

Great Ming 541

Chapter 541 Lao Nanfeng's Investment Project

By the time Qiu Qianfan's sedan chair arrived at the entrance of Spring Wind Pavilion, the street outside had already lost all pretense of order.

People were everywhere.

Not the usual loose gathering of drinkers and patrons, but a full-on human flood—official robes rubbing shoulders with merchant silks, wealthy householders squeezing in beside clerks and craftsmen. Even well-off commoners who normally wouldn't dare set foot near such a place were craning their necks, standing on tiptoe, desperately trying to glimpse whatever spectacle had dragged half the city out into the street.

Qiu Qianfan nearly collided with someone the moment he stepped down.

"What on earth is going on?" he muttered.

He grabbed a passerby by the sleeve. "Why is it so crowded here?"

The man turned, eyes shining. "Prefect Qiu, you didn't know? Tonight is Miss Cailin's debut performance!"

"...Debut performance?"

"Yes! Her first concert!"

The word sounded unfamiliar, but the tone made it clear: whatever it was, it was important.

Miss Cailin.

Qiu Qianfan recognized the name immediately.

Spring Wind Pavilion's current crown jewel. The woman who had taken Puzhou by storm with that scandalously catchy tune—Lovelovelove—the one that had merchants humming under their breath and magistrates pretending they didn't know the lyrics.

Her real name, of course, was something else entirely. "Cailin" was a stage name.

Coined by Lao Nanfeng.

So was the word concert, for that matter.

Ever since Li Daoxuan had shown him those strange "short videos," Lao Nanfeng had become a man possessed by ideas no one else fully understood.

And this—this chaos—was the result.

Outside the pavilion, an enormous stage had been erected on the open ground.

Not a flimsy opera platform, but something audacious—broad, elevated, framed with carved beams and hung with rows upon rows of colorful glass lamps. When night fell, the entire street glowed as if someone had spilled starlight across the ground.

Benches had been arranged in wide circles around the stage, layer upon layer.

A thousand seats.

Every single one filled.

And beyond them, pressed up against wooden railings, were the unlucky masses who hadn't managed to buy tickets in time.

Admission cost one hundred copper coins.

For officials and merchants, that was pocket change.

For Gao Family Village workers? Also manageable.

Which was precisely why the place was packed to bursting.

Qiu Qianfan took a slow breath.

This... is no small affair.

He did a quick calculation in his head.

One hundred copper coins per seat. A thousand seats.

That was already a hundred taels of silver—earned in a single evening.

And Lao Nanfeng had barely begun.

Somewhere in the crowd, Lao Nanfeng himself was practically vibrating with excitement.

"Hahahahaha!" he cackled, clapping along as people poured in. "At last! At last! I've brought the Dao Xuan Tianzun's Flower World into the mortal realm!"

A militia soldier elbowed his way over and leaned in. "Brother Nanfeng, it's about time. Aren't you going on stage to say a few words?"

Lao Nanfeng's face darkened instantly. "Say what? Curse at them? Scold them? I open my mouth and the mood dies. Let the madam handle it."

"You're the sponsor."

"That's even more reason not to speak."

Unfortunately, the decision had already been made without him.

Under the gaze of the entire audience, the Spring Wind Pavilion's madam ascended the stage.

She was in her thirties, her beauty polished by experience rather than youth, and she wielded a tin megaphone like a general commanding troops.

"Honored guests!" she called out, her voice ringing clear. "Thank you all for coming tonight! This is Miss Cailin's first concert, where she will perform the songs that have captured Puzhou's hearts these past days! I promise—you will leave satisfied!"

A wave of excited murmurs rippled through the crowd.

"And tonight's event," the madam continued smoothly, "has been generously sponsored by General Nan, a trusted commander under General Xing Honglang! Let us invite General Nan to say a few words!"

Somewhere below the stage, Lao Nanfeng swore.

"...Damn it."

Before he could escape, hands shoved him forward.

Boos and cheers mixed together as he stumbled onto the stage, the crowd instantly recognizing him.

Flatt Rabbit voice was the loudest of all. "Say something nice, General Nan!"

Lao Nanfeng shot him a murderous glare and silently promised retribution later.

He cleared his throat.

"Well... ah..." He scratched his head, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "I don't know how to talk pretty. I only know one thing—"

He spread his arms wide.

"Have fun! Make as much noise as you want! The louder you are, the happier I am!"

The crowd roared.

That was enough for him.

Lao Nanfeng fled the stage as if pursued by ghosts.

Then—

Miss Cailin appeared.

The moment she stepped into the light, the noise softened into a hush.

She didn't waste a heartbeat.

The opening notes of Lovelovelove flowed out, bright and teasing, her voice weaving through the crowd like silk. She sang with an ease that felt intimate, as if she were smiling directly at each listener.

The effect was immediate.

Officials leaned forward.

Merchants forgot to breathe.

Young men clutched their chests like they'd been struck.

Qiu Qianfan, however, scowled.

Gnawing on a roasted chicken leg he'd had sent over earlier, he shouted, "This official didn't come here for this song! Where's Koi Transcription?!"

Fortunately for him, Koi Transcription followed soon after.

His mood improved instantly.

Then came Ode to Yu, which left the wealthy merchants staring blankly, their souls seemingly drifting several inches above their bodies.

At the end of each song, silver flew.

Tael ingots clanged against the stage.

Loose silver scattered like rain.

Someone even tossed a few gold pellets, which bounced and rolled among the others.

A militia soldier gaped. "Brother Nanfeng... you're going to be rich."

Lao Nanfeng didn't even look. He waved dismissively. "Listen to the song. Don't insult it by staring at money."

That was when a furious shout tore through the edge of the crowd.

"What are you doing here?!"

Xing Honglang stormed in, eyes blazing, her presence alone parting the masses.

Her gaze locked onto Lao Nanfeng.

"You—! What kind of nonsense are you pulling?!"

Lao Nanfeng jumped. "I—! I'm not breaking discipline!"

Before he could finish, Xing Honglang froze.

Because right beside him stood Li Daoxuan.

Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

He wasn't standing aloof or stern.

He was swaying.

Actually swaying.

Moving with the rhythm, relaxed, amused, very much enjoying himself.

Xing Honglang's anger evaporated into cold sweat.

"Dao... Dao Xuan Tianzun?" she said carefully.

Li Daoxuan smiled. "Quite lively, isn't it?"

"...But," Xing Honglang ventured, "isn't this a brothel? Lao Nanfeng spending money here—"

Li Daoxuan waved his hand. "Indulging in debauchery is forbidden. Singing and dancing for public enjoyment is not. From today on, these women sell talent, not themselves."

Xing Honglang fell silent.

At that moment, the music shifted.

The gentle tune gave way to pounding drums.

Miss Cailin disappeared backstage—and returned transformed.

Armor.

A spear.

The stance of a warrior maiden.

She sang Treading the Mountains and Rivers, her voice sharp and soaring.

Xing Honglang's eyes lit up. "This song—!"

"Good, right?" Lao Nanfeng laughed.

She didn't hesitate.

A tael of silver flew onto the stage.

Then she sang along—

Completely off-key.

The crowd exploded into applause anyway.

And under the lights, amid song, laughter, and silver rain, Puzhou's night burned brighter than ever.

Chapter 542 My Heart Aches

The morning after the grand concert, Puzhou City woke up... late.

Unnaturally late.

Shops that normally opened before sunrise kept their shutters down. Street vendors who usually shouted themselves hoarse at dawn were nowhere to be seen. Even the stray dogs had the decency to sleep in.

The city looked like it had collectively decided to call in sick.

Last night's concert had wrung the people dry—emotionally, spiritually, and in several cases, financially. Too many merchants had gone home with ringing ears and buzzing hearts, replaying melodies in their heads until half the night slipped away unnoticed.

Then—

THUD-THUD-THUD-THUD!

A single rider tore through the city gates like a nail driven by a hammer.

"Urgent report! Urgent military dispatch!"

The shout shattered Puzhou's fragile peace.

The horse skidded to a halt outside Xing Honglang's official residence. The rider barely managed to dismount before his legs gave out. He slammed a knee into the stone, slapped the ground with his palm, and shouted hoarsely:

"General Xing! Disaster! Great disaster!"

Xing Honglang was already moving before he finished.

"The rebel leaders—Chuang Jiang-Li Zicheng, the Eight Great Kings Zhang Xianzhong, Lao Huihui-Ma Shouying, Zijing Liang-Wang Ziyong, Fan Shan Yao-Gao Jie—have joined forces! They attacked Puxian for three days and three nights but failed to take it. Last night, three hundred elite bandits bypassed the front lines and launched a surprise assault on Daning County."

His throat bobbed.

"Daning... fell in the dead of night."

Silence.

Then he forced the rest out in one breath.

"Deputy General Cao Wenzhao has already led his army back to Shaanxi to suppress bandits. He is no longer in Shanxi. The main army of the Shanxi Regional Commander is also far away. His Excellency the Governor has issued orders—commanders in surrounding regions are to reinforce immediately."

The words landed like stones dropped into a well.

Xing Honglang's sleepiness evaporated without leaving a trace. She dismissed the messenger with a sharp gesture, turned, and pressed her fingers instinctively against the embroidered emblem on her chest.

The symbol of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun..." she whispered, voice tight. "The bandits have struck Puxian and taken Daning. Both are close to Pingyang Prefecture. Bai Mao is right there."

No answer.

The emblem remained cold and silent.

Somewhere far away—very far away—Li Daoxuan rolled over in his bed, drooled onto his pillow, and slept like a man who had stayed up far too late watching nonsense.

Xing Honglang waited a heartbeat.

Then another.

Nothing.

She straightened.

...So that's how it is.

He wasn't responding. Which meant he wasn't stepping in. Which meant—this wasn't a divine emergency.

Just because Dao Xuan Tianzun has been performing miracles lately doesn't mean we can lean on him for everything, she told herself, teeth clenched. This is our battlefield.

She spun on her heel and stormed back into the inner chambers.

"Chuwu! Wake up!"

Gao Chuwu jolted upright as if stabbed. "Honglang?!"

She fell into his arms, breathless, and poured the entire report into his ear in a rapid, urgent whisper.

By the time she finished, both of them were fully awake.

They didn't bother with armor yet. They ran.

The barracks erupted like a kicked anthill.

Zao Ying, Lao Nanfeng, Zheng Daniu—men who had been snoring like thunder just moments ago—were dragged out of bed by shouted orders and flying boots.

Xing Honglang relayed the situation in clipped, efficient sentences.

"Puxian under siege. Daning fallen. Pingyang threatened. We move immediately."

Zao Ying and Zheng Daniu were already barking commands, scrambling to assemble troops.

Only one person remained unhurried.

Lao Nanfeng yawned, stretched, and scratched his stomach.

"Relax," he said cheerfully. "Why's everyone rushing around like their pants are on fire? At least listen properly to the report first."

The room froze.

Everyone turned to him.

"...What do you mean?" Xing Honglang asked slowly.

Lao Nanfeng grinned. "Let's repeat the key line, shall we? 'They attacked Puxian for three days and three nights but couldn't take it.'"

"...And?" Zheng Daniu frowned.

"And Pingyang Prefecture is practically next door," Lao Nanfeng said, tapping his temple. "If Puxian had been under attack for three whole days, news would've reached Pingyang three days ago."

A beat.

"And if Bai Mao knew three days ago," Lao Nanfeng continued, voice light but eyes sharp, "then Dao Xuan Tianzun would've known three days ago too."

Silence.

"Yet," he said, spreading his hands, "did Dao Xuan Tianzun say a single word?"

Everyone inhaled.

"No..."

"Exactly." Lao Nanfeng nodded. "Not only did he say nothing—he even let us hold a concert last night. Big stage. Bright lights. No lightning bolts. No divine warnings."

The logic hit home.

Dao Xuan Tianzun wasn't a slow messenger. If this were truly a life-or-death crisis, they would've been mobilized days ago.

"So," Lao Nanfeng concluded, "Bai Mao isn't in mortal danger. Pingyang can hold. That's why the bandits went for Puxian and Daning instead—soft targets."

Xing Honglang exhaled slowly.

"...That makes sense."

"But," Lao Nanfeng added, grin returning, "now that the Governor's official order is here, we can't just sit on our hands."

He leaned forward, voice lowering.

"This is a perfect excuse to march north."

Xing Honglang narrowed her eyes. "Explain."

"Inspection," he said smoothly. "Reinforcement. Support. Whatever label the court likes. We go county by county, see what's worth taking, clear out roaming bandits, and recruit some able-bodied men."

His smile turned feral.

"Road builders don't grow on trees."

She stared at him.

"...Say that again without sounding like a criminal."

He coughed. "Purely civic-minded intentions."

"Hmph." She nodded once. "Fine. Half an hour. Move out."

Pingyang Prefecture

The city gates were sealed tight.

Every inch of the walls crawled with militia. Spears bristled like hedgehog spines. Crossbows were loaded. Flintlocks rested against parapets.

Prefect Dou Wenda looked like he was about to faint.

He paced the wall, wringing his hands, peering into the distance every few steps.

"Commander Wang," he whispered for the tenth time, "they haven't arrived yet, have they?"

Bai Mao leaned casually against the battlements, sunlight glinting off the flintlock slung across his back.

"Relax," he said, chuckling. "If they were coming, we'd know."

"But—but there are two hundred thousand of them!"

"And?" Bai Mao shrugged. "Two hundred thousand without command, without discipline, without logistics. Call them twenty thousand and you'd still be generous."

Dou Wenda swallowed hard.

"I only have four hundred men," Bai Mao went on calmly. "And that's enough."

He patted the rifle.

"With walls, guns, and discipline? Forty thousand could come and die here."

The prefect nodded, reassured—but only a little.

Bai Mao turned his gaze outward.

Beyond the walls lay everything he couldn't protect.

Danling County was gone. The people there... he didn't need to imagine it.

He clenched his fist.

"...Damn it."

A heavy sigh came from behind him.

Wang Er stepped up, beard stirring in the wind.

"There was nothing we could do," he said quietly. "Too far from Gao Family Village. Even if reinforcements were sent the moment news arrived, they wouldn't make it in time."

Bai Mao nodded. "...I know."

Still, the ache remained.

They had once marched under Wang Jiayin. Now Wang Jiayin's remnants were butchering the countryside.

Guilt was a stubborn thing.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun knows," Wang Er said after a moment. "He always does. Gao Family Village's troops will arrive faster than the court's armies."

Bai Mao looked up.

"...You're right."

Then—

"They're here! They're here!"

Prefect Dou Wenda's scream tore through the air.

Bai Mao snapped to attention, eyes locking onto the horizon.

The roving bandits had arrived.

And this time—

They would pay.

Chapter 543 Put a Shot Right in His Face

"They're here!"

Prefect Dou Wenda's shrill cry ripped across the city wall like a blade.

In the next breath, Pingyang Prefecture exploded into noise.

Bells clanged. Gongs thundered. Someone beat on a hollow bamboo tube like it owed him money. Civilians grabbed whatever they could strike and made sound with the desperation of people who knew silence was a luxury.

It was barely dawn.

The sun hadn't fully climbed the horizon, but the city was already wide awake—and very much afraid.

Wang Er mounted the battlements in three long strides, eyes fixed westward. Bai Mao followed half a step behind, hand already resting on the flintlock at his back.

"Big Brother," Bai Mao asked quietly, squinting into the distance, "which banner?"

Wang Er's jaw tightened.

"Fan Shan Yao."

Bai Mao sucked in a breath.

"...That bastard."

They both knew him.

Back when they still marched under Wang Jiayin, Fan Shan Yao had been impossible to forget—not because of his tactics, not because of his leadership—

—but because the man was obnoxiously good-looking.

"So damn handsome," Bai Mao muttered darkly. "Every time I see that face, I get this overwhelming urge to put a shot right in the middle of it."

A lazy voice suddenly spoke from beside his ear.

"That's jealousy."

Bai Mao nearly jumped out of his boots.

"What the—?! Dao Xuan Tianzun?!"

Li Daoxuan's voice sounded relaxed, amused, and faintly smug.

"Mm. Just woke up. Switched perspectives. First thing I hear is you plotting facial rearrangement."

Bai Mao laughed awkwardly. "Ah... haha... Your Eminence, I was just—"

"Ventilating," Li Daoxuan finished for him. "Perfectly human. Dangerous emotion, though."

Wang Er bowed instinctively. "Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan hummed in acknowledgment, then said, "So this is Fan Shan Yao?"

"Yes," Bai Mao said through clenched teeth. "Unfortunately."

"I've heard about him for a while," Li Daoxuan continued. "Everyone keeps saying how absurdly handsome he is. Bring binoculars."

A soldier rushed forward with a pair.

He hesitated for half a heartbeat, then sensibly handed them to Bai Mao instead of trying to figure out how a divine being was supposed to hold optics.

Bai Mao scanned the enemy camp.

A tattered banner flapped in the morning wind.

Fan Shan Yao.

Below it stood the bandit formation—and near the center, a man on horseback.

Broad shoulders. Straight posture. A face that, objectively speaking, could probably ruin marriages.

Bai Mao adjusted the binoculars and angled them slightly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan looked.

And immediately laughed.

"Hah."

Not cruel laughter.

Disappointed laughter.

"That's it?"

Bai Mao blinked. "That's... it?"

"Handsome," Li Daoxuan allowed. "But empty. Like a lacquered bowl with nothing inside."

He paused, then added, "No depth. No weight. No cultivation behind the eyes. He's the sort of man who only looks impressive from a distance."

Wang Er nodded grimly. "A pretty bandit is still a bandit."

"Exactly." Li Daoxuan sounded satisfied. "He's not more handsome than me."

Bai Mao didn't comment on that.

Li Daoxuan continued casually, "All right. Don't waste a bullet on his face. Shoot wherever's convenient."

Bai Mao felt... vindicated.

Below the walls, the bandits began to howl.

The assault came fast.

Wang Er moved like lightning, shouting orders.

"Arquebusiers—front line!"

Two hundred gun barrels leveled.

"Fire!"

BOOM—BOOM—BOOM!

Smoke rolled across the wall.

Arrows followed. Militia hurled logs and stones. The city roared like a beast defending its den.

The first wave broke almost instantly.

Bandits fell. Others fled. Discipline shattered.

But Fan Shan Yao stayed back, well outside gun range, watching with a smile that made Bai Mao's fingers itch.

"Tch," Bai Mao clicked his tongue. "Coward knows his distance."

The bandits withdrew—for now.

On the wall, men exhaled, shaking with adrenaline.

Prefect Dou Wenda rushed over, face pale. "Commander Wang—ammunition! How much do we have left?"

Bai Mao answered honestly. "A few dozen rounds per man."

Dou Wenda's knees nearly buckled. "That's... that's not nearly enough!"

Bai Mao looked westward.

"They won't last that long," he said calmly.

Because—

Two days earlier.

Gao Family Village.

Li Daoxuan had already seen this coming.

And Cheng Xu was already moving.

Just not recklessly.

Prison Valley was full. Overflowing. A hundred thousand lives under watch, under reform, under pressure.

You didn't leave that unattended.

So Cheng Xu locked the base down.

Then—

Only then—

The army marched.

And when they arrived—

Pingyang would not be alone.

Bai Mao tightened his grip on his rifle.

"Hold the walls," he said quietly. "Help is coming."

From above, Dao Xuan Tianzun watched.

And smiled.

Chapter 544 They're Civilians. Forget It.

Cheng Xu didn't say anything heroic.

He didn't need to.

Before leaving Gao Family Village, he made sure every loose end was tied so tightly it couldn't wriggle.

Two thousand militia stayed behind, spread across the village and the valley like nails hammered into the ground. Then he sent for the oldest batch of labor reform prisoners—the ones who had been here long enough to understand exactly how fragile mercy was.

Chen Baihu arrived with his men.

Six hundred former Guyuan rebels. Once loud, once reckless, once convinced the world could be taken by force.

Now they stood quietly, backs straight, eyes lowered.

Cheng Xu looked at Chen Baihu for a long moment.

"You want out," Cheng Xu said.

Chen Baihu didn't deny it. He swallowed and nodded.

"I think about it every day."

"Then listen carefully." Cheng Xu's voice was calm. "You perform well on this assignment. You keep order. You don't start trouble. When we come back—I'll sign your early release."

For half a breath, Chen Baihu forgot how to breathe.

Then his knees hit the ground.

"I swear on my life," he said, voice shaking, "we will not shame you."

Weapons were issued—not firearms. Blades. Spears. Old shields patched a dozen times over. Enough to hold a line. Enough to prove trust.

Chen Baihu accepted every piece with both hands.

Only then did Cheng Xu mount up.

North.

The Dragon Gate Yellow River Bridge was already screaming.

Shi Jian's voice had gone hoarse hours ago.

"Hurry! Keep moving! Don't stop—don't stop!"

People poured onto the bridge like floodwater breaking a dam. Children clung to sleeves. Old women stumbled and were hauled upright by strangers. Someone dropped a basket—grain scattered and was trampled flat without a glance.

Behind them lay Hejin County.

A city without walls.

Without hope.

Shi Jian didn't regret abandoning the stockade.

The wooden barricades there were thin as lies. Two hundred musketeers. Two hundred garrison troops. Against bandits who moved like a tide?

He'd rather die on the bridge than bury civilians in a pen.

Sandbags were stacked at the midpoint. Stones dragged into place by soldiers already shaking with exhaustion. Musketeers knelt behind the crude barricade, ramming powder with hands blackened by soot.

A scout came running, nearly tripping over his own feet.

"Commander—cavalry!"

Shi Jian's stomach sank.

"...Cavalry?"

"Hui cavalry," the scout gasped. "Heavy armor. Border army type."

Shi Jian cursed under his breath.

Infantry he could stall.

Cavalry didn't stall.

"Faster!" he roared at the bridge. "Everyone faster! If you can walk, walk! If you can run, run!"

Panic rippled through the crowd like a struck drum. People pressed closer, bottlenecking the bridge instead of clearing it.

Shi Jian slapped his helmet off his head.

"Don't panic!" he screamed. "You panic, you die right here!"

Hooves thundered.

They appeared from the northeast—iron cavalry, ranks tight, horses breathing hard. Bows slung across their backs, sabers resting easy at their sides. Beards thick, armor uniform.

Real soldiers.

Shi Jian's hands trembled as he lifted his flintlock.

"Musketeers," he barked. "Hold steady. Do not let them reach the crowd. If they charge—we die first."

Even as he spoke, his eyes slid instinctively toward the bridgehead.

Dao Xuan Tianzun should have been there.

If there was ever a moment—

But Dao Xuan Tianzun wasn't watching him.

Dao Xuan Tianzun was elsewhere.

Shi Jian swallowed.

Then—

The cavalry slowed.

At their front, a man with a scarred face pulled his reins.

Lao Huihui.

He looked at the bridge. At the civilians crushed together like ants under rain.

His lips curled—not in a smile.

"They're civilians," he said.

He turned his horse around.

"Not worth it."

The command rippled backward.

Hundreds of horses wheeled at once.

And just like that, the iron cavalry left.

Shi Jian stood frozen.

"...They're leaving?"

A soldier beside him whispered, almost afraid to believe it, "They really left."

Another man swallowed. "The rumors were right."

"What rumors?" Shi Jian asked dully.

"That Lao Huihui's men aren't like the others," the soldier said. "Border troops. Abandoned by the court. They don't butcher civilians. They take strongholds."

Shi Jian let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"So even bandits," he muttered, "have rules."

The relief lasted less than a minute.

A scream from the watchtower.

"They're coming again!"

Shi Jian's heart slammed into his ribs.

This time, the ground shook differently.

Not disciplined hooves.

Chaos.

A sea of men surged forward—shouting, laughing, waving rusted blades and farm tools. A massive banner flapped above them.

Eight Great Kings.

Shi Jian squinted.

"...Western Camp."

Zhang Xianzhong.

These weren't soldiers.

They were animals let loose.

Someone in the mob laughed wildly.

"There's a bridge full of people!"

"Kill first! Take later!"

They charged.

Straight at the civilians.

Shi Jian raised his rifle.

And knew—

This time—

There would be no mercy.

Chapter 545 Defending the Dragon Gate Bridge

History books would later call this moment "the heroic defense of Dragon Gate Bridge."

History books were written by people who weren't there.

What actually happened began with screaming.

Zhang Xianzhong's men—those self-proclaimed Eight Great Kings of the Western Camp—charged like a natural disaster that had learned how to curse. They yelled, whooped, laughed, and howled with the confidence of men who believed Heaven owed them loot.

Shi Jian immediately began sweating.

Not the dignified kind.

The kind that soaked straight through armor and went, Yes, this is how you die.

"Move! MOVE!" he bellowed. "Across the bridge! Don't stop, don't look back—just RUN!"

The civilians were already panicking. His words simply upgraded their condition from panic to complete spiritual collapse.

People surged forward.

Those already on the bridge ran like their legs were on fire. Those still on the eastern bank shoved like tomorrow had been officially canceled. Children screamed. Old men prayed. Someone dropped a chicken, which immediately became the least important tragedy of the morning.

Shi Jian stood at the rear with four hundred men.

Rearguard.

A polite word meaning: you're the last ones to die.

At least there were no horses.

No cavalry.

That mattered.

Infantry had to run.

And civilians, when sufficiently motivated by the prospect of being chopped into souvenirs, could run surprisingly fast.

"Last group!" Shi Jian roared. "LAST GROUP—!"

When the final villagers stumbled onto the bridge, Shi Jian didn't hesitate.

"Musketeers!"

"Volley! Then fall back!"

Two hundred rifles roared.

Fire. Smoke. Thunder.

Bandits at the front dropped like grain under a sickle.

"GUNS!" someone shrieked.

"The government has guns!"

"What idiot didn't expect that?!" another bandit screamed back. "What, you think officials throw stones? Charge!"

And so they charged.

Shi Jian's men retreated onto the bridge, boots skidding, nerves fraying. They dove behind sandbags and began the most soul-crushing activity known to warfare.

Reloading.

Rifled muskets were wonderful weapons.

Accurate. Powerful. Elegant.

They were also slow enough to make you reconsider every life choice that led you here.

Powder spilled. Ramrods fumbled. Hands shook.

Somewhere, a man whispered a prayer that consisted entirely of swearing.

The two hundred Wei Suo soldiers stepped forward, bows drawn. Arrows flew—not enough to stop the charge, but enough to say please don't kill us yet.

"Fire!"

Another volley.

More bodies fell.

Still not enough.

There were too many bandits. Always too many. History loved that particular joke.

Shi Jian glanced back.

The civilians were halfway across.

Not safe.

But farther.

Farther was hope.

"Fall back!" he shouted. "Again!"

They retreated deeper onto the bridge, abandoning the first barricade. Musketeers reloaded once more, now with the dead-eyed calm of men who had accepted that survival was optional.

The bandits laughed.

"They're slow!"

"They're scared!"

"This bridge is ours!"

The moment they rushed onto the bridge deck, everything changed.

The space narrowed.

The chaos compressed.

Shi Jian's eyes sharpened.

"Fire at will!"

At this range, missing was an achievement.

Bullets tore through packed bodies. Men fell into each other. The bridge became a terrible, crowded place to lie down forever.

Fear flickered.

Just briefly.

Then Zhang Xianzhong laughed.

It wasn't loud.

It didn't need to be.

"If some die," he said calmly, "use them as shields. Push."

There was a pause.

Bandits stared.

Then—some of them actually did it.

They lifted corpses.

Propped them upright.

Used their dead brothers as walking cover.

At that moment, several Wei Suo soldiers discovered that courage has a limit, and theirs had just been exceeded.

"Is... is he human?" someone whispered.

Shi Jian swallowed hard. "Grenades! Throw grenades!"

"But the bridge—!"

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun values people more than wood!" Shi Jian snapped. "THROW!"

Grenades arced.

Explosions followed.

And did almost nothing.

The blast killed a handful—who immediately joined the corpse wall.

The bandits kept coming.

Shi Jian felt a cold truth settle in his bones:

Some enemies didn't fear death.

And some didn't even respect it.

Just as despair began drafting its victory speech—

A cheer erupted behind them.

Joyful. Loud. Completely inappropriate for the situation.

The civilians on the western side parted like a curtain being yanked open.

An army surged forward.

At its head rode a man with his face wrapped in black cloth.

Cheng Xu.

He hadn't fought in years.

He'd been busy with logistics. Training. Managing idiots. Arguing with Xu Dafu. Negotiating with Gao Yiyi. Explaining things to Li Da that should not have required explanation.

In short—he'd been doing important work.

But the battlefield welcomed him like an old drinking buddy.

He looked at the bridge.

Still standing.

Still uncontested.

He laughed.

A big, unrestrained laugh—the kind that suggested he was enjoying himself far too much.

"Shi Jian!" Cheng Xu called. "Down!"

Shi Jian didn't hesitate. He dove behind the sandbags, dragging his men with him like startled ducks.

The bridge deck cleared.

Cheng Xu raised a hand.

And pointed.

Fifteen hundred guns answered.

Chasepot rifles. Rifled muskets. Discipline.

No shouting.

No speeches.

Just efficient, professional murder.

The corpse wall ceased to exist.

The bandits vanished in waves.

Cheng Xu lowered his hand, calm as if he'd just finished inspecting a drill.

Advanced weapons.

Training.

Logistics.

No miracles here.

Just preparation reminding madness why it usually loses.

And on Dragon Gate Bridge, history quietly updated its notes.

Chapter 546 Cheng Xu's Literary Prowess

The volley ended.

Not gradually.

Not politely.

It ended the way a sentence ends when the author gets bored—with a period.

Smoke drifted across Dragon Gate Bridge.

On the far bank, the West Camp Eight Great Kings stood frozen, staring at the bridge like it had personally insulted their ancestors.

This was not how things were supposed to go.

Zhang Xianzhong—who had seen villages burn, cities fall, and officials weep—felt a rare and unfamiliar sensation crawl up his spine.

Unease.

Government troops weren't supposed to hit like that.

They weren't supposed to reload that fast.

They certainly weren't supposed to appear out of nowhere like an ambush written by someone who'd actually read a tactics manual.

"Who in hell are these people?" someone muttered.

Zhang Xianzhong didn't answer.

He was already weighing two ancient bandit philosophies:

Figure it out later.

Stay alive now.

He chose wisely.

"Retreat."

No rallying cry.

No heroic stubbornness.

Just the most reliable technique in bandit history.

Run.

The West Camp Eight Great Kings pivoted as one, fleeing northeast with the speed of men who'd practiced this exact maneuver many times before. They wore no heavy armor—couldn't afford it, didn't want it. Their loads were lighter than those of Gao Family Village's militia.

When they ran, they ran.

In moments, they were gone—leaving behind corpses, wounded groans, and the lingering smell of gunpowder and regret.

Only then did Cheng Xu step onto Dragon Gate Bridge.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

Like a man entering a stage after the audience had finally quieted down.

Shi Jian poked his head out from behind the sandbags, face streaked with sweat and soot. He forced an embarrassed smile.

"Instructor He... you arrived just in time. A little later, and I'd have had to personally thank the underworld for its hospitality."

Cheng Xu glanced at the bridge, then the river, then the distant dust cloud of fleeing rebels.

"Shanxi really does descend into chaos the instant no one's watching," he said mildly. "Just from a glance, I'd say there were at least twenty or thirty thousand of them."

Shi Jian nodded grimly. "Ever since Cao Wenzhao and Wang Cheng'en were transferred to Shaanxi to deal with Shen Yikui's mess, the rebels here have grown... confident."

"Ah." Cheng Xu smiled faintly. "Like students the moment the teacher leaves the classroom."

Shi Jian snorted despite himself. "Exactly. The second Mr. Wang turns around, Gao Sanwa's already hanging from the rafters. Now Cao Wenzhao's gone, and they're about ready to flip the desk and burn the school down."

Cheng Xu's gaze sharpened. "And Du Wenhuan?"

Shi Jian hesitated. "Imprisoned."

Cheng Xu blinked.

Just once.

"...Why?"

It was at this moment that Cheng Xu realized—once again—that he was shockingly out of touch with official politics.

Shi Jian sighed. "Months ago, Shen Yiyuan besieged Qingyang. Du Wenhuan went to avenge the Shen brothers. He killed Shen Yiyuan, yes—but afterward, he butchered refugees from Yanchuan, claimed they were rebels, and padded his report. Wu Shen exposed him. Censor Zhang Chengzhao followed with an impeachment. Du Wenhuan was stripped and jailed."

Cheng Xu listened in silence.

Then he smiled—but it wasn't a pleasant one.

"Killing civilians for merit," he said softly. "If he'd pulled that under Dao Xuan Tianzun's rule, Li Daoxuan would've slapped him into next week. Funny thing is... just days ago, Dao Xuan Tianzun mentioned Gao Family Village needed a military academy head. I was even considering recommending Du Wenhuan."

He shook his head.

"Turns out trash has a smell, no matter how polished the armor."

Shi Jian glanced at the two thousand troops behind Cheng Xu, eyes wide. "Instructor He... are we really committing all our elite forces this time?"

Cheng Xu nodded. "Dao Xuan Tianzun has ordered the consolidation of the entire border line—from Dragon Gate Ferry to Hejin County, Pingyang Prefecture, and down to Puzhou City. This corridor is where rebels love to crawl out of the cracks."

His voice hardened.

"We'll scare them so badly they won't even dream of coming back."

Shi Jian straightened instinctively.

"And this bridge," Cheng Xu continued, tapping the wooden rail, "will become one of the most important arteries in the future. All land trade between Shanxi and Shaanxi will pass here. Since you're guarding it, guard it like your life depends on it."

Shi Jian hesitated. "But with only four hundred men—holding a bridge against tens of thousands..."

Cheng Xu laughed and clapped his shoulder. "Who said you'll stay at four hundred?"

Shi Jian froze. "What?"

"Paper. Brush."

"...Sir?"

"Paper. Brush."

Moments later, Cheng Xu was already writing.

He skipped the opening flattery—no doubt polished enough to blind a censor—and dove straight into fiction with terrifying confidence.

"...The rebel leader Lao Huihui, alongside the West Camp Eight Great Kings, launched a joint assault on Hejin County. Your humble servant, commanding but four hundred men, was ordered to hold the line..."

Shi Jian's eye twitched.

"...Lao Huihui charged with two thousand cavalry. I stood alone before the ranks, rebuked him loudly, appealed to his conscience. Overcome with shame, he withdrew..."

Shi Jian's other eye joined the first.

"...Then the West Camp Eight Great Kings advanced with fifty thousand rebels. I personally led the counterattack, pierced the enemy lines thrice, was struck by countless arrows..."

Cheng Xu paused, considering.

"...Make that numerous. Too many arrows sounds fake."

He continued.

"...After the battle, physicians removed arrowheads weighing no less than two catties..."

He finished, blew on the ink, and leaned back with satisfaction.

"There," he said cheerfully. "That should be worth at least two ranks."

Shi Jian felt cold sweat pour down his spine. "Instructor He... nine out of ten lines in that memorial are outright lies."

"Of course," Cheng Xu said brightly. "Do you think court memorials are biographies?"

He laughed.

"The Emperor knows. The ministers know. Everyone knows. But history doesn't run on facts—it runs on results. You won. The rebels fled. The bridge stands. That's all anyone cares about."

He leaned closer.

"Unless, of course, you're part of the Eunuch Party. Then even the truth can get you killed."

Shi Jian had no response.

Cheng Xu patted his shoulder again. "Relax. You'll be promoted soon enough."

Stunned, Shi Jian sealed the letter anyway. He collected the severed ears of the fallen rebels—grim but persuasive evidence—and sent everything off to Wang Cheng'en for inspection.

After issuing a few final instructions, Cheng Xu marched northeast with his forces.

As for the people of Hejin County—

They were terrified.

Returning to a wall-less town after this was unthinkable. The water fort, shabby as it was, suddenly looked like paradise.

Shi Jian accepted all ten thousand refugees.

And immediately realized the fort was far too small.

That same day, he wrote to San Shier of Gao Family Village.

San Shier replied without hesitation:

"Approved. Cement is on the way. Blue Hats too. Use the refugees as labor—turn that broken fort into a concrete castle."

Shi Jian nearly wept with joy.

Meanwhile—

Xing Honglang's army had just departed Puzhou City.

Several dozen li later, a miserable little town appeared along the Yellow River—no walls, half-ruined, barely standing.

Gao Chuwu squinted. "That place looks like a sigh made of bricks. Where are we?"

Xing Honglang replied calmly, "Sunji Town. Linyi County. It had walls once. Old Zhang Fei tore them down."

She paused.

"Chaos tends to be thorough."

Chapter 547 Another Bridge for You

"Sunji Town of Linyi County?"

Gao Chuwu scratched his head so hard it looked like he was trying to dig out a memory with brute force. "That name... I swear I've heard it somewhere."

A head popped out beside him.

Lao Nanfeng grinned. "Back when we were still running Yongji Water Fort. Before Puzhou. Remember? We hired people from Linyi County to dig limestone. Quite a few of them said they were from Sunji Town."

Gao Chuwu's eyes lit up. "Right! That's it!"

Sunji Town.

A place that history had slapped around without apology.

When the bandit Old Zhang Fei swept through, he seized the town and tore down its walls—brick by brick—leaving nothing but open ground and bad luck. After that, any bandit passing by treated it like a roadside inn that didn't charge.

Worse still, many townsfolk had been dragged off and forced into bandit ranks.

Only after Xing Honglang killed Old Zhang Fei at Yongji did those people finally crawl back to freedom. They worked for the water fort, hauling stone, mixing lime, surviving on honest wages and thin gruel. When the fighting eased, some returned home.

Returned to a town with no walls.

No protection.

And no future.

Xing Honglang's column hadn't even fully halted when the town erupted.

"They're here!"

"It's Chief Xing's army!"

"Chief Xing? Watch your mouth—that's General Xing now!"

A crowd surged out like a dam breaking.

People who had once worked at Yongji rushed forward, faces bright, voices loud, joy spilling everywhere. Their excitement was contagious; even the more cautious villagers—those who didn't recognize Xing Honglang—were dragged along, standing at a distance, peeking and whispering, wanting to believe but afraid to hope.

"General Xing! Are you doing business here?"

"Are you building another water fort?"

"Yongji was too far—I had to come home! If you build one here, I'll work day and night!"

"I'll do anything! Just let me work again!"

The town buzzed like a festival that hadn't existed in years.

Xing Honglang felt... awkward.

"I'm just passing through," she said carefully. "Heading north to suppress bandits."

The joy froze.

"Oh."

The disappointment was immediate and unfiltered.

Because for common folk like them, working for Xing Honglang had been the best days of their lives.

Fair pay.

No deductions.

No tricks.

No overseers who "forgot" wages.

You worked, you ate.

It shouldn't have been miraculous.

But in this era, it was.

Xing Honglang frowned slightly. These people needed help—but how?

At that moment, a calm voice spoke from Gao Chuwu's shoulder.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatar.

"Across the Yellow River," it said mildly, "lies Heyang County."

The crowd gasped.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"He's here!"

The avatar continued, "From there, it is very close to Qichuan Ferry."

Xing Honglang nodded. "Cross here, and you reach Sanji Village. From there, it's barely a dozen li to Qichuan Ferry."

The avatar's tone was almost casual.

"Then connect them."

Silence.

"Build a bridge," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "So Sunji Town can receive supplies, trade, and work from Qichuan Ferry."

Qichuan Ferry was no backwater anymore.

It had docks, fleets, warehouses, and the Second Steel Mill—the beating industrial heart of Gao Family Village's artillery. A town had grown around it, loud and alive.

And here, just across the river—

Poverty.

Because water, apparently, was stronger than fate.

"I grant you," Dao Xuan Tianzun said, "another great bridge."

The villagers blinked.

"Grant... a bridge?"

Xing Honglang and the others, however, reacted very differently.

"What?!"

"A bridge?!"

"We missed Longmen—and now there's another?!"

Gao Chuwu laughed so hard he nearly dropped his halberd. "Quick! Everyone! To the river!"

The militia sprinted.

The villagers followed, half-confused, half-dizzy with excitement.

The Yellow River surged before them, vast and violent, roaring like something alive.

From inside the box, Li Daoxuan glanced at his monitor.

Sunji Town.

Future site of the Linyi Yellow River Bridge.

Budget: 2.32 billion RMB.

He nodded.

"Good location."

He reached for the building blocks.

The golden hand descended.

First, the riverbanks were compacted—soil pressed, stabilized, reinforced. Then—

Boom.

A plastic pier slammed into the ground.

The militia cheered.

The villagers screamed.

Then stopped screaming.

Because Xing Honglang wasn't afraid.

And neither was Dao Xuan Tianzun.

"Oh," someone whispered. "It's not a monster."

"It's... benevolent."

The golden hand moved with patient precision.

Click.

Clack.

Segment after segment locked into place.

This bridge was longer than Longmen's, requiring multiple piers. Li Daoxuan drove them deep into the riverbed, tamped them down, adjusted alignment like a craftsman rather than a god.

Time passed.

And then—

The Linyi Yellow River Bridge stood complete.

Spanning destiny.

The river bowed beneath it.

Xing Honglang stared, breathless.

The villagers stared, stunned.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatar chuckled.

"I've already informed Bai Yuan at Qichuan Ferry. He'll bring people over soon. As for Sunji Town—start building roads. Cement roads. One to the town. One to Qichuan Ferry."

The villagers didn't fully understand.

But they understood work.

"Road construction!"

"We have work!"

"I'm going to run across the bridge!"

"You fool! It's several li long—you'll starve before you finish!"

Laughter erupted.

But Xing Honglang and the others saw the deeper truth.

This bridge didn't just help Sunji Town.

It opened a land corridor between Heyang County and Puzhou City.

The Gao Family Village militia could now move faster.

And history—

History had just been nudged.

Again.

Chapter 548 I'm Completely Out

Bai Yuan, Naval Commander of Gao Family Village, stood before a mirror in a spotless white robe.

He turned slightly to the left.

Then to the right.

Then nodded at his reflection with deep satisfaction.

"Mm. Impeccable."

Only after confirming—beyond all doubt—that he looked devastatingly handsome did he gather his retainers, mount his horse, and charge across the newly completed Linyi Yellow River Bridge.

The experience was... intoxicating.

The wind howled across the bridge deck. His white robe snapped and billowed like something straight out of a painting. The Yellow River thundered beneath him, vast and obedient, as though it, too, was impressed.

For a brief, dangerous moment, Bai Yuan almost fell in love with himself.

Fortunately, he recovered in time.

Bai Yuan's position granted him an unusual freedom.

He wasn't an official, so no bureaucratic borders constrained him.

He wasn't a bandit or salt smuggler, skulking about like a rat in daylight.

He was gentry.

An old family.

Money, but no post.

Respectable, mobile, and—most importantly—useful.

Men like him traveled freely, bought land, ran enterprises, and quietly held regions together while officials rotated in and out like seasonal decorations.

Thus, Sunji Town naturally fell under his jurisdiction.

As he crossed the bridge, he saw them.

A dense crowd of townsfolk gathered on the eastern bank, staring up at the white-robed figure like he'd stepped out of a storybook.

Bai Yuan smiled faintly.

He snapped open his folding fan with a practiced shap.

Facing outward were two large characters:

Gentleman.

"Esteemed villagers," Bai Yuan announced warmly. "My surname is Bai. You may call me Master Bai or Squire Bai. I, too, serve Dao Xuan Tianzun."

At the mention of the name, the crowd stirred.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun already knows of your hardships," Bai Yuan continued smoothly. "Just now, he issued a divine decree—ordering me to help you rebuild your homes and prosper."

The reaction was immediate.

Cheers erupted like boiling water.

Bai Yuan raised his fan again. "To prosper, one must first build roads. We'll start by laying a cement road from Sunji Town to Qichuan Ferry. All laborers will be provided meals—and paid three catties of flour per day."

The cheers doubled.

Then—

"...Bai Yuan... Bai Yuan..."

A voice echoed.

The ink-painted image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on the back of the fan opened its eyes.

And its mouth.

Bai Yuan screamed.

He snapped the fan shut so fast it nearly took his fingers off.

The voice immediately resumed—this time from the gold-embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest.

"I was speaking," the avatar said calmly. "Why did you close the fan?"

Bai Yuan nearly dropped to his knees. "Forgive me, Dao Xuan Tianzun! The fan suddenly speaking startled me—pure reflex! I beg forgiveness!"

He reopened the fan.

With a faint shimmer, the presence shifted back into the ink-painted image.

"Recently," Dao Xuan Tianzun said, "Lao Huihui and the Eight Great Kings of the West Camp attacked the Longmen Yellow River Bridge. Shi Jian barely held them until Instructor He Jiu arrived."

"Oh?" Bai Yuan murmured, instantly attentive.

"They attacked Dragon Gate Ferry because it has always been the most critical crossing between Shaanxi and Shanxi," Dao Xuan Tianzun continued. "Now that a bridge stands there, they will covet it even more."

Bai Yuan nodded. "And now we have another bridge."

"Correct," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "This bridge will draw attention—bandits and officials alike."

Bai Yuan understood immediately. "Then Sunji Town cannot be developed alone. It must be fortified."

Silence followed.

Dao Xuan Tianzun was satisfied.

Bai Yuan snapped his fan shut, eyes sharp. "Send word to Gao Family Village. Request funds, materials, and Blue Hats. Sunji Town will become a bridgehead fortress. No enemy touches this bridge."

He paused. "Oh—and ask for a few middle school graduates. They don't need to be prodigies. Anyone who's finished middle school will do."

The retainer bowed and left at once.

Bai Yuan gazed north, toward Dragon Gate Ferry.

Shi Jian must be doing the same, he thought.

Fortifying. Expanding.

Gao Family Village was growing faster than anyone expected.

The bottleneck was no longer money.

It was people.

Back at the main fortress—

San Shier was dying.

Not metaphorically.

Emotionally.

He clutched his temples, staring at stacks of documents like they were plotting his assassination.

Factories were opening in Puzhou.

Blue Hats were being drained away.

Baishui. Dali. Han City.

Everywhere demanded expertise.

Shi Jian wanted Blue Hats.

Dragon Gate Ferry wanted Blue Hats.

San Shier slammed the table. "Blue Hats! Everyone wants Blue Hats! Where am I supposed to pull them from?! Even the cleverest housewife can't cook without rice!"

"Master," Tan Liwen said gently, "that idiom exceeded four characters."

"IS THIS REALLY THE TIME?" San Shier snapped. "This is neglecting the root to chase the branches!"

Tan Liwen nodded seriously. "Our innovations are advancing too quickly. Without Blue Hats supervising, workers revert to old methods. Every new territory requires more specialists. There is no surplus—only faster training."

San Shier groaned... then froze.

"Wait."

He flipped through a dossier pile like a man searching for air.

"Puzhou's Third Steel Factory... operational. Stable. Blue Hats there should be free."

He seized the opportunity like a drowning man grabbing driftwood.

"Transfer a dozen. Immediately. Send them to Dragon Gate Ferry."

Orders flew.

Finally—finally—San Shier set down his brush.

Then the door burst open.

A retainer bowed deeply. "Third Steward! I bring word from Master Bai. Dao Xuan Tianzun decreed that Sunji Town is to be developed into a bridgehead fortress. He requests Blue Hats. And a few middle school graduates."

San Shier screamed.

"Aaaaaaagh! NONE LEFT! I'M COMPLETELY OUT! NOT ONE! ABSOLUTELY NONE!"

The sound echoed through the fortress.

Somewhere, the future quietly laughed.

Chapter 549 I've Got Blue Hats

If Bai Yuan's previous request had merely scratched the wound—

Then his latest plea was a full-arm plunge straight into San Shier's already-bleeding heart.

San Shier and Tan Liwen sat facing each other at the long council table.

At the same moment, they both raised their hands.

At the same moment, they both let them drop again.

No words.

Because there really were no words left.

Tan Liwen finally sighed first, rubbing his temples. "If this were any other order, I'd pretend I didn't hear it."

San Shier stared at the ceiling, eyes hollow. "Unfortunately... it came from Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Silence.

That name had weight. Not metaphorical weight—real weight. The kind that crushed excuses flat before they even formed.

"Divine decrees," Tan Liwen muttered, "are not things we can ignore. Even if we sold our homes, pawned our shoes, and mortgaged our dignity, the decree must still be fulfilled."

San Shier slammed his forehead onto the table with a dull thud.

"Blue Hats... Blue Hats... where in the nine layers of bureaucracy am I supposed to find more Blue Hats?"

He dragged out thick stacks of documents, flipping pages so fast the paper screamed for mercy.

Factories in Puzhou.

Roads in Baishui.

Fortifications at Dragon Gate Ferry.

Now Sunji Town, too.

Everyone wanted Blue Hats.

Everyone needed experts.

And Gao Family Village, for the first time, had run headfirst into a problem money couldn't solve.

People.

Just as San Shier was on the verge of questioning his life choices, a familiar silhouette appeared at the council hall entrance.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. Wearing the relaxed smile of a man who commanded tens of thousands of backs and shovels.

"Gentlemen," Zhong Gaoliang said cheerfully, clasping his hands. "Long time no see."

San Shier looked up.

"...You."

If San Shier were a drowning man, Zhong Gaoliang would be the unexpected piece of driftwood—slightly damp, possibly splintered, but still floating.

Zhong Gaoliang, Warden of Labor Reform Valley.

The man currently in charge of one hundred and twenty thousand labor reform prisoners.

In sheer manpower alone, his authority rivaled an entire county.

There was a saying circulating quietly around Gao Family Village:

If a mountain blocked Zhong Gaoliang's road, he'd just point at it and say 'dig,' and by tomorrow morning the mountain would be gone.

Zhong Gaoliang smiled. "I've come to make a small request. A few labor reform prisoners performed exceptionally well recently. I was hoping to reward them with some of those... miraculous foods bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

"I have no time," San Shier replied flatly.

Zhong Gaoliang blinked. "Wow. That wasn't even an idiom."

"No time to think of idioms!" San Shier snapped.

Now that caught Zhong Gaoliang's interest. "Oh? What could possibly have our Third Steward so flustered?"

San Shier waved him over and explained the entire situation—the bridges, the fortifications, Bai Yuan's request, and the catastrophic shortage of Blue Hats.

Zhong Gaoliang listened... then burst out laughing.

"That's it?"

San Shier stared. "That's it?!"

Zhong Gaoliang waved a hand casually. "If you need people, why not come to me? I've got a hundred and twenty thousand over there. Surely a few are usable."

San Shier squinted. "Yellow Hats, sure. But Blue Hats? Technicians?"

Zhong Gaoliang crossed his arms confidently. "You underestimate labor reform prisoners. Their past professions span all thirty-six trades. Carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, scholars—you name it. Plenty can read, write, calculate."

He leaned forward slightly. "They've been building roads, leveling mountains, constructing workshops. After working alongside Gao Family Village's technicians, some of the sharper ones already are Blue Hats in everything but name."

San Shier's eyes lit up.

"So that's how it is!"

Then his expression collapsed again.

"But they're still serving sentences!" he hissed. "How can we let them wear Blue Hats and send them to Shanxi? What if they run? What if something happens? Dao Xuan Tianzun—"

Before he could finish, the golden-thread embroidery on his chest stirred.

The embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun calmly opened its mouth.

"You may try it."

San Shier froze.

When Dao Xuan Tianzun speaks, discussion ends.

San Shier straightened immediately. "Very well. Zhong Gaoliang, select them yourself. Skill, character, reform progress—no mistakes."

Zhong Gaoliang bowed. "Understood."

One Day Later

Huanglong Mountain — Labor Reform Valley

For once, the valley buzzed with excitement rather than exhaustion.

At the fortress gate, a line of Labor Reform Model Workers stood upright.

Among them were two old acquaintances: Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou.

Today, they looked... different.

Gone were the undyed cotton uniforms.

They now wore blue work clothes and blue safety helmets—identical to Gao Family Village's technicians, except for a single character stamped on the helmet:

Trial.

The moment they put them on, something strange happened.

For the briefest instant—

They felt free.

Around them, tens of thousands of labor reform prisoners stared with undisguised envy.

Zhong Gaoliang stood atop the wall, megaphone in hand.

"Congratulations," he announced. "Due to your outstanding performance and technical ability, Dao Xuan Tianzun has granted you a special assignment."

The crowd erupted.

"You will leave the Labor Reform Valley and be deployed to Shanxi. During this period, you will receive treatment equivalent to free technical workers."

Gasps.

"Your wages will be slightly reduced," Zhong Gaoliang added calmly, "but this difference may be exchanged for sentence reduction."

Qi Cheng and Chen Ergou grabbed each other's hands.

"The chance for sentence reduction!" they whispered, eyes shining.

After years of full bellies, people always want more.

Freedom.

Qi Cheng shouted first. "Warden! I swear I will perform excellently!"

Chen Ergou followed immediately. "I won't disappoint!"

Zhong Gaoliang chuckled. "You answer not to me—but to Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The prisoners fell silent.

"Look at your chests."

They looked down.

There—embroidered in five-colored thread—was Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Suddenly, the image on Qi Cheng's chest smiled.

Qi Cheng yelped.

Then Chen Ergou's smiled.

Then the next.

Like falling dominoes, smiles spread across the line.

A collective gasp rose.

Zhong Gaoliang's voice turned cold. "Heaven watches. If anyone harbors wicked intent—do not embarrass yourself by trying. Dao Xuan Tianzun will see."

Qi Cheng swallowed hard. "I would never!"

The Blue Hats shouted in unison. "We will never disappoint Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Zhong Gaoliang nodded.

"Good. Depart."

A retainer from Bai Family Fortress stepped forward.

"Follow me."

And so—

The first trial Blue Hats marched out of Labor Reform Valley.

Chapter 550 Rain in the Box

At noon, Li Daoxuan was in a rare state of peace.

One bowl of shredded pork with fungus over rice.

One hand on the mouse.

One eye on the screen.

One mouth doing its absolute best to chew and observe reality at the same time.

In other words—maximum efficiency, minimum dignity.

Because of this, he hadn't "co-sensed" into the box to personally stir up trouble. For once, he was behaving like a normal human being eating lunch.

The box's perspective was currently locked onto Xing Honglang's group.

They were deep in Shanxi territory, moving toward an area where conflict could erupt at any moment. This was not the time to look away. Li Daoxuan leaned closer to the screen, rice bowl balanced precariously on the desk like a ticking bomb.

The group reached a river.

From Li Daoxuan's god's-eye view, the so-called river looked... pitiful.

It was narrow. Shallow. Barely flowing.

"This?" Li Daoxuan muttered around a mouthful of rice. "This is a river? Looks like a badly drawn line on a map."

Inside the box, Xing Honglang raised her arm and pointed calmly.

"This," she said, "is the Fen River—the mother river of Shanxi."

Gao Chuwu nearly choked on air.

"...This? The mother river?"

He stared at the trickle as if it had personally insulted his ancestors.

"How many people does Shanxi have, then? A dozen?"

Xing Honglang smiled faintly, the kind of smile that carried history's weight and disappointment in equal measure.

"It wasn't always like this."

Li Daoxuan paused mid-chew.

That tone—that was the tone people used when talking about fallen dynasties, old heroes, and hairlines that never came back.

Curious, he freed one hand, typed Fen River into his browser, and hit search.

Information flooded in.

Once upon a time, the Fen River was truly magnificent—its tributaries spreading across Shanxi like veins, nourishing farmland, supporting trade, earning it the title Mother River. There had been a saying: Ten thousand rafts descend the Fen.

Then came centuries of deforestation.

Then soil erosion.

Then silting.

By the Ming Dynasty, boats could only pass in summer and autumn. In winter and spring, people literally crossed it by piling dirt into makeshift bridges.

And now?

The Little Ice Age.

Relentless drought.

Chongzhen's fourth year, edging toward the fifth—midwinter.

All debuffs stacked.

No wonder it looked like a drainage ditch having an identity crisis.

Inside the box, Xing Honglang continued, pointing downstream.

"Don't underestimate it. From the Yellow River through Hejin County, all the way to Pingyang Prefecture. In summer, when the water's high, we can transport goods by boat and support Wang Xiaohua."

Li Daoxuan's eyes flicked to his map software.

"...Oh?"

He zoomed out.

Sure enough—the Fen River connected straight to Pingyang Prefecture.

His view inside the box hadn't expanded that far yet, which was why he hadn't noticed.

A thought quietly took shape.

Pingyang Prefecture currently had only Wang Xiaohua's forces stationed there. No other officials. No competing power.

In practice, it was already Gao Family Village territory—just without the paperwork stamped.

Grain was being transported by land.

Slow. Expensive. Vulnerable.

Water transport would be infinitely better.

Problem was—this river.

Li Daoxuan picked up a ruler and measured the river in the box.

Ten centimeters.

"...Wow."

Converted to real scale, the downstream section was only about twenty meters wide.

And that was downstream.

Upstream? Middle sections?

Probably one enthusiastic cow could block it by lying down sideways.

Li Daoxuan walked to his balcony, grabbed a small gardening shovel, and held it up thoughtfully.

"One scoop," he muttered, lining it up visually. "Just one scoop, and I could double this thing."

Then he frowned.

"...But widening alone won't help if there's no water."

Late Ming disasters weren't just about rebellion. Water scarcity was the real killer.

As he pondered—

Something felt off.

Inside the box...

It was raining.

Li Daoxuan froze.

"...Huh?"

This wasn't his doing.

No summoning.

No divine UI prompt.

No dramatic soundtrack.

Rain was just... falling.

In all his time watching the box—years of famine, drought, suffering—this was the first natural rainfall he had ever witnessed.

From his perspective, it was surreal.

The rain materialized from the underside of the box lid, cascading downward in sheets. A real downpour.

Inside the box, Xing Honglang's group stopped dead.

For people who had lived through endless drought, the sound alone was enough to stun them.

Their first instinct was immediate.

"Did Dao Xuan Tianzun send rain?"

They looked up.

No dragon heads.

No divine apparitions.

Gao Chuwu blinked. "Huh? No Dragon Kings this time?"

Zheng Daniu scratched his head. "That's... new."

Old Nanfeng snorted. "What's strange about rain? Have you all gone mad from drought? Rain is normal."

Zao Ying shot back instantly. "I'd believe that if you weren't flailing your arms like you're blessing crops."

Old Nanfeng froze mid-flail.

"...Habit."

They burst out laughing.

"Hahahaha—rain! It's raining!"

Li Daoxuan rapidly shifted perspectives, scanning wide.

Shanxi.

Shaanxi.

Upper Yellow River.

Rain everywhere.

It wasn't a miracle.

Just... weather.

Even during the Little Ice Age, the sky hadn't completely forgotten how to cry.

Li Daoxuan leaned back.

"With this," he murmured, "the Fen River's water level should rise."

He glanced again at the narrow channel.

"...Guess the shovel gets promoted."

Inside the box, the group trudged along in the rain.

Xing Honglang sighed. "If this river were navigable again, we wouldn't be suffering like this. We could sit on a boat, eat hot pot, sing songs, and drift straight to Pingyang."

Old Nanfeng laughed loudly. "Dream on. This river's been choked with mud for years. Boats? Impossible."

The rain above them suddenly lessened.

Old Nanfeng blinked. "Huh? Is it stopping?"

Xing Honglang frowned. "No. Something's blocking it."

Zao Ying shouted, "Look up!"

They raised their heads.

The clouds parted.

A colossal golden hand, gripping an enormous shovel, descended from the heavens.

The rain slid off its surface, completely shielded.

Silence fell.

"...Is Dao Xuan Tianzun," Gao Chuwu whispered, "digging?"

The shovel plunged into the river ahead.

With a single, casual scoop—

A mountain-sized mass of silt vanished.

The riverbed widened instantly.

The Fen River, silent for centuries, felt its throat open again.