.

"The technology is at least one generation behind," Gao Yiye continued. "Their efficiency is unacceptable."

"...!"

The man swallowed hard.

Gao Yiye turned to him. "How many textile factories like this exist in the city? And how many looms in total?"

The owner answered quickly, "Only mine is this large. The others are smaller. Altogether, the city probably has six or seven hundred looms."

Gao Yiye asked again, "Would that be enough during a bumper cotton harvest?"

The owner hesitated, then answered honestly. "If it's a bumper year, it would be... strained. But if it's an ordinary harvest, six or seven hundred looms would be sufficient."

Gao Yiye smiled.

"Sir," she said gently, "your factory doesn't seem to be doing very well."

The owner forced another smile. "Y-Yes..."

"Why not sell it to us?" Gao Yiye continued. "Although Puzhou has finally received rain, it's still autumn. Cotton won't be planted until March or April next year, and it will take at least another six months to harvest."

She tilted her head slightly. "Which means this factory will sit idle for another year."

Her words were clear, reasonable, and spoken right in front of the Magistrate.

No tricks.

No pressure.

The factory owner barely hesitated before nodding vigorously. "Alright!"

Contracts were drawn up on the spot. Silver changed hands.

Just like that, the textile factory changed ownership.

The new owner: Qiu Ju.

Watching from the side, Qiu Qianfan couldn't help but marvel.

She didn't even put her own name on the deed, he thought. She bought a factory of this size and gave it to a maid to manage.

This could only mean one thing.

A textile factory isn't even worth writing her name on.

The former owner clutched his silver and left, practically floating with relief.

Gao Yiye turned to Qiu Ju with a warm smile. "Well, now you're rooted here. I'll miss you when you're no longer by my side."

Qiu Ju smiled back, though her eyes were a little wistful. "I'll miss you too, my lady. At least Dong Xue will still be with you."

Gao Yiye laughed softly. "Now that you have a factory, what's your plan?"

Qiu Ju didn't hesitate. "First, I'll calculate the production efficiency of these old looms. Then I'll compare it to the output of our new-style looms."

She continued calmly, "That way, I can estimate how many new looms we'll need once next year's cotton yield doubles. Before next year arrives, I'll commission carpenters to build them."

Qiu Qianfan's heart jumped.

Doubling cotton yield?

Where does that confidence come from?

He opened his mouth, intending to caution them against reckless investment—

But Dong Xue spoke first, smiling. "Sister Qiu, where will you order the new looms? Shipping them from Shaanxi will be troublesome."

Qiu Ju waved a hand. "Then we won't ship them."

She said it as if discussing the weather. "We'll bring a few senior master carpenters from back home, open a large carpentry workshop right here in Puzhou, and have them train apprentices."

Qiu Qianfan's breath caught.

A carpentry workshop... as support?

Qiu Ju continued, "We'll need at least one or two hundred carpenters. There will be many more things to build in the future."

Dong Xue nodded eagerly. "And we'll need porters, loggers, and blacksmiths. Looms aren't just wood—there are iron parts too. Someone has to make those."

Qiu Qianfan closed his mouth.

At this point, advising them would be pointless.

How many industries will this one textile factory stimulate? he thought.

As Magistrate, he could not—must not—interfere with something that would benefit so many people.

Fine, he decided. Spend all you want. Whether you profit or lose is none of my concern. The people of Puzhou come first.

Just as he reached that conclusion—

A bailiff rushed in, shouting, "Magistrate! Terrible news! There's been an accident at the Jiguanshan Iron Mine near Shuiyukou! The mine shaft collapsed—over fifty miners are trapped inside!"

Qiu Qianfan's face went pale.

"Oh no! Quickly—organize men to dig them out!"

The Jiguanshan Iron Mine was Puzhou's most important source of iron. Its surface deposits were shallow by mining standards—but still deep enough to swallow lives whole.

Centuries of digging had turned it into a labyrinth beneath the earth.

A collapse like this meant only one thing.

Even in modern times, survival would be unlikely.

In this era?

It was a death sentence.

Though Qiu Qianfan spoke of rescue, in his heart he had already given up hope.

Gao Yiye frowned.

Then she heard a faint, familiar voice from near her left collarbone.

"Let's go save them."

She looked down at the embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun, stitched close to her skin.

She nodded.

Raising her head, she said to Qiu Qianfan, "Magistrate, where exactly is the Jiguanshan Iron Mine? I'd like to go see if we can help."

Qiu Qianfan shook his head immediately. "The mine has collapsed. The area is extremely dangerous. Lady Li, you shouldn't go."

Gao Yiye gestured calmly toward the hundred armed guards behind her.

"I have manpower," she said. "Perhaps we can still do something."

Chapter 528 Clear the Way — We're Here to Rescue

Seeing that this noblewoman clearly had no intention of being persuaded, Qiu Qianfan stopped wasting breath.

If someone insists on walking into danger, at least give them good directions.

"The Jiguanshan Iron Mine at Shuiyukou isn't far," he said. "Five li southwest of the city. Exit through the South Gate, follow the earthen official road, walk five li, climb a small slope, and you'll reach it."

After saying that, he turned and hurried back to the Prefectural Yamen.

There was no time to lose. Whether the miners could still be saved or not, the mine itself had to be reopened. It was a government-owned iron mine—centuries old, vital to Puzhou. A single collapse couldn't be allowed to bury it forever.

Orders were issued immediately: organize civilian laborers, prepare tools, re-excavate the mine.

Meanwhile, Gao Yiye exited the textile factory.

Outside, a carriage had already been prepared. She and her two maids climbed inside without hesitation. Behind them, more than a hundred guards mounted their horses in practiced silence.

The moment the carriage lurched forward, the entire procession broke into a gallop, racing toward Shuiyukou.

Five li passed in the blink of an eye.

After cresting a low slope, the scene below hit them like a wall.

A mining village clung to the hillside, half-shrouded in dust. The air was thick, gritty, choking. Figures ran everywhere—some shouting, some crying, some simply stumbling around as if their souls had already fled.

Screams echoed from every direction.

As soon as the group entered the village, the dust swallowed them whole. Visibility dropped to almost nothing. Pale, panic-stricken villagers rushed past at random, faces streaked with dirt and fear.

Flat Rabbit reached out, grabbed a man by the collar, and shouted over the chaos, "Hey! I can't see a damn thing! What happened here?"

The villager's voice trembled. "The hillside collapsed! The mine shaft— the mine shaft is buried! Dozens of people are still trapped inside!"

Flat Rabbit clicked his tongue. "Tch. With dust like this, we can't even tell up from down."

Gao Yiye's voice cut through the noise, calm and steady.

"Don't panic," she said. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is about to act. Everyone—grab onto something nearby, or you'll be blown away by the wind."

The guards reacted instantly.

"All villagers!" they shouted in unison. "Hold onto trees, pillars, rocks—anything! Do not let go!"

The villagers were already terrified out of their minds. Right now, they didn't care who was giving orders—as long as someone sounded confident.

People scrambled to comply. Some hugged trees like drowning men clinging to driftwood. Others wrapped themselves around house pillars. A few even latched onto boulders with both arms and legs.

And then—

Whooooosh!

A violent gust tore through the village.

The dust that had blanketed everything was swept clean in an instant, as if an invisible hand had brushed the world aside. The sky reappeared. The village snapped back into focus.

Only Gao Yiye noticed the truth.

Her gaze never left the sky.

She saw it clearly: Dao Xuan Tianzun stood above the clouds, wielding an enormous fan and giving the air a casual flick.

Is that... the legendary Plantain Fan? she wondered.

No.

That fan had a very strange design.

A yellow little monster was painted on it, with three characters beside it:

Pikachu.

She had absolutely no idea what that meant.

...Was the divine artifact called the Pikachu Fan?

Before she could think further, the villagers finally noticed the newcomers.

At the front stood three young women—one clearly a wealthy lady, the other two her attendants. Behind them, over a hundred guards stood in disciplined formation, armor gleaming, weapons ready.

This wasn't just help.

This was authority.

Hope surged through the crowd.

People rushed forward, voices overlapping:

"Lady, save us!"

"The mine is buried!"

"My husband is inside!"

"My brother hasn't come out!"

Gao Yiye raised her hand slightly.

"Where is the mine shaft?"

They led her to the slope.

There, carved into the earth, was a massive pit—dug deeper and deeper over centuries. A shaft opened in its wall, but the entrance was completely sealed by mud and stone.

Anyone with eyes could tell: the debris hadn't collapsed from within.

It had slid down from above.

Which meant—

"They're not crushed inside," someone whispered.

"They can still be saved!"

Villagers surged forward and began clawing at the mud with bare hands.

Flat Rabbit shouted, "Everyone help! Clear the rocks—fast! If we open the entrance, they can get out!"

Zheng Gouzi grabbed him by the shoulder. "Stop."

Flat Rabbit turned. "What?"

"There's too much debris," Zheng Gouzi said grimly. "Even with all of us, it'll take days. By then, they'll suffocate."

Flat Rabbit clenched his fists. "Then I'll do what I do best! I'll dig a tunnel—burrow straight in!"

"You'll get buried alive," Zheng Gouzi snapped. "The soil's loose. One wrong move and it collapses again."

Flat Rabbit froze. "Then... then what the hell do we do?"

The embroidered figure at Gao Yiye's collarbone spoke softly.

"Evacuate the people. Tell them to stop digging and move back."

The guards' eyes lit up.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is acting personally!"

They immediately shouted, "Everyone, step back! Stop digging for now!"

The villagers resisted.

"How can we stop?"

"My family's inside!"

"We have to keep digging!"

Gao Yiye stepped forward.

"If you move back," she said gently, "it will be easier for us to save them."

Her voice was soft, but unwavering.

For reasons even they couldn't explain, the villagers trusted her.

Slowly, reluctantly, they backed away.

"Further," Gao Yiye said. "Everyone retreat... ten zhang."

She paused, corrected herself mentally, then nodded.

Ten zhang.

The villagers were confused.

That far?

Won't we be useless back there?

But she didn't waver.

"Move back."

Only after the crowd had retreated more than thirty meters did Gao Yiye lower her head slightly.

"It's done."

"Hm."

The connection severed.

Outside the diorama box, Li Daoxuan returned to his true form.

He looked down.

To the tiny people below, the collapsed mine entrance was a mountain of death.

To him—

It was just a pile of dirt.

Li Daoxuan stepped onto his balcony and picked up a small gardening trowel. Palm-sized. The kind used to plant flowers.

Then he returned.

Below, the villagers waited anxiously.

They had expected soldiers to rush forward and dig.

Instead, everyone stood perfectly still.

Confusion spread.

Then, as one, all one hundred guards tilted their heads upward.

"Whoa!"

"It's coming!"

The villagers followed their gaze—

And looked up at the sky.

Chapter 529 The Immortals Saved Us

What the villagers witnessed that day would be etched into their bones for the rest of their lives.

The clouds above suddenly split.

Not drifted. Not parted politely.

They were torn open—like a curtain ripped aside by an impatient god.

From the gap descended a shovel.

Not a metaphorical shovel. Not some symbolic heavenly implement.

An actual, brutally practical shovel.

It was more than ten zhang long and wide, its metal surface cold and gleaming, reflecting sunlight so fiercely that several villagers instinctively shielded their eyes. Its wooden handle was thicker than a city gate pillar—and wrapped around that handle was a colossal golden hand.

Five fingers.

Each one thicker than a watchtower.

The hand descended slowly, calmly, as if the heavens were taking their time to avoid unnecessary panic.

Which... didn't work at all.

"Ah—!"

"What in the ancestors' names is that?!"

"Mother of Heaven—!"

Before anyone could finish screaming, the shovel dropped.

Boom.

With one clean, decisive scoop, it plunged straight into the mountain-like pile of earth and rock sealing the mine entrance.

The ground shuddered.

Villagers stumbled.

A mass of debris—so large it could have buried the entire village twice over—was lifted effortlessly into the air, as if it weighed no more than a basket of radishes.

The shovel didn't fling it away.

Instead, it rotated calmly, shifted to a nearby ravine, and dumped the load inside.

Then—

The shovel flipped.

Its flat back pressed down.

Thump.

The loose earth compacted instantly, crushed into solid ground.

That ravine—the one that had forced villagers to take a long detour for years—was flattened into a smooth path in mere moments.

The villagers stood frozen.

Mouths open.

Souls temporarily misplaced.

"Ah... ah... ah..." someone croaked.

"What... what divine power is this...?"

The shovel didn't answer.

It simply kept working.

Left scoop.

Right scoop.

Clean. Efficient. Utterly merciless to geology.

In no time at all, the mountain of rubble vanished.

The mine entrance was revealed.

Then the shovel rose, slipped back into the clouds, and disappeared.

Silence fell.

For exactly three breaths.

Then the clouds parted again.

This time, only the golden hand emerged.

Its index finger extended.

Slowly.

Delicately.

The fingertip slid into the mine shaft.

Scrape.

Sand and stones poured out like grain from a torn sack.

Another scrape.

More debris fell free.

Another.

And just like that—

The passage was clear.

The finger withdrew.

A dark, open mine entrance yawned before them.

For a heartbeat, no one moved.

Then the village exploded.

Cheers, sobs, laughter, screams—everything crashed together.

"We're saved!"

"The Immortals saved us!"

"Thank the heavens—thank the Immortals!"

What the villagers didn't know was that inside the mine, the fifty-odd trapped miners were experiencing something entirely different.

Moments earlier, they had been digging like madmen, tools scraping desperately against packed earth, oil lamps flickering weakly in the suffocating dark.

Then the ground began to roar.

Not a tremor.

A presence.

It felt like something impossibly vast was clawing its way toward them from outside.

The sound was deafening. The shaft shook. Dust rained down.

The miners screamed and dug faster, driven by blind terror.

Then—

The earth ahead convulsed.

They barely had time to scramble back before a colossal golden finger burst through the blockage with a thunderous crack, filling half the shaft.

It flexed.

Scraped.

The wall vanished.

Light flooded in.

Fresh air rushed through.

The tunnel was open.

And fifty grown men screamed like children being chased by ghosts.

Because let's be clear—

If you were digging your way out of a collapsed mine and a finger the size of a house suddenly punched through the wall and cleared the path for you...

Would you be the first to step outside?

The miners huddled together, shaking, trousers decisively ruined, peeking out from the opening like frightened animals.

Something was out there.

Something huge.

After an eternity—or maybe just a minute—a shadow appeared at the mine entrance.

Someone stepped into view.

The miners squinted.

"Is that... the Village Chief?"

Behind him, more figures gathered—men, women, children—standing in full sunlight, peering nervously into the dark.

The miners saw them clearly.

"My wife!"

"My brother!"

"Mother!"

Recognition hit like a hammer.

Fear shattered.

With a collective roar, the miners surged out of the shaft.

What followed was chaos of a different kind.

People collided, hugged, cried, laughed, sobbed into each other's shoulders. Tears mixed with dust and snot. Nobody cared.

Life had returned.

It took a long while for the noise to settle.

Finally, one miner asked, voice trembling, "What... what just happened? We saw a huge finger come into the mine. That wasn't real, right?"

The Village Chief straightened, eyes blazing. "Nonsense! That was no illusion. It was an Immortal! A true celestial descended to save you!"

He jabbed a finger toward Gao Yiye. "That lady summoned the Immortal!"

"An... Immortal?" The miners stared.

Only then did they truly look at her.

Fine clothes. Composed bearing. Married woman's coiffure. Two senior maids. A hundred guards standing like iron walls behind her.

This was not someone you questioned casually.

The miners exchanged glances.

Then dropped to their knees in unison.

"Thank you, Esteemed Lady, for saving our lives!"

Gao Yiye smiled gently. "Please rise. It was not I who saved you."

She lowered her gaze slightly.

"It was Dao Xuan Tianzun."

They didn't quite understand.

She didn't explain.

There would be time later—for comics, for stories, for faith delivered in bright ink and exaggerated panels.

For now, survival was enough.

She continued calmly, "From now on, you must prioritize safety. On slopes like this, landslide prevention is essential. This must never happen again."

The miners nodded frantically.

Just then, a voice shouted from above.

"The Prefect is here!"

Everyone turned.

Qiu Qianfan climbed up with a large group of laborers, tools in hand, ready for excavation.

He took one look at the mine entrance.

And froze.

"...Eh?"

He blinked.

"...Eh??"

The villagers pointed upward. "Reporting to the Prefect! Just now, this lady summoned an Immortal. The Immortal cleared the mine with his own divine hand!"

Qiu Qianfan went silent.

He stared at Gao Yiye.

Then at the mine.

Then at the sky.

Ridiculous, he thought.

Only days ago, farmers had claimed Dragon Kings were dragged down to make it rain. He hadn't believed that nonsense either.

Rain was heaven's will—but gods digging mines?

Impossible.

Clearly, the shaft hadn't been buried deeply. With Lady Li's guards and the villagers working together, it must have been cleared quickly.

Yes.

That made sense.

Qiu Qianfan exhaled slowly. "Though this official's journey was unnecessary, I am pleased. In matters of life and death, a wasted trip is a blessing."

Before he could say more—

The rescued miners suddenly rushed him and dropped to their knees.

"Prefect!" they cried. "When will we receive our wages?"

Gao Yiye blinked.

Dao Xuan Tianzun... paused.

The heavens, it seemed, had not prepared him for this.

Chapter 530: The Center of All Under Heaven

A semicircle of miners knelt on the ground.

Not five or ten—dozens of them, spreading out like a kneeling human fan in front of Qiu Qianfan. Heads bowed, backs hunched, hands rough and cracked from years of iron dust and stone.

It was... difficult to look at.

Or rather, painfully awkward.

Qiu Qianfan stood there, hands stiff at his sides, his face twisted into an expression best described as a man actively wishing for spontaneous invisibility.

"About the wages..." he cleared his throat. "...cough... the matter is this."

Every miner lifted his head slightly.

Qiu Qianfan's voice grew weaker with every word.

"The imperial court has recently been... occupied. Bandits. Marauders. Suppression campaigns. Logistics." He spread his hands helplessly. "As such... this official... truly has no silver to disburse."

Silence.

Then—

"Magistrate Qiu," one miner said hoarsely, "if we don't get paid, we'll starve."

Another added bitterly, "Being buried alive in the mine might actually be faster."

"At least it wouldn't take months," someone muttered.

Qiu Qianfan stared at them.

Speechless.

What could he say?

Please starve patiently, the court is busy?

Being a local official in the late Ming was a profession that shaved years off a man's lifespan. Qiu Qianfan felt his head swell until it was twice its normal size.

At that moment, a soft chuckle sounded.

The voice of Dao Xuan Tianzun drifted down, light and amused.

"Yiye. You understand."

Gao Yiye did not hesitate.

Years of serving as the Saintess had trained her well. She didn't need explanations—only intent. She stepped forward, skirts brushing the dust, expression calm and gentle.

"Magistrate Qiu," she said softly, "are you saying... you cannot pay them?"

Qiu Qianfan's ears burned. "I have exhausted every avenue. The prefectural treasury is empty. Last year's tax silver was scraped together by selling off everything that wasn't nailed down. This year—"

He stopped.

Then, with a bitter smile, he spread his hands.

"There is nothing left. Taxes, wages, obligations—I acknowledge them all. But I have no silver. None."

The miners' faces drained of color.

Several hands tightened around mining picks.

The mood shifted—heavy, brittle, dangerous.

Then Gao Yiye spoke again.

"If the court is struggling," she said, voice clear, "then those who have prospered first should shoulder the burden."

She turned slightly, her gaze sweeping over the miners.

"My Li family will pay their wages."

For a heartbeat, no one reacted.

Then the village erupted.

"A living Bodhisattva!"

"She saved us from the mine and now feeds us too!"

"Is this a dream?!"

Qiu Qianfan's eyes lit up—but only for a moment. He was no fool.

"What," he asked carefully, "does Madam Li want in return?"

Gao Yiye answered without hesitation. "The mining rights to this iron ore."

Qiu Qianfan understood instantly.

A private concession.

In northern Shanxi, this was hardly unusual. Coal and iron mines dotted the land—some registered, some... conveniently overlooked.

He nodded once. "Agreed."

Gao Yiye was mildly surprised.

Back in Heyang County, Magistrate Feng Jun had negotiated until his beard nearly fell out. Yet Qiu Qianfan didn't even blink.

Interesting.

Qiu Qianfan continued, lowering his voice. "Madam Li, I know the Li family's strength. The grain entering Puzhou through General Xing—without it, this city would already be in chaos."

He exhaled slowly.

"My only wish is simple: keep the people fed. Keep them calm. Prevent rebellion."

He paused, then added bluntly, "As for the rest, this official can choose not to see."

Gao Yiye understood perfectly.

In a province crawling with hundreds of thousands of marauders, ideology mattered less than survival.

An agreement was reached.

Everyone got what they wanted.

That evening, the Puzhou City barracks.

Lao Nanfeng stripped off his lamellar armor and changed into civilian clothes. With a few trusted militia brothers, he swaggered out of the gates, humming loudly.

"No matter how hard I fly—

I still can't escape this world of flowers and delights~"

The soldiers burst out laughing.

"Brother Nanfeng," one teased, "you haven't even left the barracks and you're already like this?"

Lao Nanfeng laughed heartily. "You brats don't understand where we are."

He waved grandly at the city.

"This is Puzhou. Ancient Puban. The birthplace of civilization itself. The Center of All Under Heaven!"

The soldiers blinked.

Lao Nanfeng warmed to the topic. "Liu Zongyuan. Wang Wei. Sikong Tu. Poets, painters, martial artists—opera and boxing styles were born here!"

The soldiers stared at him in awe. "Brother Nanfeng... you know a lot."

"Of course!" he boomed. "Tonight, I'm taking you to experience culture!"

The soldiers cheered. "Following Brother Nanfeng, we see the world!"

Lao Nanfeng sighed theatrically. "Shame we can't drink."

A soldier slipped him a waterskin. "We can drink this."

Lao Nanfeng sniffed it.

"...That smells like alcohol."

"Don't worry. Tianzun calls it 'alcohol-free sparkling wine.' Less than zero point five percent."

Lao Nanfeng hesitated. "I'd dare defy imperial law—but Gao Family Village rules? Never."

"It's allowed."

Lao Nanfeng grinned. "Brotherly loyalty!"

He took a long gulp, eyes lighting up. "Ha! Wine without punishment!"

The waterskin passed around. Spirits lifted.

By the time they reached the market streets, they were laughing and swaying, utterly fearless.

Dusk had fallen. Taverns were full. Lanterns glowed.

Lao Nanfeng grabbed a passerby, grin wicked.

"Brother," he asked, "which way to the brothels?"

The passerby pointed.

Lao Nanfeng laughed.

"The Center of All Under Heaven, indeed!"