

## Great Ming 531

### Chapter 531 I'll Teach Her a Tune

The moment Lao Nanfeng casually dropped the words courtesan house, the half-drunk militia guards snapped sober as if splashed with ice water.

"No—absolutely not!" one of them blurted out, voice cracking. "Courtesan houses are strictly forbidden in Gao Family Village! If Dao Xuan Tianzun finds out, that's five taels of silver in fines and fifteen days locked up to reflect on your life choices!"

Lao Nanfeng waved his hand, utterly unbothered, like a man brushing away a fly.

"I know, I know. Don't get your trousers in a knot," he said lazily. "If I were here for that, I'd be asking for a cheap brothel, not a proper courtesan house. Think about it. I just want to sit in the main hall, eat some snacks, and listen to music. That's cultured behavior. That doesn't break village rules, does it?"

The militia exchanged looks.

Snacks.

Music.

Public hall.

...Technically clean.

After a brief, morally conflicted silence, one of them sighed. "Alright. But only that. No funny business."

"Excellent," Lao Nanfeng said, already walking. "See? Reason always wins."

Led by a few locals who clearly knew the way far too well, the group soon stopped before a building that stood out from its surroundings like a peacock among chickens.

The entrance alone screamed money.

Elegant couplets framed the doorway:

Slender fingers pluck moonlight beyond the goblet.

Too lazy tonight to write autumn in painted halls.

Above them hung a horizontal plaque, the calligraphy flowing and confident:

Spring Wind Pavilion.

Lao Nanfeng clasped his hands behind his back and nodded approvingly. "Now this," he said, "is what a proper courtesan house looks like. You can tell just from the couplets—no desperation, no filth, just vibes."

One militia guard scratched his head and chuckled. "It does remind me of the old courtesan house Gao Family Village used to have. Though... compared to this, ours was a bit rough."

Lao Nanfeng whipped around. "Wait. Gao Family Village had one? What were the couplets? Don't hold back."

The guard grinned. "Top line: Business thrives, bedsprings groan. Bottom line: Wealth pours in, belts come undone. The plaque said: Joyful Red Chambers."

There was a beat.

Then Lao Nanfeng burst out laughing so hard he had to brace himself against the doorframe.

"No wonder Dao Xuan Tianzun shut it down!" he wheezed. "That's not a courtesan house—that's a rural fertility shrine! Absolutely vulgar! No refinement whatsoever! A real courtesan house focuses on music, chess, calligraphy, painting—the arts! You don't just charge straight into base instincts like a bull!"

The militia guards laughed along.

One of them, emboldened, muttered, "But Brother Nanfeng... that celestial maiden you're always talking about. The one with her arms and legs showing. That doesn't exactly scream refinement either."

Lao Nanfeng straightened instantly. "You know nothing."

The laughter died.

"That," he said sternly, "is celestial fashion. Completely different genre. The fairy maiden herself radiates purity and wholesomeness. She is nothing like the gaudy, bargain-bin women you see in common brothels."

The guards chose life and shut up.

"Enough talk," Lao Nanfeng said, stepping forward. "Let's go inside and broaden your horizons."

Spring Wind Pavilion's madam appeared almost immediately, as if summoned by the scent of money.

Despite the title, she was barely in her thirties—poised, sharp-eyed, and well-maintained enough that in another era she'd be called a young lady and still get asked for tea.

One look at Lao Nanfeng's posture and the way the militia unconsciously deferred to him, and her smile deepened by three degrees.

"Honored guests, please come in," she said smoothly, already ushering them inside.

The main hall was spacious, lantern-lit, and buzzing with quiet indulgence. Over a dozen tables filled the space. At the center, a dancer moved gracefully while musicians plucked zithers, the melody soft and lingering like incense smoke.

Lao Nanfeng scanned the room.

Salt merchants.

Mostly salt merchants.

Which meant men who were very good at reading danger.

Several of them stiffened when they recognized him.

Isn't that one of the bandit chiefs who accepted pacification with Xing Honglang?

That man's hands aren't clean.

Don't provoke him.

Voices lowered. Laughter softened. Even the musicians played more carefully.

The madam noticed immediately.

A room doesn't go quiet for no reason.

She personally escorted Lao Nanfeng to the best table and waved her hand. In moments, the finest snacks and wine appeared, arranged like an offering.

"Is this your first visit, honored sir?" she asked sweetly. "Would you like me to introduce a few of our top maidens?"

"No, no," Lao Nanfeng laughed. "Just snacks and music. If Dao Xuan Tianzun hears otherwise, I won't survive the night."

"Of course," the madam said, bowing. "Then please enjoy. If you need anything, just say the word."

She retreated—but not far. Her eyes stayed glued to his table.

Lao Nanfeng leaned back, soaking in the atmosphere, grinning like a man who had finally discovered civilization.

He reached into his robe and pulled out a solid silver ingot.

Ever since arriving at Yongji Ferry, his merits had stacked up like firewood. Rewards poured in—silver, favors, and those precious song-and-dance videos from Cai Xinzhi that he guarded like state secrets.

He was rich now.

Very rich.

He slammed the ingot onto the table.

The sound rang like a temple bell.

"Brothers!" Lao Nanfeng roared, laughter booming. "Tonight, the entire house drinks on me!"

The response was immediate.

"Long live the General!"

"Such generosity!"

"From today on, you're Elder Brother Nanfeng!"

The madam's smile nearly split her face.

A General.

She clapped her hands sharply. "Bring out our finest! Let our most celebrated maiden dance and sing for our honored guests!"

The pavilion's star soon appeared.

She was undeniably beautiful—delicate features, steady hands, and a pipa cradled like part of her body. She danced, played, and sang alone, filling the hall with life.

Applause thundered.

Everyone was pleased.

Except Lao Nanfeng.

He frowned.

"...Something's wrong," he muttered.

The madam teleported to his side. "General? What displeases you?"

"She's good," Lao Nanfeng admitted. "Pretty. Skilled. But the tune—too old. Ancient. It sounds like something my grandfather's grandfather hummed while staring at a wall."

The madam froze. "Old-fashioned?"

Well... she couldn't exactly deny it. There were only so many songs in circulation. Courtesans had been recycling the same melodies for generations.

"Then... what should we do?" she asked carefully.

"Have her come down," Lao Nanfeng said. "I'll teach her a tune."

The madam's heart skipped.

Teach... a tune?

She glanced at the maiden on stage, then at Lao Nanfeng's face, then at the upstairs rooms.

Oh no.

Bandit-turned-general. Powerful. Untouchable.

If he took the girl upstairs, her reputation would be ruined.

But could she refuse?

With a sinking heart, the madam ascended the stage and whispered, "The honored guest wishes you to sit with him. He wants to teach you a tune. We... cannot offend him. If he asks for more... just accept it."

The maiden's fingers went cold.

Who was this man?

She forced a smile, clutching her pipa, and walked down.

Her heart pounded wildly as she sat beside Lao Nanfeng, tense as a drawn bowstring, bracing for a hand around her waist, a whispered order, a trip upstairs into eighteen unspeakable postures.

The salt merchants nearby watched with grim sympathy.

Bandit origins, they thought. Poor girl.

Lao Nanfeng didn't notice any of it.

"I don't know composition or notation," he said cheerfully. "I'll just hum it. Listen carefully."

Then he leaned forward.

And hummed—

"No answers, no answers, where is true love found?

My love, my love—could it be him, truly...?"

The maiden blinked.

Once.



Twice.

Her fear stalled, confusion flooding in instead.

This... wasn't what she'd expected at all.

Chapter 532 Constructing Puzhou

The young courtesan sat there, utterly stunned.

So were the salt merchants nearby.

Wait... that's it?

He called her down just to hum a song?

For a brief, collective moment, everyone in the Spring Wind Pavilion felt like they'd misjudged reality.

This wasn't lust.

This wasn't power play.

This was—audacious in an entirely different direction.

The girl's mind blanked completely. The melody she'd just been desperately trying to memorize scattered like startled birds.

"Sir..." she said awkwardly, fingers tightening around the pipa. "Could you... could you start from the beginning again? I... I didn't quite catch the first two lines."

To everyone's surprise, Lao Nanfeng didn't flare up. He didn't scowl, didn't bark, didn't throw silver at her face.

He laughed.

"Of course," he said easily. "My fault. Listen carefully this time."

And he hummed again.

Clear. Steady. Unhurried.

Once through.

The girl's eyes lit up.

She plucked a few tentative notes on her pipa, testing, feeling her way along the tune. It wasn't perfect—she missed a beat here, bent a note there—but the shape was there.

Lao Nanfeng hummed it a second time.

That was enough.

By the end of it, she had the entire melody locked into her bones.

Courtesans survived on memory and instinct. This was what they did.

Lao Nanfeng clapped his hands together, delighted. "Excellent! Truly excellent!"

He casually flipped a silver ingot into her hands.

"Go," he said. "Take this tune backstage. Rearrange it properly. You know better than I do what kind of dance suits it. Pull a few girls to help you, polish it up, then come back and stun everyone."

The girl stared at the silver, then bowed deeply, almost tripping over herself as she retreated backstage.

The madam hurried over, whispering urgently, "That's... all?"

Backstage, the young woman looked dazed. "I thought my chastity was about to become a historical footnote. Who knew he just wanted a song?"

The madam clapped her hands. "Then stop standing there like a statue and arrange it! Quickly!"

And so they did.

If there was one thing the pleasure houses of the Central Plains excelled at, it was speed.

They might not rival the legendary Eight Beauties of Qinhuai in Jiangnan, but they were no amateurs. Rearranging a tune, designing a dance, coordinating performers—an hour was more than enough.

Out front, the hall continued with the usual rounds of singing and dancing.

Finally, the madam stepped onto the stage, beaming.

"Earlier, one of our honored guests gifted us a new song," she announced. "The arrangement is complete. Our girls will now present it to you."

Lao Nanfeng straightened, eyes gleaming.

The same young woman returned to the stage, pipa in hand. Several other girls surrounded her, forming a loose formation.

She stood at the center.

Her lips parted.

She sang.

The accompanying girls moved with the rhythm, their steps quick and light.

The choreography wasn't complex—but it didn't need to be.

A fundamental rule of dance was harmony with the music.

The tune Lao Nanfeng had taught—Love Love Love—was bright, lively, almost reckless. The dance followed suit, bursting with youthful energy.

The infamous heartthrob style lived up to its reputation.

This wasn't the usual slow, drifting elegance. The girls darted across the stage, sleeves flying, movements crisp and playful, like butterflies weaving through spring flowers.

Cloud sleeves still flowed.

But now they whipped the air.

The audience gasped.

"Oh!"

"What is this?"

"This feels... different."

"It was almost noisy at first—but now? It's exhilarating!"

When the song ended, the girls bowed and hurried backstage, laughter bubbling between them.

Lao Nanfeng roared with laughter, slamming his palm on the table.

"Interesting! Now this is interesting!" he boomed. "Watching this is like seeing celestial maidens descend! Everyone who performed today—reward them heavily!"

Another silver ingot hit the table with a solid clang.

That was the last of his silver for the night.

Satisfied, he stood, still laughing. "Alright. Let's go."

The militia closed ranks around him as he swaggered out into the night.

His laughter echoed down the street.

"This lively world—this is how one ought to live it! Hahaha!"

The madam chased him to the door, staring after his retreating figure, scratching her head.

"...So what exactly was he here for?"

Puzhou City changed soon after.

Changed violently.

Changed enthusiastically.

Its economy began accelerating at a speed that made people dizzy.

Even Gao Yiye herself made a personal trip to Puzhou.

That alone told everyone how important this city was in the eyes of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Manpower? Supplied.

Materials? Delivered.

Technology? Introduced.

Overnight, Puzhou became Gao Family Village's top priority.

Blue Hats and Yellow Hats poured in like a flood, hiring locals by the thousands. Mines were dug. Workshops sprang up. Smoke rose everywhere.

Government workshops couldn't afford to pay craftsmen?

No problem. Gao Family Village took them over—and paid more.

City walls crumbling?

"Cement team! Move!"

Bluestone roads riddled with potholes?

"Road crew! You're up!"

Then a Blue Hat stopped before the Prefectural Yamen.

He frowned.

"This is... unsightly."

He drew a red circle on the outer wall.

Qiu Qianfan came running out, half laughing, half panicking. "Hey! What are you doing to my yamen? Haven't you heard—officials don't repair their yamen!"

"Why not?" the Blue Hat asked calmly.

"We're transferred every three years!" Qiu Qianfan snapped. "Why would anyone spend money fixing something their successor will enjoy?"

Which explained why the yamen looked less like an office and more like a condemned ruin.

The Blue Hat nodded. "You may leave. The people won't."

"What?"

"This appearance damages public morale," the Blue Hat said. "We'll cover the cost. You won't spend a single copper."

Qiu Qianfan hesitated, then sighed. "Fine. As long as it's not my budget. You think I like living in that wreck?"

The Blue Hat dipped his brush in red ink and wrote a single character inside the circle:

Demolish.

The next day, Yellow Hats arrived.

"There's a 'Demolish' sign!"

"Charge!"

With hammers swinging, the Prefectural Yamen was flattened.

Qiu Qianfan stood amid the dust, suddenly homeless.

Fortunately, a sharp-eyed local family immediately offered their fabric shop as a temporary office.

And so, until the new yamen was built, the Prefect conducted official business beneath a massive plaque that read:

"Tailoring to Fit, Fair to All Ages."

Two rows of yamen runners stood stiffly on either side.

They looked uncannily like shop mannequins.



Puzhou marched forward—loudly, messily, and with absolutely no intention of stopping.

## Chapter 533 Re-planning

Early that morning, Gao Yiye arrived at the entrance of the tailoring shop.

The signboard still hung proudly overhead:

"Tailoring to Fit, Fair to All Ages."

Inside, the temporary prefectural yamen was already bustling.

The moment the bailiffs on duty spotted her, their spines straightened so fast it looked painful. One of them turned and sprinted inside to announce her arrival, while the other rushed forward, bowing so deeply his hat nearly slipped off.

"Madam Li," he said with a smile so eager it bordered on worship, "please—this way."

Gao Yiye nodded politely and stepped inside.

She barely made it three steps before Qiu Qianfan himself hurried out to greet her.

"Ah! Madam Li," he said, clasping his hands and bowing. "You're here quite early today. To what do I owe this... distinguished surprise?"

Gao Yiye smiled faintly. "There are some matters concerning the city's layout that I wished to discuss with Your Excellency."

Qiu Qianfan blinked. "The city's... layout?"

He looked around instinctively, as if afraid the streets might rearrange themselves on the spot.

"What's there to plan?" he asked, baffled. "Puzhou has stood like this for centuries."

Gao Yiye replied calmly, "Puzhou City is too small."

Qiu Qianfan froze.

"...Too small?"

"Our factories won't fit."

For a moment, the prefect genuinely thought he'd misheard.

"How could that be?" he said. "I personally oversaw the acquisition of the textile factory site. It wasn't that large."

Gao Yiye didn't argue. She merely gestured. "Please come and see for yourself."

Qiu Qianfan followed her.

And the moment the construction site came into view, his breath caught.

The original textile workshop—and everything around it—was gone.

Flattened.

In its place rose vast concrete structures, skeletal but unmistakably colossal.

Rows upon rows of factory buildings were taking shape, designed to house two hundred textile machines. Beyond them stood auxiliary workshops: dyeing facilities, garment production halls, storage depots.

And beyond those—

Dormitories.

A cafeteria.

An open sports field.

A park.

A school.

A clinic.

Qiu Qianfan stood rooted to the spot, his mouth slowly falling open.

"This..." he croaked. "This is one factory?"

Gao Yiye nodded. "Naturally."

This single textile factory alone threatened to consume several tenths of Puzhou City's inner space.

Puzhou, after all, was a classic square city—eight li and three hundred forty-seven bu from wall to wall, its dimensions recorded in history and confirmed by later scholars.

Perfectly sufficient for feudal workshops.

Utterly inadequate for modern industrial monsters.

Qiu Qianfan stared as if witnessing an invading army.

"Does it truly need to be this large?" he asked weakly. "And... what is that enormous empty field over there?"

"A sports ground," Gao Yiye said cheerfully. "Workers need exercise."

He swallowed. "And that?"

"A park."

His hand trembled. "Are you hiring workers... or raising nobles?"

Gao Yiye's smile didn't waver. "Ensuring people live well is our foundational principle."

Qiu Qianfan found himself at a loss for words.

She continued, her tone still mild. "And this is only the textile factory. We have many more planned. Some industries cannot be placed within city walls at all—cement plants, Celestial Fertilizer production, iron smelting, paper mills. These generate smoke, waste, and noise. They must be built outside."

Qiu Qianfan's jaw slackened.

When Xing Honglang first arrived, he had agreed to everything with a wave of his hand—build whatever you like, just keep the people alive. He had never imagined this scale.

If every factory was like this, Puzhou wouldn't just be crowded.

It would be devoured.

"I never thought..." he muttered, "that you would build like this."

Gao Yiye shrugged lightly. "Which is why we must re-plan the city."

Qiu Qianfan groaned, rubbing his temples. "This is beyond me. I no longer have the ability to handle such a thing."

He gestured wildly. "If the city expands outward by several li, how many li of walls would that require? Even a governor couldn't afford that! Let alone a mere prefect like myself."

Gao Yiye didn't respond.

She simply unrolled a blueprint.

Puzhou City sat at its center.

Around it bloomed multiple satellite towns, arranged like petals around a flower.

She pointed.

"This is a commercial town near Gudu Ferry—focused on transport and logistics."

Her finger moved.

"This is the Jiguanshan Iron Mine town."

"Here—an iron smelter and ironware factory, forming a specialized industrial settlement."

"Over here, limestone hills. Cement factory. Adjacent paper mill."

Then she circled everything with a wide arc.

"Together," she said, "they form a metropolitan ring."

Qiu Qianfan stared, his mind racing.

Gao Yiye continued, voice steady. "Puzhou City itself will no longer require traditional walls. If enemies attack, they will be engaged at whichever township they approach. Until they break through the outer ring, they will never reach the core."

"These townships will defend the city."

"And protect the farmland within."

She looked up and smiled faintly.

"Therefore—walls are unnecessary."

Qiu Qianfan's eyes widened until they nearly popped.

"This... this is..."

He had no word for it.

This wasn't town planning.

This was re-drawing an entire prefecture.

He shook his head slowly. "Magnificent—but dangerous. Such dispersed settlements would be difficult to defend if a large bandit force attacked."

"As for defense," Gao Yiye replied, "General Xing Honglang will oversee it."

Qiu Qianfan laughed hollowly. "How could I not worry? Even imperial armies can't stop these bandits."

"She will," Gao Yiye said simply. "Have faith."

He bit back his retort.

Faith doesn't stop arrows, he thought—but he kept it to himself.

Gao Yiye's voice softened.

"Prefect Qiu, Puzhou is called the 'Center of All Under Heaven.' Its population is more than three times that of surrounding regions. Hundreds of thousands are starving under this drought."

She met his gaze.

"If we don't build large enough to employ them, they will join the bandits."

"And that," she said quietly, "is when your real troubles begin."

Qiu Qianfan stiffened.

Then he exhaled slowly, deeply.

"...You're right," he said at last. "It's better to fear that we build too small than too large."

He straightened.

"Very well. Build as you see fit. Puzhou will follow this plan."

The blueprint fluttered softly in the morning breeze.

And the city's fate shifted with it.

Chapter 534 Dismissal from Office

Puzhou moved like it had been possessed.

From dawn to dusk, the prefecture roared.

Hammers rang. Earth split. Smoke rose in disciplined columns instead of desperate cooking fires. Entire neighborhoods seemed to grow overnight, sprouting scaffolding and shouting foremen like weeds after rain.

To the west, the dock town swallowed new land from the riverbank, warehouses marching downstream like soldiers claiming territory.

To the south, the iron mine town cracked open the mountains, veins of red earth exposed, carts rumbling day and night.

To the north, the cement works and paper mills expanded in tandem—kilns burning white-hot, vats bubbling, pulp steaming like a living thing.

Everywhere you looked, the ground was being torn open and rebuilt with intent.

Puzhou no longer looked like a famine-stricken prefecture.



It looked like a bet placed against heaven.

And while the land buzzed with life—

Far to the north, in Yan'an Prefecture, death was being tallied.

Yang He arrived at the governor's yamen with dust still clinging to his robes.

He didn't bother announcing himself.

The moment he crossed the threshold, he barked, "Hong Chengchou! Report!"

Hong Chengchou had been waiting.

He stood straight-backed beneath the eaves, robe immaculate, expression composed to the point of irritation. If the man had been born a blade, he would've been polished steel—no rust, no nicks, no wasted motion.

"Governor Yang," Hong said calmly, hands folded. "There is no need for urgency."

Yang He stopped short. "No need? Shen Yikui has raised the banner again. I rushed from Puzhou day and night—"

"Shen Yikui is dead."

The words dropped like a stone.

Yang He stared. "What?"

"I said," Hong Chengchou repeated evenly, "Shen Yikui is dead."

Yang He's mouth opened, then closed.

Dead?

Already?

"When I left Puzhou," Yang He said slowly, "the reports said he was still gathering men. How could he be dead before I even reached Yansui?"

Hong Chengchou gestured lightly, as if explaining the weather.

"I deployed Deputy General Cao Wenzhao from the east, Yulin Advisor Zhang Fuzhen from the north, and Gansu Commander Yang Jiamo from the west. We encircled Shen Yikui's forces."

He paused.

"First, we killed his brother, Shen Yiyuan."

Yang He inhaled sharply.

"That fractured their morale. Afterward, we sowed discord among his lieutenants. One of them—Huang Youcai—proved... receptive."

"...You turned him."

"He assassinated Shen Yikui himself."

Silence followed.

Yang He sucked in a breath through his teeth.

So this is Hong Chengchou, he thought.

He had been on the road for mere days. This man had already ended a rebellion.

Formidable didn't begin to cover it.

"And the rest?" Yang He asked. "Without Shen Yikui, they must've scattered."

Hong Chengchou's gaze didn't waver. "Not yet."

"How many remain?"

"Over one hundred thousand."

Yang He felt something crack behind his temples.

"One hundred thousand?" he repeated. "Even without a leader, that's an army."

Hong Chengchou nodded. "Which is why I was preparing to deal with them."

He smiled faintly.

"If Governor Yang is concerned... perhaps you would care to observe."

Yang He straightened, pride bristling. "Good. I'd like to see how you intend to 'deal with' one hundred thousand rebels."

What followed was not a battle.

It was a demonstration.

A few days later, Hong Chengchou rode out with his personal guard—the famed Hong's Elite Troops—and joined forces with Cao Wenzhao.

Cao Wenzhao was brave, skilled, and obedient to a fault. Tell him east, he went east. Tell him west, he went west. In the hands of a fool, such a man would die early.

In the hands of Hong Chengchou—

He became a blade.

The rebel army met them head-on.

And broke.

In a single clash, the so-called one hundred thousand were routed. Du San and Yang Laochai were dragged from the chaos alive, bound and screaming.

Yang He expected interrogations.

Negotiations.

Appeasement.

Instead, Hong Chengchou didn't even let them kneel properly.

"Behead them."

The order was flat.

Steel fell.

Blood soaked the earth.

By nightfall, two heads hung outside the city gates, faces frozen in terror for every passerby to see.

"Captured generals are meant to be persuaded," Yang He muttered, stomach churning.

Hong Chengchou didn't look back. "I don't persuade."

The remaining two—Hong Junyou and Li Dusi—fled.

Hong Chengchou pursued without pause.

Yang He followed, watching with growing unease as stratagem after stratagem unfolded. Hong Junyou fell to internal betrayal. Li Dusi thought he had sprung an ambush—only for Hong Chengchou to charge straight through it like a madman, blades flashing, blood spraying.

When it was over, Li Dusi's head joined the others at the gate.

Not one of Shen Yikui's top commanders survived.

None.

Afterward, Hong Chengchou turned—almost casually—and gestured behind him.

Ninety thousand men knelt in the dirt.

"Governor Yang," he said, "the ringleaders are dead. These followers surrendered."

He smiled thinly.

"They can't be killed. They must be appeased."

Yang He felt his eye twitch.

"But appeasement," Hong Chengchou continued, already mounting his horse, "is not my specialty."

He rode off.

Leaving ninety thousand lives behind.

Yang He stared at the kneeling sea of heads.

"...Damn it," he whispered. "What am I supposed to do with all of you?"

Then he remembered.

Censor Wu Shen.

One hundred thousand taels.

Yang He grabbed a brush and wrote at once:

"Brother Wu, it has been far too long. The weather is pleasant. Have you eaten?"

I happen to have ninety thousand surrendered rebels here. Might I borrow your one hundred thousand taels of silver?"

The reply came swiftly.

"My sincerest apologies. That sum is... currently unavailable."

Yang He swore.

Fine.

Then—another letter.

"Brother Liang, save me. Ninety thousand surrendered rebels.

I know the number is large. Chengcheng County will suffer hardship.

But hardship can be overcome. We must share the burden for the imperial court."

Liang Shixian read it.

Inside, he was laughing so hard his ribs hurt.

Outwardly, his reply was solemn.

"It will be difficult. But even if I must sell all I own, I will shoulder the burden for the court. Send them all."

Far away, in the Imperial Study.

Zhu Youjian flipped through memorials with leaden eyes.

Shanxi burned.

Wang Jiayin was dead—but his remnants still numbered over three hundred thousand. Zijing Liang roamed freely. Smaller rebel bands scattered like sparks, crossing rivers, igniting new fires.

Bu Zhan Ni had crossed the Yellow River again.

Scattered rebels were worse than armies.

Memorials piled high.

"All roads lament appeasement."

"Yang He has brought disaster to the realm."

"One wave quelled, another rises."

Zhu Youjian closed his eyes.

He knew why appeasement had been chosen. When the border generals rushed to defend the capital, Yang He had been left with nothing. No troops. No options.

But now—



The Manchus were quiet.

The relief armies had returned.

Appeasement had outlived its use.

And policy shifts required blood.

Zhu Youjian dipped his brush.

"Yang He, as Supreme Commander of Shaanxi, wielded great authority yet failed to suppress the rebels, plunging the people into misery and betraying his charge.

He is hereby stripped of office.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard shall apprehend him and bring him to the capital for interrogation.

Lian Guoshi is provisionally demoted three ranks and shall suppress the bandits in atonement.

Further negligence will be punished without mercy."

The brush lifted.

Yang He's fate was sealed.

Appeasement ended.

Suppression took the stage.

And the Great Ming turned another page—one written in blood.

Chapter 535 We've Come for the Celestial Fertilizer

Once the brush left the paper, the Chongzhen Emperor felt lighter.

Not relieved—lighter, like someone had finally taken a sack of rotten grain off his back and handed it to someone else.

Yang He was done.

The burden had a name now, and it was no longer his.

Chief Eunuch Cao Huachun, ever perceptive, leaned closer and lowered his voice to a whisper smooth as oiled silk.

"Your Majesty, with Yang He dismissed, the post of Supreme Commander is vacant. If this position remains unfilled, the provinces will lack unified command. When suppressing bandits, officials will only point fingers and dodge responsibility."

Zhu Youjian hummed, fingers tapping the edge of the desk.

"Mmm. I know. This cannot be rushed."

His gaze drifted to the memorial stacks again, eyes narrowing. Who... who can take this seat?

Before the thought could fully form—

"Your Majesty! Great news! Tremendous news!"

A young eunuch burst in like a firecracker, nearly tripping over the threshold.

Zhu Youjian straightened immediately.

"Speak!"

"Governor Hong Chengchou of Yansui mobilized his forces and crushed the rebellion of Shen Yikui!" the eunuch rattled off in one breath. "Over ten thousand rebels slain, ninety thousand captured! Northern Shaanxi has been pacified!"

He presented the memorial with both hands, head bowed.

Zhu Youjian snatched it up, eyes flying across the page.

Then—

"Hahaha!"

The sound rang through the Imperial Study.

"My Hong!" the emperor laughed, slapping the desk. "You truly live up to my expectations!"

He stood abruptly.

"I've decided. The post of Supreme Commander—it goes to Hong Chengchou!"

And just like that—

In barely three years, Hong Chengchou had leapt from a modest fourth-rank Grain Intendant to Supreme Commander of the Three Borders, commanding military affairs across Shaanxi, Gansu, Yansui, and Ningxia.

A rocket strapped to ambition.

Fourth year of Chongzhen. Winter.

The wind in Chengcheng County cut like a blade.

Wu Shen sat inside a horse carriage, hands tucked into his sleeves, eyes sharp despite the cold. Across from him, Shi Kefa pulled his cloak tighter, peering out through the curtain.

Wu Shen frowned.

"...Strange."

"What is?" Shi Kefa asked.

Wu Shen nodded toward the street.

"It's dead winter. The wind could peel skin off a man's face. And yet—look at them."

Pedestrians passed by with steady steps, faces ruddy, shoulders relaxed. A group of children chased one another, laughter slicing through the cold air.

Wu Shen blinked.

"Children. Playing. In this weather."

Shi Kefa nodded slowly.

"Every one of them is wearing thick cotton-padded jackets."

Wu Shen's brow furrowed deeper.

"A single jacket costs five taels of silver," he muttered. "That's the price of a fine Japanese blade. Ordinary people shouldn't be able to afford that."

Shi Kefa smiled faintly.

"Elsewhere, no. But this is Chengcheng County."

Wu Shen turned sharply.

"And why should Chengcheng be different?"

Shi Kefa lifted a finger and pointed ahead.

"Look."

Wu Shen followed his gaze—and stopped.

Towering above the county town rose a colossal golden statue. It loomed higher than rooftops, higher than watchtowers, eyes cast downward as if surveying every alley and household.

Majestic. Dominating.

Unavoidable.

Wu Shen swallowed.

"...That's the Dao Xuan Tianzun you mentioned?"

"Yes." Shi Kefa's voice softened. "He watches over this land. That is why the people here prosper."

Wu Shen's expression hardened. He leaned closer, voice dropping.

"Master Shi. You are a jinshi scholar. A hereditary Jinyiwei. Don't tell me you've fallen for a cult."

Shi Kefa bristled.

"This is not a cult! Cults deceive the people and lead them astray. How can something that feeds the hungry and clothes the cold be called heretical?"

Wu Shen snorted, pointing out the window.

"Any deity without a clear lineage is suspect. Only those with established origins—like the Living Buddha Jigong—are orthodox."

Shi Kefa opened his mouth.

"Jigong? That's nonsense, where would there even be a Jig—"

He froze.

Out of the corner of his eye, a figure shuffled from an alley.

Tattered kasaya.

Broken palm-leaf fan.

Bare feet on frozen stone.

The monk grinned at them—eyes bright, utterly mischievous—then turned and vanished back into the alley.

"...What," Shi Kefa breathed, "was that?"

"Stop the carriage!" he snapped. "There—that alley!"

The whip cracked. The carriage lurched forward.

They reached the alley in moments.

Empty.

Not a footprint.

Shi Kefa's mouth hung open.

Wu Shen chuckled softly.

"Didn't I tell you? The Living Buddha Jigong exists."

Shi Kefa sat back, stunned.

They proceeded straight to the county magistrate's yamen.

Liang Shixian only received the news at the last moment and rushed out, bowing deeply.

"Master Wu! Master Shi! Your humble subordinate failed to welcome you properly—please forgive me!"

Once seated, Shi Kefa got straight to the point.

"We've come for the celestial fertilizer."

Liang Shixian smiled.

"Oh? You've tested it already?"

Shi Kefa's grin spread.

"Tested? The results are astonishing. The fields near Xi'an that escaped disaster—after applying the fertilizer, they produced a bountiful harvest."

He spoke with genuine excitement.

"The pressure on Xi'an's grain supply has eased significantly."

Liang Shixian merely nodded. As if this were obvious.

Shi Kefa continued, "That's why we're here. Farmers can't all travel to Chengcheng. We intend to open an official shop in Xi'an Prefecture to sell celestial fertilizer directly."

Liang Shixian nodded again.

"Of course. No problem."



Shi Kefa nearly clapped his hands in delight.

Then—

"But," Liang Shixian added calmly, "there is one matter."

Shi Kefa straightened.

"Please speak."

"The fertilizer increases yield," Liang Shixian said, "but by how much depends on skill, soil, and circumstance. And since it must be purchased..."

Wu Shen's eyes sharpened.

"The price cannot exceed the value of the increased grain yield," he finished. "Otherwise, the people won't buy it."

"Exactly."

Liang Shixian folded his hands.

"So—have you calculated the price?"

Silence.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa exchanged a look.

Blank.

Utterly blank.

How much grain per mu?

How much fertilizer per mu?

Market price per picul?

Cost per catty?

Their confidence collapsed like a poorly stacked ledger.

Wu Shen hurriedly pulled out paper and brush.

Numbers flew.

Scratched out. Rewritten. Argued over.

By the time the candle burned low, both men looked as if they'd aged several years.

Shi Kefa rubbed his temples.

"...This is impossible."

Wu Shen stared at the calculations, eyes bloodshot.

"No wonder the common folk call this 'celestial.' Even pricing it requires divine help."

Across from them, Liang Shixian only smiled.

And far above Chengcheng County, the golden gaze of Dao Xuan Tianzun remained fixed—silent, patient, amused.

Chapter 536 Graduates of Gao Family Village Middle School

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa stared at the paper until their eyes went dry.

Numbers crawled across the page like ants. Columns multiplied. Values were crossed out, recalculated, overwritten. The candle had burned down to a stub, wax pooling like a small white grave beside the inkstone.

Still—nothing.

No answer.

No certainty.

Not even a direction.

Shi Kefa finally leaned back, exhaling slowly.

"This won't do."

Wu Shen pressed two fingers against his temples.

"If we can't even calculate a selling price," he said grimly, "how are we supposed to roll this out across Xi'an? We'll be laughed out of the prefecture."

For the first time since they arrived in Chengcheng County, the word panic crept quietly into the room.

Liang Shixian watched them with an almost amused calm.

After a moment, he chuckled.

"Gentlemen," he said, "why struggle like this? Come—I'll introduce you to someone."

He turned toward the inner room and raised his voice.

"Chen Yuanbo. Come in."

The curtain lifted.

A young man stepped out.

Seventeen, perhaps eighteen. Slim build, straight-backed. He wore a padded scholar's gown—clean, well-kept, modest. The sort of outfit that suggested learning, discipline, and long hours hunched over books.

But what caught the eye immediately was the embroidery on his chest.

A small image of Dao Xuan Tianzun, stitched carefully in white cotton thread.

Not gold.

Not silver.

Plain cotton—simple, sincere.

In Gao Family Village, this had become fashion.

The wealthy flaunted Dao Xuan Tianzun in gold thread, sometimes even inlaid with gemstones. The common folk used cotton. Either way, wearing the image was both an aesthetic choice and a declaration of belief.

Faith, but with style.

Shi Kefa frowned slightly.

"And this young man is...?"

Liang Shixian's smile widened.

"This is Chen Yuanbo. Top student of Gao Family Village's first-ever middle school graduating class."

Wu Shen blinked.

"...Middle school?"

Shi Kefa echoed, "What is a middle school?"

Liang Shixian clasped his hands behind his back, delighted to explain.

"A level of education. At present, the highest one available. To graduate from middle school means one has mastered profound knowledge—he understands heaven and earth, literature and numbers. He can write, calculate, analyze, deduce."

He gestured lightly toward Chen Yuanbo.

"Frankly speaking, aside from Dao Xuan Tianzun himself, there is no one left to teach him. From here on, he studies on his own."

The room went quiet.

Very quiet.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa both wore expressions that could only be described as strange.

They were jinshi.

Men who had clawed their way through the most brutal examination system in the empire. Survivors of essays, commentaries, poetry, policy debates. The so-called "dragons among men."

And now—

They were being told that some teenager with an embroidered deity on his chest had reached the limits of human instruction?

Their gazes slid toward Chen Yuanbo, sharp and deeply skeptical.

Chen Yuanbo, for his part, smiled politely and bowed.

"Greetings, honored sirs. Magistrate Liang flatters me far too much. I merely have a rudimentary understanding of several subjects. A middle school diploma is nothing special. I still need to continue studying—self-study, that is. If I can complete high school courses one day, that would truly be worth boasting about."

Wu Shen's eye twitched.

"So," he said coolly, "your meaning is that your knowledge surpasses that of this official?"

Chen Yuanbo waved his hands quickly.

"Oh no, no! Certainly not. Perhaps in mathematics, physics, chemistry, geography, and biology, I may have a slight advantage. But in literature and classical language, I cannot compare to you sirs at all."

Silence.

Then—

Wu Shen's face darkened.

A slight advantage?

In five subjects?

And conceding defeat in only one?

Shi Kefa felt irritation bubble up as well, though his temperament was gentler. He forced a neutral tone.

"Brother Chen," he asked, "have you passed the provincial examination? Have you been listed on the golden roster?"

Chen Yuanbo shook his head.

"No. I haven't even taken it."

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa stared at him.

Not a xiucai.

Not a juren.

Not even attempted the exams.

And yet here he stood, calm as spring water, speaking of disciplines neither man had even heard named.

It was... infuriating.

Sensing the temperature drop, Liang Shixian smoothly stepped forward.

"Chen Yuanbo," he said, "tell us—what should the price of celestial fertilizer be in Xi'an?"

Chen Yuanbo nodded, unperturbed.

"That depends on current grain prices and several variables," he replied. "May I ask—what is the price of grain in Xi'an Prefecture?"

Wu Shen answered stiffly,

"Four hundred wen per dou."

Chen Yuanbo's brush paused briefly. He nodded once and wrote it down.

"Four hundred wen."

Then—



The page vanished under numbers.

Symbols.

Formulas.

Lines that crossed, branched, looped.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa leaned in—and immediately regretted it.

None of it made sense.

Chen Yuanbo murmured to himself as he worked.

"Assuming first-time usage... yield increase likely below double... estimate one point seven five times... taxation still applies... increased supply will lower market price—perhaps to three hundred or three hundred fifty wen..."

"One mu requires X jin of fertilizer... selling price must remain under Y to ensure net gain..."

His brush flew.

Then stopped.

He lifted the paper.

A single number sat there, bold and final.

"This," Chen Yuanbo said, "is the maximum price per jin of celestial fertilizer in Xi'an. Any higher, and farmers will lose incentive. They will choose lower yields over loss. That defeats the entire purpose."

Wu Shen squinted.

"...Hmm?"

Shi Kefa leaned closer.

"Oh?"

Neither understood a word of the calculations. Not one.

Chen Yuanbo added another note beneath the number:  $\times 3/4$ .

Turning to Liang Shixian, he explained,

"This should be our wholesale price. That leaves sufficient margin for transport and resale. Producers earn. Middlemen earn. Retailers earn. Farmers earn."

He smiled faintly.

"That is a healthy system. Break one link, and the chain collapses."

Liang Shixian nodded, thoroughly pleased.

"Excellent. We'll do exactly that."

He turned to the two officials.

"Your thoughts?"

Wu Shen hesitated.

"...He's calculated a great deal. I understand none of it."

Liang Shixian shrugged lightly.

"Then test it. Sell it. If the farmers come back for more, you'll have your answer."

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa exchanged a look.

Then nodded.

Just like that—the matter was settled.

As they rose to leave, Wu Shen suddenly paused.

He turned back.

Both men circled Chen Yuanbo slowly, scrutinizing him from head to toe, as if trying to confirm he was real.

After a long moment, Wu Shen spoke.

"Regardless of accuracy," he said, "your computational ability is undeniable. Governor Wang Shunxing of Shaanxi is seeking advisors. Would you consider serving him?"

It was an offer that could change a life.

A single nod—and Chen Yuanbo would leap into officialdom, fame, fortune.

Chen Yuanbo smiled.

And shook his head.

"I thank you for the honor," he said gently. "But I believe I can do more good here. The Governor will surely find advisors better suited than me."

Wu Shen inhaled sharply.

He hadn't expected that.

Not at all.

Outside, the winter wind howled.

Inside Gao Family Village, a new kind of scholar quietly went back to his calculations—uninterested in rank, unmoved by titles, already walking a road the empire had yet to understand.

Chapter 537 New Office For Yamen

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa finally wrapped up their deeply uncomfortable conversation.

The kind that started stiff, got worse halfway through, and ended with everyone pretending they hadn't just been intellectually bullied by a teenager.

They cupped their hands, exchanged a few polite, hollow phrases, and left.

Only after their footsteps faded down the corridor did the air inside the office loosen again.

Liang Shixian watched their backs disappear, then turned with a smile that had been waiting patiently in reserve.

"Yuanbo," he said casually, "come. Sit."

Chen Yuanbo obeyed, folding himself neatly into the chair opposite the magistrate.

For a moment, Liang Shixian didn't speak. He poured tea, pushed a cup forward, then leaned back and studied the young man with open curiosity.

"You didn't come all the way to Chengcheng just to calculate fertilizer prices," Liang Shixian said at last. "So. What else are you here to do?"

Chen Yuanbo straightened his back immediately, posture snapping into something halfway between a student reciting lessons and a soldier reporting duty.

"No tasks," he said seriously.

Liang Shixian blinked.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun told me to go out and walk around," Chen Yuanbo continued, utterly sincere. "He said I'm the first middle school graduate from Gao Family Village, and that I didn't favor any subject. I studied everything. So now I should see the world with my own eyes and determine where this knowledge can actually be used."

Liang Shixian let out a low laugh.

"So you're on... an inspection tour?"

Chen Yuanbo's eyes brightened. "Yes! Exactly."

"And you've already made a mark in commerce," Liang Shixian said, nodding toward the now-finalized fertilizer deal.

Chen Yuanbo scratched his head, smiling sheepishly. "Honestly, I didn't expect mathematics to be this useful outside textbooks."

Liang Shixian laughed outright this time.

"Good. Then I won't keep you here." He waved a hand. "Go. Wander. See what else you can stir up."

Chen Yuanbo stood, cupped his hands deeply, and bowed.

Then he turned and left the yamen with light steps, like someone who'd just been handed the entire world and told to figure it out.

Middle school graduates.

Released into society.

Heaven help everyone.

Meanwhile—

Puzhou City.

After several months of construction, the city barely resembled its former self.

Not because Gao Family Village possessed miraculous speed—

but because buildings in this era had the decency to stay short.

No towering monstrosities scraping the sky. No endless foundations dug for years. One or two floors at most. Sometimes the foundations were laid carefully. Sometimes... not at all.

Bricks stacked. Cement slapped on. Done.

Efficient. Brutal. Effective.

Qiu Qianfan stood before the newly completed prefectural yamen, hands clasped behind his back, face glowing with a health he hadn't known in years.

After months of being exiled to the fabric manor—where he had nearly become a full-time tailor—he had finally returned to civilization.

And what civilization it was.

"These walls..." he murmured.

Cement. Thick. Solid.

Solid enough that if bandits ever broke through the city gates, he was fairly confident he could retreat here, slam the doors, and fight a second siege inside his own office.

And the doors—

Heavy wood. Properly treated.

The windows—

Qiu Qianfan froze.

"...Wait."

He leaned closer.

Blink.

Blink again.

"Glass?"

He sucked in a sharp breath and whipped around.

"Madam Li!" he said urgently. "This—this is too much! These are glass windows! Do you know how this looks? If word reaches the capital, His Majesty will think I've been lining my sleeves with silver!"

Gao Yiye smiled calmly.

Above her collarbone, embroidered in fine gold thread, Dao Xuan Tianzun gazed benevolently into the mortal world.

Qiu Qianfan, being a proper gentleman, did not notice. His eyes remained firmly on her face. Even if the Heavenly Lord had started doing backflips, Qiu Qianfan would've missed it.

"Magistrate Qiu," Gao Yiye said gently, "glass has become quite common once the method of production was understood."

Qiu Qianfan's mouth fell open.

"We've already built a glassworks near the northern mining town," she added. "Sand in, glass out."



"...Sand?" he echoed weakly.

"Yes."

She gestured toward the building. "The yamen is the heart of administration. It should embody openness and honesty. Paper windows make everything dim and stifling. Glass allows light. Clarity. Transparency."

Qiu Qianfan hesitated, then stepped inside.

Light flooded the hall.

No shadows lurking in corners. No oppressive gloom pressing down on the chest.

For the first time in his career, the phrase 'upright officialdom' felt... tangible.

He sat at his desk, placed his palms on the smooth surface, and exhaled deeply.

Then something felt off.

He looked up.

Directly above his head—

Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Carved into the ceiling.

Watching.

Qiu Qianfan stiffened. "This is...?"

Gao Yiye smiled serenely. "It's called 'The gods are watching.' When the people see you working beneath the Heavenly Lord's gaze, they'll believe you dare not be corrupt."

Qiu Qianfan nodded slowly. "That... makes sense."

Then he frowned. "Though I admit, I'm more familiar with the Great Supreme Elder Lord."

"Oh, him?" Gao Yiye waved lightly. "Too lazy. Hasn't checked in on mortals for a thousand years. Dao Xuan Tianzun is more attentive."

Qiu Qianfan burst into laughter.

"Good! Good! Whoever's watching, I'm not afraid."

He toured the yamen thoroughly—front, back, left, right.

The old ruin was gone.

In its place stood something dignified.

Alive.

"Madam Li," he said sincerely, "I feel like I've gained ten more years of life."

She smiled. "Shall we inspect the factories?"

"Absolutely."

Horses were prepared. The party rode out.

The cement road unfurled before them like a gray ribbon, winding up toward Jiguanshan.

Qiu Qianfan stared. "This road—already finished?"

Gao Yiye laughed. "Puzhou is the center of the world. We called for labor. Tens of thousands answered."

Many hands.

Many hoes.

Fast results.

The road split ahead—one path toward the mine, the other toward the steel mill.

Qiu Qianfan pointed without hesitation.

"The steel mill first."

Some things, after all, were simply more exciting than holes in the ground.

Chapter 538 The Steel Mill

The convoy had barely rolled out of the city when the world began to smell like iron.

Not metaphorically.

Literally.

A thick, mineral tang drifted through the air, the kind that clung to the back of the throat and made one instinctively swallow. Before the steel mill itself even came into view, Qiu Qianfan spotted movement ahead on the road.

Carts.

Lots of them.

Oxen and horses strained against wooden yokes, hooves thudding in uneven rhythm as cart after cart creaked forward. Each vehicle was piled high with jagged black rocks—iron ore, raw and unrefined, still dusted with the pale gray scars of the mountain it had been ripped from.

They were all headed in the same direction.

Straight toward the steel mill.

Qiu Qianfan stared, eyes widening despite himself.

"So many carts?" he blurted out. "How long did it take to dig all this out? Don't tell me you waited years just to haul everything here at once."

The man leading the transport convoy immediately dismounted and bowed, spine bending with practiced respect.

"Reporting to Your Excellency," he said briskly. "This is three days' worth of ore."

Qiu Qianfan froze.

"...Three days?"

"Yes."

His breath hitched.

"In three days, you dug this much?" His voice rose despite himself. "Then explain this to me—why, for decades, did Puzhou always complain about iron shortages?"

The convoy leader straightened slightly, emboldened now that he was speaking of things he understood.

"In the past, Your Excellency, mining relied entirely on shoulders and hands. Men carried baskets, climbed ladders, hauled stone one load at a time. Slow. Dangerous. Exhausting."

He gestured vaguely toward the mountains.

"Now we've laid tracks inside the pits. Small carts run along them. Gear winches pull the carts out. Miners inside only dig and load. The men outside turn the winches. The ore comes out on its own."

Qiu Qianfan nodded slowly.

He didn't understand what a "gear winch" actually looked like—but he understood results.

And the results were staring him in the face.

As the two convoys merged, something startled the animals. One ox suddenly snorted, hooves skidding as it lurched sideways. The cart behind it tilted dangerously, its load shifting with a low, grinding groan.

"Careful—!"

Before anyone else could react, a figure shot forward.

Flat rabbit.

Gao Yiye's guard captain didn't shout orders or strike a heroic pose. He simply moved—hands bracing the cart's frame, boots digging into the dirt. Several guards followed instantly, bodies pressing in, shoulders slamming against wood and iron.

"Together!" someone barked.

They heaved.

The cart shuddered... then settled.

The ox was calmed. The load stabilized.

The convoy rolled on.

Flat rabbit and the others didn't immediately leave. They walked alongside the cart for a time, some pushing lightly, others chatting with the driver, laughter breaking out as the tension bled away.

Qiu Qianfan watched silently.

When flat rabbit had first marched into Puzhou with Xing Honglang, he'd looked like a rough bandit—simple, blunt, not especially clever.

But now?

Disciplined. Cooperative. Alert.

Qiu Qianfan glanced back at his own yamen runners.

They had watched the near-accident like it was street entertainment.

Not one of them had moved.

Bandits with better discipline than officials, he thought grimly. What a world.

Then the steel mill came into view.

It wasn't a single building.

It was a settlement.

Concrete walls stretched outward like a fortress, enclosing an industrial beast that breathed smoke and fire. A massive iron gate stood at the entrance, flanked by watch posts.

Across the gate, bold characters were carved deep into metal:

THE THIRD GENERAL STEEL MILL

Qiu Qianfan squinted.

"Third?" he asked. "You've built three of these already?"

Gao Yiye smiled lightly. "Yes. Third."

"Then where are the first two?"

"Chengcheng County and Heyang County."

Qiu Qianfan's brows rose.

"And this one?"

"This is the largest," she said calmly. "Puzhou has people. Chengcheng and Heyang do not."

He looked again at the vast complex.

Largest?

This is already nearly the size of my prefectural city.

"And this is only the beginning?" he asked weakly.

Gao Yiye's smile did not change.

Inside, heat slammed into them like a wall.

Dozens of towering furnaces roared, each one taller than a man and wide enough to swallow livestock whole. Flames pulsed within their mouths, smoke boiling skyward, turning the clouds above faintly red.

Qiu Qianfan gasped.

"This scale..." he murmured. "It's like Zunhua."

The imperial furnaces in Hebei.

Endless rows of fire, the court's iron heart.



The technology was the same—Song Yingxing's furnaces mirrored the court's designs perfectly. Anyone who had seen Zunhua would recognize them instantly.

Gao Yiye nodded toward the furnaces. "Bandits plague the land. General Xing now guards Puzhou. Weapons are needed."

Qiu Qianfan swallowed. "That is... reasonable."

They passed another workshop.

Inside, blacksmiths hammered long, thick iron bars—far longer than spears, far thicker than blades. Workers laid them on the ground, aligned them carefully, measured, adjusted, lifted, and hammered again.

Qiu Qianfan frowned.

"Those aren't weapons."

"No," Gao Yiye said. "Railway tracks."

"Railway... tracks?"

"They go on the ground," she explained pleasantly. "So heavy carts can roll easily."

He opened his mouth.

She continued, unhurried. "If we forge many weapons, we must move them quickly. Faster transport is necessary."

She tilted her head. "Isn't that reasonable?"

Qiu Qianfan nodded rapidly. "Entirely reasonable."

They walked on.

This time, there was no mistaking it.

Firearms.

Rows of blacksmiths in yellow hats worked under the sharp gaze of a blue-hatted foreman. They forged only barrels—nothing else. Each one was measured against a standard ruler, diameter checked again and again.

Uniform.

Precise.

Hundreds lay stacked nearby.

Qiu Qianfan inhaled sharply.

"I told you to make weapons," he said, voice tight. "Not this many. Are you planning a rebellion?"

Gao Yiye looked genuinely puzzled.

"Many?" she repeated. "This is only a few hundred."

She gestured broadly.

"Bandits come in tens of thousands. If Zijing Liang were to march here, that's three hundred and sixty thousand men."

She looked back at him, serene.

"How could a few hundred firearms suffice?"

Qiu Qianfan's mouth opened.

Closed.

"...Reasonable," he said hoarsely. "Far too many bandits."

At the rear of the complex stood a large building.

The canteen.

Though it wasn't mealtime yet, workers were already lining up, lunchboxes in hand, chatting easily as steam drifted from within.

Gao Yiye chuckled.

"Your Excellency," she said, "care to try the staff canteen?"

Qiu Qianfan stared at the line.

Then at the mill.

Then at the smoke-stained sky.

"...I suddenly feel," he said slowly, "that I may be living in a world I no longer fully understand."

Gao Yiye smiled.

Chapter 539 Are You Kidding Me?

"Experience the staff cafeteria?"

Magistrate Qiu almost choked on air.

Absolutely not.

He didn't say it out loud, of course. A man of his rank had manners. A face. Even when refusing something outrageous, one must refuse with elegance.

Eating the same food as laborers? Standing in line with grimy hands and sweaty backs?

That wasn't dining. That was social suicide.

So he folded his hands into his sleeves, cleared his throat, and delivered the safest possible excuse.

"This official... is not hungry at the moment. I fear I wouldn't be able to eat even a bite."

Perfect. Polite. Untouchable.

Gao Yiye didn't argue.

She simply nodded. "Oh? Then we'll head over ourselves."

She turned around, smiling brightly at the guards behind her.

"You've all been walking all morning. Hungry, aren't you? Let's eat at the steel factory cafeteria."

The guards lit up instantly.

Flat Rabbit laughed so hard his shoulders shook. "Perfect timing! I was starving."

Zheng Gouzi rubbed his hands together. "I've wanted to eat here forever. Heard the food's no worse than what we get at camp."

Flat Rabbit scratched his chin. "We can't all go. Someone should stay and protect the Saintess. Let's split up. Gouzi, you take half the men first—"

"No need."

Gao Yiye waved him off casually.

"I'll go with all of you."

Magistrate Qiu's eyelid twitched.

She's... going herself?

He stared after her retreating figure, expression unreadable.

What kind of woman is this Madam Li?

To eat common laborers' food so openly... does she not fear damaging the Li family's reputation?

Fine.

He'd watch.

He stood aside, hands folded, posture impeccable — and observed.

The cafeteria hadn't even opened yet.

A hundred guards lined up behind Gao Yiye, forming a long, disorderly snake that immediately obliterated any illusion of "dignified queue."

When the wooden shutters finally slid open—

"Line up properly! No pushing! One by one!"

An older woman appeared behind the window, ladle in hand, voice sharp enough to cut steel.

"What do you want?"

"This, this... and that one."

The spoon flew.

A casual flick — and a chunk of braised pork launched cleanly out of the ladle, tumbling through the air like a sacrificial offering... straight back into the pot.

The worker holding his meal box let out a tragic cry.

"Ah—! Auntie! Please don't flick the spoon!"

Just then, a hand reached in from the side.

"Let me."

The woman jumped. "Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"No need to panic."

Li Daoxuan gently nudged her aside, took the ladle, plunged it deep into the braised pork — deep, like he was dredging treasure from the seabed — and scooped up a mountain.

No flick. No finesse.

He dumped it straight into the box.

Thud.

"Eat more," he said cheerfully.

The worker froze, then nearly cried on the spot.

"Thank you! Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Li Daoxuan laughed.

"Today is the Dao Xuan Tianzun Extra Meat Festival! Everyone gets more meat!"

The woman whispered anxiously from behind him.

"If you serve like this, we'll run out..."

"Relax." Li Daoxuan didn't even look back.

"The main batch of workers won't arrive for another half-hour. I've already ordered takeout. Fresh braised pork arrives in thirty minutes."

She didn't understand what "takeout" meant.

But she did understand Dao Xuan Tianzun.

So she shut up.

The ladle kept moving.

Every plate received an obscene amount of meat.

Smiles spread like an epidemic.

Then it was Gao Yiye's turn.

She leaned forward, eyes sparkling.

"Tianzun, I want more vegetables. Less meat."

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow.



"You're young. Still growing. Why avoid meat?"

"I'll get fat."

"And?"

"I don't want to get fat!"

Li Daoxuan burst out laughing.

"A little softness feels better to the touch!"

The words landed.

Hard.

Gao Yiye's face turned crimson instantly.

A maiden of this era stood no chance against modern shamelessness.

She grabbed her meal box like it was a shield and fled.

When they returned, Magistrate Qiu was still standing where he'd been — dignified, composed, and extremely hungry.

He himself was unmoved.

But his yamen runners?

Their eyes had already betrayed them.

The meal boxes were heavy.

Steaming.

Overflowing.

Glossy chunks of braised pork shimmered under the sun.

A runner swallowed. Loudly.

Another pressed a hand to his stomach.

Gao Yiye noticed and smiled.

"Go eat."

They looked at Magistrate Qiu, eyes begging.

Magistrate Qiu sighed deeply.

"Go."

They ran.

By the time they finished, the real lunch bell rang.

Workshops emptied. Workers flooded toward the cafeteria, laughing, chatting.

Every service window opened.

Every auntie—

flicked their spoon.

It was clearly a required skill.

Li Daoxuan, having had enough fun, returned the ladle.

The flicking resumed immediately.

The tour continued.

Everyone was full.

Everyone except Magistrate Qiu.

His stomach growled.

The sun had crossed noon.

He endured.

They reached the sports ground.

Rows of workers stood in formation.

Marching.

Turning.

Stomping in unison, thunder rolling across the ground.

Magistrate Qiu frowned.

"What is this?"

"Military training," Gao Yiye replied.

"...Military training?"

"General Xing can't be everywhere. If danger comes, workers must know how to defend themselves."

Magistrate Qiu nodded slowly.

"Ah. Militia."

"Yes." Gao Yiye smiled. "That's the word."

The formation moved.

At the far end stood long tables.

On them — muskets.

The workers grabbed them. Fixed bayonets.

Thrust.

"Kill!"

"Kill!"

"Kill!"

The sound punched the air.

Magistrate Qiu sucked in a sharp breath.

"...Wait."

He turned to Gao Yiye, eyes wide.

"Your militia..."

"They're training with firearms?"

"...Are you kidding me?"

Chapter 540 They Need Their Strategist

By the time the tour of the steel factory ended, Qiu Qianfan felt as though someone had reached into his skull and shaken his brain.

Not violently.

Just... relentlessly.

He let out a long breath and said the only thing that still felt safe to say.

"You treat your workers... extraordinarily well."

This was not praise.

This was a statement of alarm.

"How," he continued slowly, "do you feed them like that? Every meal meat and vegetables together — where does so much grain come from?"

Gao Yiye smiled, unhurried.

"We have Celestial Fertilizer," she said lightly. "It increases yield. Master Qiu already knows this."

"Yes, yes." Qiu Qianfan nodded. "The grain, I understand. But the meat..."

He paused, as if recalling trauma.

"All that meat."

Gao Yiye laughed softly. "Meat is still relatively scarce. That's why you saw the cooks shaking their ladles earlier."

"...That was because of a shortage?"

"Yes."

Qiu Qianfan stared at her.

"With a shortage," he said carefully, "you still served that much?"

Gao Yiye tilted her head. "Then I suppose we'll have to invite Master Qiu to see our chicken and pig farms."

She added politely, "Though I should warn you — those places are dirty. And smelly. I worry you might find them... unpleasant."

Qiu Qianfan straightened immediately.

"If a distinguished lady such as yourself can endure it," he declared, "then what hardship could possibly defeat this humble official?"

Gao Yiye smiled.

"Very well," she said. "Then this afternoon, we'll visit them."

They headed west, toward the Gudu Ferry.

About two li out, before they even reached the buildings, the wind arrived first.

Qiu Qianfan's face stiffened.

The smell hit him like a physical object.

Chicken droppings.

Warm.

Dense.

Unforgiving.

A lifetime of refined incense and clean courtyards did absolutely nothing to prepare him for this.

He raised his sleeve instantly and clamped it over his nose.

His feet slowed.

For one fleeting, shameful moment, retreat tempted him.

Then he remembered his words from earlier.

If she can endure it...

He gritted his teeth and walked on.

The sign read: Yongji Chicken Farm.

Inside, Qiu Qianfan froze.

The chickens weren't running around.

They weren't pecking the ground.

They were stacked.



Layer upon layer of wooden-and-bamboo cages rose before him, each divided into neat compartments. Several chickens occupied each one, calm, contained, productive.

Qiu Qianfan stared as though witnessing a minor heresy.

"They... don't come out?"

"That's right," Gao Yiye said cheerfully. "It simplifies management, allows large-scale breeding, and produces more eggs."

"...And the pigs," Qiu Qianfan asked cautiously, "they're not raised like this too, are they?"

Gao Yiye shook her head.

"Pigs require more space. Their pens can't be stacked. That's why meat is still somewhat limited."

She gestured toward the next compound.

"But once the pig farms improve efficiency, supply will stabilize."

Qiu Qianfan followed her inside, nose still pinched.

Rows of pigsties stretched ahead — large, small, some reinforced, some newly built. Fat pigs lounged inside, snorting contentedly, unaware they were the foundation of a fiscal revolution.

Qiu Qianfan sighed inwardly.

Steel... cement... glass... textiles... paper...

These weren't workshops.

They were towns.

Entire satellite settlements bloomed around Puzhou like stars circling the moon.

If he visited all of them...

He didn't finish the thought.

Instead, he sighed aloud.

"I feel... pressure," he admitted. "Puzhou may already be beyond what I can manage alone."

He turned to his strategist.

A Shaoxing man — clever, efficient, and usually unflappable.

This time, the strategist looked embarrassed.

"My lord," he said quietly, "the scope here is... unprecedented. With my limited abilities, I fear—"

He hesitated.

"—you may need two or three more strategists."

Qiu Qianfan went silent.

So this was no longer a matter of finding help.

It was a matter of assembling a team.

The strategist leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"My lord, the people you need... should come from their side."

Qiu Qianfan blinked.

"From them?"

"These enterprises defy conventional understanding. Ordinary strategists would only add confusion."

Before he could respond, a young man appeared at the pig farm entrance.

"Ah!"

He waved cheerfully.

"Oh—Saint— cough—Lady Li! What brings you here?"

Gao Yiye turned and smiled.

"Chen Yuanbo," she said. "What are you doing in Shanxi?"

It was an old classmate.

The first middle school graduate of Gao Family Village.

Chen Yuanbo scratched his head. "Looking for work. I've been visiting farms the past couple of days."

They exchanged a few words, relaxed, familiar.

Then Chen Yuanbo sighed.

"If I'd known earlier, I might've gone for that strategist post under the Governor."

Gao Yiye laughed and shook her head.

"I wouldn't recommend it. Xi'an is complicated. Old systems. Your talents would rot there."

Her tone was casual.

Her words were not.

Qiu Qianfan snapped his head around.

"Mr. Chen," he said quickly, "did you say Wu Shen and Shi Kefa recommended you?"

"Yes," Chen Yuanbo replied. "But I declined. Too old-fashioned."

Qiu Qianfan's heart leapt.

"Then," he said earnestly, "would my humble office have the honor of employing you?"

Gao Yiye's eyes brightened.

"Oh?"

Chen Yuanbo paused.

Puzhou wasn't Xi'an.

Here, factories rose daily. Systems evolved weekly. Ideas mattered.

Rank meant less than relevance.

He glanced down at the embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest.

The stitched mouth looked oddly pleased.

He smiled.

"I accept."

Qiu Qianfan bowed deeply.

"I am greatly indebted to you, sir."

Thus, Gao Family Village's first middle school graduate quietly entered officialdom.

One Shaoxing strategist and one graduate were still not enough.

More would come.

Puzhou would become the first city under Gao Family Village's soft military control — the testing ground for systems yet unnamed.

By dusk, the tour ended.

Qiu Qianfan returned to the city starving.

Everyone else was full.

He rubbed his stomach and sighed.

"...Perhaps I'll dine at the brothel tonight," he murmured.

"And listen to 'Carp's Account.'"

At least something today would be familiar.