

## Great Ming 571

### Chapter 571 How Much Grain Is Left?

To the west of Daning County stretched a district so run down that it barely deserved to be called part of the city at all. Crumbling shacks leaned against one another for support, their walls cracked and their roofs sagging, as if a strong wind might scatter them into dust. There was not a single proper house in sight. This was clearly where the poorest of the poor had gathered, the kind of place even bandits would wrinkle their noses at.

After hearing from the soldiers that survivors had been found here, Cheng Xu, Xing Honglang, and the others hurried over at once. At an intersection clogged with rubble and broken timbers, they ran straight into Ma Xianglin. When they saw one another, a flicker of relief passed between them without a word being spoken.

They had all feared the same thing, that not a single living soul remained in the city. To find survivors here felt like stumbling upon a patch of living green in a land of ash and gray.

The group moved together into the heart of the district.

At once, they saw figures peering out from doorways and holes in broken walls. Crowds of common folk huddled inside their dilapidated homes, clutching one another, eyes wide with terror as they stared at the soldiers in the street.

Ma Xianglin looked at the collapsing houses lining both sides of the road and let out a quiet sigh. "This place must have been too poor even for the rebels to bother with."

Cheng Xu shook his head. "They rob the rich, but they also squeeze the poor. Poverty alone would not stop bandits from preying on them."

Ma Xianglin frowned slightly. "That is true. Then how did this district survive?"

No one answered at once. The question hung in the air, puzzling everyone.

Xing Honglang cast a meaningful glance at her old subordinate, Lao Zhu. "Go ask."

Lao Zhu nodded. He pulled a steamed bun from his satchel, then ducked into one of the shacks. A moment later, he emerged again, followed by a young woman who was stuffing the bun into her mouth with desperate urgency. Some of the terror in her eyes had faded.

After all, when someone gave you food, it usually meant they did not intend to kill you.

She swallowed several mouthfuls in a hurry. Seeing that the people around her wore relatively calm and even kind expressions, her courage slowly returned. "Sirs... is there... something you wish to ask?"

Xing Honglang forced her face into what she believed was a gentle expression. "The rebels did not kill you?"

No matter how hard she tried, her features twisted into something fierce, and the word kill seemed to echo ominously in her tone. The young woman immediately misunderstood.

Could this female general think we surrendered to the bandits, and that is why they spared us? Is she planning to settle accounts now?

The thought made her body tremble uncontrollably. She no longer dared to eat the bun, retreating several steps in fear.

Zao Ying stepped forward at once. "Sister Xing, you frightened her. Let me try."

She walked up with what she thought was the gentlest expression she could manage. "Do not be afraid. We do not eat people."

"Ah!"

The woman recoiled even farther, eyes filled with pure panic.

The group exchanged helpless looks.

In the end, Zhang Fengyi stepped forward. "Do not be scared. We only want to ask you a few questions."

Her appearance was unremarkable, her expression calm and ordinary, like a kind middle aged woman from any town. At last, the young woman stopped backing away.

Everyone glanced at Xing Honglang and Zao Ying with a trace of sympathy.

Both women clenched their fists at the same time, veins bulging on the backs of their hands. "Are you looking for a beating?"

Zhang Fengyi soothed the young woman for a while longer before she finally dared to speak. "This district... was occupied by a rebel leader called Chuǎng Wang. He said everyone living here was very poor, so he spared our lives. He did not come in to rob or kill, and he did not force us to join his army. His men guarded the outer perimeter of the district, so no other bandits dared come in."

A murmur of surprise rippled through the group.

Wang Er and Bai Mao, however, looked less astonished than the others. When Wang Er had wanted to leave Wang Jiayin's forces in the past, Chuǎng Wang had spoken up for him, asking the others to let him go so as not to break the code of brotherhood. This had happened long ago, but they still remembered it clearly.

Among a crowd of ruthless bandits, this Chuǎng Wang was considered someone who still maintained a shred of order, not entirely sunk into wanton slaughter.

Wang Er nodded. "If Chuǎng Wang held this area, then it makes sense. That man dislikes killing for no reason."

Bai Mao nodded in agreement.

Perched quietly on Gao Chuwu's shoulder, Dao Xuan Tianzun reflected inwardly. At this point in time, Chuǎng Wang was not yet Li Zicheng. He should be Gao Yingxiang.

Historical records said that Chuǎng Wang Gao Yingxiang raised his forces in Anse and had once been a horse trader. Beyond that, there was little detail about his character, his background, or his life. Other rebel leaders were vividly described. Li Zicheng was cunning and ungrateful. Zhang Xianzhong was a relentless butcher. The rebel leader nicknamed Cao Cao was known for mediating disputes. Fan Shan Yao, Gao Jie, was famous for his handsome appearance. Only Gao Yingxiang seemed to drift through the records as nothing more than a name and a list of battles.

In a novel, such a figure would be called someone with a forgettable face, a sign that the author lacked the skill to give him defining traits, leaving him to blur into the background until readers forgot him entirely once the book was closed.

Even the author of *Those Ming Dynasty Things* could only describe him as, "Gao Yingxiang was a peculiar man, and his peculiarity lay precisely in his complete lack of distinguishing features."

This was the first time Dao Xuan Tianzun had learned anything about Chuǎng Wang Gao Yingxiang beyond the dry lines of history.

Ma Xianglin spoke again. "So there are people like this among the rebels. That is a good thing. Sparing the common folk counts as a good deed. How many people survived in this district?"

The young woman answered timidly, "Maybe a few thousand... I am not sure... After the rebels entered the city, we never dared leave our homes..."

Ma Xianglin raised his voice. "White Pole Soldiers, go door to door. Call out everyone hiding inside. Count them and see how we can help."

The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers moved at once, knocking on doors and calling out. Before long, streams of common folk emerged hesitantly from their homes.

This vast slum truly hid many people. Once gathered together, there were roughly three thousand individuals, all from the lowest rungs of society.

During the days the rebels occupied Daning County, these people had hidden indoors without daring to step outside. To avoid drawing bandits to their doors, they had not even dared light cooking fires or let smoke rise. They ate their food raw. When the cold set in, they did not dare light braziers or heat their sleeping platforms, instead huddling together and shivering through the nights.

After enduring days like this, every one of them looked wretched beyond words.

Ma Xianglin watched the scene, his heart aching, yet unsure what he could possibly do.

Just then, he heard Cheng Xu ask from nearby, "How much military grain do our troops still have?"

Zheng Daniu grinned broadly. "None. Not a single grain left."

Cheng Xu snorted. "Your appetite is not a reliable measure. Next."

Zao Ying chimed in, "Why do you not believe him? The military grain really is gone. Look, my bag is empty too."

Cheng Xu shot back, "Your rations are probably all in Daniu's stomach. You are not reliable either. Next."

Laughter broke out among the group.

Bai Mao raised his hand. "I have one day's worth of rations left."

"I also have one day's worth."

"Most of us have about one day left."

Cheng Xu nodded and pulled out a map. "Daning County is still forty li from the Yellow River bank. We can reach it in one day. Our rations are just enough to get us there."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Cheng Xu made his decision. "Good. All soldiers will give their remaining rations to the common folk. We will go hungry for a day and march to the Yellow River. It will not be a problem."

Chapter 572 Food Awaits by the Yellow River

The instant Cheng Xu finished giving the order, Zheng Daniu's face collapsed into a picture of utter misery, as if the sky itself had fallen on his head.

"What kind of cruel command is this?" he wailed, clutching his chest. "Giving away our rations and going hungry for a whole day? That's torture! Absolute torture! I don't want to starve for a day!"

Zao Ying reached out and tugged his sleeve, her voice dry. "Daniu, you don't have any rations left anyway. You already ate all of mine too. Even if we didn't give the food to the common folk, you'd still be starving for a day."

Zheng Daniu froze.

The truth struck him like a hammer. His eyes went blank, and with a dull thump, he collapsed straight onto the ground, sprawled flat, looking as though all will to live had left his body.

Cheng Xu did not spare him a second glance. Once the order was issued, no one hesitated. The soldiers calmly pulled out the last bits of military rations they had kept hidden in their packs, some only a handful of grain, others a hard biscuit or two, and piled everything together before handing it over to representatives of the common folk.

There was no shouting, no grand speeches, just quiet, decisive action.

Watching this scene, Ma Xianglin felt a heaviness settle in his chest. When it comes to truly cherishing the people, he thought, I am still far behind them.

He clenched his teeth, then turned to Zhang Fengyi beside him. "Should we give ours as well?"

Zhang Fengyi lowered her voice. "Will there really be food when we reach the Yellow River?"

Ma Xianglin hesitated briefly, then answered honestly. "Judging by how confident they are, there should be. Even so, I cannot understand how they have the ability to transport supplies this far up the Yellow River."

Zhang Fengyi fell silent, then murmured, "If Mother were here, she would certainly help the common folk too, wouldn't she?"

Ma Xianglin nodded without hesitation. "Without a doubt."

"Then let's give it," Zhang Fengyi said firmly. "It's better than standing by and watching people starve to death."

And so, the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers also brought out their remaining grain. Not a single man held anything back. All of it was handed over and entrusted to the representatives of the common folk, to be distributed among themselves.

Only after everything had been given away did Cheng Xu step forward again. "Good people," he said, raising his voice so all could hear, "Daning County is no longer a safe place. There is no food left, and there are no city walls to protect you. Bandits could return at any time. If that happens, you will once again be in grave danger. Why not come with us? We will take you to a place where you can live in safety."

How could the common folk possibly refuse?

They had just crawled back from the edge of death, and now, standing before them, was an army that treated them like its own kin. Almost without thinking, they all nodded, voices overlapping as they agreed.

Thus, soldiers and civilians merged into a single, vast procession. Nearly ten thousand people abandoned Daning County and began marching westward toward the Yellow River.

The rain continued to fall, cold and relentless, soaking clothes and chilling bones. Whether it was the weather or the lingering fear in their hearts, no one could quite tell.

Forty li was an exhausting distance for people who had been starving for days. Fortunately, the military rations they had just eaten gave them a little strength, just enough to keep them moving, though every step felt heavy.

They struggled westward along the Xinshui River, passing village after village that had been burned out by bandits, and long stretches of land where not a single living soul could be seen.

Winter winds cut through them, rain plastered hair to faces, and hunger gnawed deeper with every step. By the time evening approached, the small meal they had eaten at midday was long gone. Common folk, White Pole Soldiers, and Gao Family Village militia alike were cold, exhausted, and ravenous, many barely able to keep their feet.

"Almost there!" Cheng Xu shouted, forcing strength into his voice. "The Yellow River is just ahead. Two more li, and we're there!"

"Food... at the Yellow River?" The common folk whispered among themselves, half hopeful, half afraid to believe.

Even Ma Xianglin found it hard to accept, yet at this point there was no turning back. "Everyone, hold on a little longer," he urged. "Just two more li!"

"Someone collapsed here!"

"Get him onto a horse!" Zao Ying ordered at once. One of her cavalymen dismounted without hesitation, helped the fallen person onto his horse, and began leading the animal on foot.

"Another one's down!"

"Put him on a horse!" Another cavalryman dismounted and started walking.

Step by step, dragging themselves forward, they finally reached the Yellow River.

At the place where the Xishui River met the great Yellow River, the exhausted common folk could go no farther. They sank down along the riverbank, breathing hard, limbs trembling.

Ma Xianglin walked to the water's edge and stopped, staring at the broad, muddy current. "Here?" he asked quietly. "There will be grain here?"

Gao Chuwu grinned. "Very soon, the boats will arrive."

Ma Xianglin frowned, puzzled.

Gao Chuwu lifted his hand and pointed south along the river channel. "Look."

Ma Xianglin followed his gesture, and what he saw made his eyes widen in shock.

Three large cargo ships were moving upstream, heading straight toward them.

The Yellow River's current was fierce, notoriously difficult to navigate, yet these ships had no sails and no visible oars. Even so, they advanced steadily against the flow, moving with surprising speed and ease.

They were simple, flat-decked cargo vessels. Their decks were piled high, the goods stacked like small hills and covered with oilcloth. Though the contents were hidden, there was no mistaking their purpose.

Ma Xianglin could not contain his excitement. "These three ships... are they all carrying grain?"

"Not all," Gao Chuwu said with a chuckle. "Two carry grain. The third holds military supplies. Gunpowder, bullets, tents, beans for the warhorses, and the like."

Ma Xianglin stared at him, utterly stunned. "You have been with us this entire time. No messenger has come to report anything. How could you know exactly when and where these ships would arrive? And how did they know we would reach this stretch of the river at this precise moment?"

Gao Chuwu only laughed, saying nothing, leaving the question hanging in the air.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had already instructed him. It was not yet time to explain such matters to Ma Xianglin.

The three ships slowly drew alongside the bank. From one of them, a very young soldier leaped lightly onto shore. He looked no more than seventeen or eighteen years old. He wore no armor, only a flintlock rifle slung across his back. His skin was fair, and his features carried a scholarly refinement.

At a glance, he looked like someone who belonged in a study, not on a battlefield.

Cheng Xu laughed. "Well now, Wang Tang. Already coming out on active duty?"

Wang Tang smiled calmly. "The village is short on manpower. It's time for the younger generation to gain experience. Besides, Dao Xuan Tianzun said some of these supplies must be handed over to the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers, and everything has to be recorded clearly. Army ledgers can't be scribbled carelessly anymore. Illiterates can't manage this kind of work, so here I am."

This Wang Tang was the adopted son of Principal Wang from the Gao Family Village school, and one of the outstanding figures among the village's second generation.

He had joined the militia at a young age. Thanks to his learning, far beyond that of ordinary soldiers, he worked mainly in logistics. Though he had never seen true combat, his status was not low, equivalent to that of a commander.

Holding a notebook in his left hand and a pen in his right, Wang Tang waved toward the crew. "Unload the cargo."

The sailors answered in unison and immediately began moving supplies off the ships.

Wang Tang stood to the side, calmly recording each item. "One basket. Two baskets. Three baskets..."

When the crew paused briefly, he wrote neatly, then added a final line with a flourish of his pen. "Two hundred baskets of flour and fifty baskets of preserved meat are transferred to the frontline troops, to be received by He Jiu."

He tore off the page and handed it to Cheng Xu. "Instructor He, please sign here to confirm receipt of two hundred baskets of flour and fifty baskets of preserved meat. Only then can I report it properly to the village treasury."

#### Chapter 573 Sharing It With You

Cheng Xu accepted the slip of paper with an easy grin, tilting his bamboo hat slightly to block the cold rain as it drummed steadily down. He lifted his brush and, out of long habit, began writing with a confident stroke, starting from the "He" radical and nearly completing the character for "Cheng" before his hand suddenly froze. The tip of the brush hovered in midair for a breath, then hastily changed direction, leaving behind a somewhat awkward but legible signature.

In the end, he barely managed to write the name "He Jiu."

Of course, a radical and a complete character were not the same thing at all.

Wang Tang glanced at the paper, instantly recognizing what Cheng Xu had done. His eyes lingered briefly on that incomplete radical, and understanding dawned at once. He said nothing, merely letting the corner of his mouth curve upward in a faint, knowing smile as he took the paper back and folded it carefully away.

"With you keeping the accounts now," Cheng Xu said casually, "even military supplies need signatures for every transfer. Anyone who wants to skim a little off the top will find it much harder than before."

Wang Tang smiled politely. "Dao Xuan Tianzun said that our generation is the new wave of scholars, while your generation still carries the habits of the old world. If we all continue to do things the same way as before, then this world will never truly move forward."

Cheng Xu snorted. "Are you insulting your elders through roundabout words now? Careful. I'll report you to your father once we get back."

Wang Tang's smile only grew broader. "Those were Dao Xuan Tianzun's exact words. I didn't change a single character. Even my father would have no choice but to accept them."

On Wang Tang's chest, the silver-threaded emblem of Dao Xuan Tianzun seemed almost to come alive, and a soft, amused chuckle rang out. "That's right. Those were exactly my words."

At that point, Cheng Xu could only shake his head and concede the exchange.

Once the grain had been formally handed over, Wang Tang continued with the rest of the supplies. Beans for the warhorses, gunpowder, lead shot, tents and assorted equipment were all checked one by one, counted carefully, and written down with clean, orderly strokes. Not a single item was missed, and not a single number was left vague.

Watching from a short distance away, Ma Xianglin could not help but sigh inwardly. "Xing Honglang truly is remarkable," he thought. "She may have come from bandit stock, but her administration is stricter than anything I have ever seen in the imperial army."

The more he watched, the more bitter his thoughts became. The imperial court was riddled with rot. Officers embezzled rations, sold warhorses in secret, and claimed pay for soldiers who never existed. Every vile trick imaginable had already been tried. And yet here, among these so called pacified bandits, everything was handled with clarity and discipline. Who, then, was the real bandit?

Zhang Fengyi was thinking along the same lines. She glanced at her husband, and he met her eyes. No words were spoken, but the understanding between them was clear. When they returned to Wan Shou Zhai, their Shizhu Tujia stronghold, they would need to study these methods carefully and learn from them.

Xing Honglang soon walked over, rain misting lightly around her as she smiled at the couple. "The provisions have arrived," she said. "This first shipment includes two hundred baskets of flour and fifty baskets of luncheon meat. Each basket weighs one hundred and twenty catties, so that makes thirty thousand catties of food in total. How many men did you bring? Come, claim your share."

"I brought three thousand White Pole Soldiers," Ma Xianglin replied.

"Three thousand?" Xing Honglang repeated thoughtfully. "Then I'll allocate sixty baskets of flour and ten baskets of luncheon meat to you for now."

Ma Xianglin quickly did the math in his head. That was seventy two hundred catties of flour and twelve hundred catties of meat.

It was an astonishing amount.

In these years of famine and chaos, such a quantity of food was almost unthinkable. When the White Pole Soldiers had marched north to serve the emperor, they had been forced to raise much of their own provisions. Later, when they remained in Shanxi to suppress bandits on their return journey, the responsibility for supplying them fell to Song Tongyin, the provincial governor.

Song Tongyin was widely regarded as a good official, honest and diligent. But when it came to provisions, he was so tightfisted that it was like squeezing water from a dry sponge. You pressed with all your strength and got only a trickle, then pressed again for another meager drop.

The Sichuan White Pole Soldiers had always lived on the edge when it came to food.

Ma Xianglin had never expected Xing Honglang to give so much, and to do so without the slightest hesitation.

He looked a little embarrassed as he spoke. "I'll take these provisions as a loan for now. When I return to Sichuan, I'll arrange to send supplies back to you."

Xing Honglang waved it off with a smile. "There's no need to rush. It's nothing important."

Ma Xianglin hesitated, then asked, "Are these the settlement provisions granted by the imperial court?"

He had heard a few days earlier that the court had dispatched Censor Wu Shen with one hundred thousand taels of silver to pacify the bandits, supposedly to fund land reclamation, seeds, and draft cattle. One hundred thousand taels was no small figure, and it gave these pacified forces a certain heroic air.

Xing Honglang laughed and shook her head. "Settlement provisions? Wu Shen is so poor he's probably crying in Shi Kefa's arms back in Xi'an Prefecture."

Ma Xianglin fell silent.

"These supplies," Xing Honglang continued lightly, "were all earned by me. Back when I was smuggling salt."

Ma Xianglin laughed. "Is it too late for me to change professions and start smuggling salt as well?"

Zhang Fengyi shot him a sharp look. "Don't say such nonsense. If a civil official hears you, you'll be impeached before you know it, and that will only bring trouble."

Xing Honglang laughed heartily. "General Ma speaks his mind. I like that. Truly."

Ma Xianglin gave the order, and the White Pole Soldiers moved quickly. They first set up tarps to keep the rain off, then carefully carried away the sixty baskets of flour and ten baskets of luncheon meat assigned to them. When they lifted the oilcloth covering the bamboo baskets, exclamations immediately rang out.

"So white!"

"This is fine flour, top grade!"

"I've never eaten flour this good in my life."

"The flour we usually get is always yellowish."

The amazement in their voices was so genuine that it was almost embarrassing to hear.

One soldier pried open a basket of luncheon meat. Inside were dozens of neat, square wooden boxes. He opened one at random and found a perfectly cut block of meat inside, smooth and even on all sides.

The sound of people swallowing hard rippled through the group.

They had seen this square meat before. In Puzhou and Daning County, they had watched Xing Honglang's men distribute it to the common folk. They had stood to the side, breathing in the rich aroma, filled with envy and longing. But discipline held them back. Unlike corrupt imperial troops, they would never steal food meant for civilians.

All they could do was watch.

"Now it's finally our turn!" a White Pole Soldier shouted, holding up a box and laughing toward the sky. "Ten baskets of meat, twelve hundred catties in total. With three thousand of us, that's almost half a catty per man!"

"Let me check... almost two boxes each!"

Cheers erupted instantly.

"Meat!"

"So much meat!"

Under the shelter of the tarps, stoves were set up and fires lit. The Yellow River flowed nearby, its muddy water scooped up without complaint. The wooden boxes were tossed straight into the boiling pots, then fished out and used as bowls, practical to the extreme.

"It smells incredible."

"I'm starving just from the smell."

"It's been years since I've had meat like this."

"I never thought I'd eat meat while out on campaign."

As the soldiers laughed and ate, more than three thousand refugees who had followed the army from Daning County watched from afar. Their eyes shone with longing, but years of hardship had taught them caution. None dared to approach and beg. They did not even dare draw close enough to catch the scent.

Then Zheng Daniu came striding over, a heavy basket slung over his shoulder. He dropped it to the ground with a solid thud and grinned broadly at them. "Three thousand refugees, your treatment is the same as the three thousand White Pole Soldiers. Sixty baskets of flour and ten baskets of luncheon meat. Organize yourselves and send people to the boats to collect it."

For a heartbeat, the refugees stood frozen in disbelief.

Then their voices rose together, trembling with joy. "Thank you, military lord!"

Chapter 574 Till We Meet Again

Everyone gathered along the banks of the Yellow River and ate until they were truly full.

There were bowls of hot noodles, slices of luncheon meat mixed in generously, the steam rising into the rain-soaked air as if even the cold heavens were momentarily softened by the scent.

After this solid, hearty meal, the weariness from the long march out of Daning County finally seemed to melt away. Those common folk who had collapsed earlier, unable to take another step, now stood up again. With food in their bellies, strength returned to their limbs, color crept back into their faces, and their eyes no longer looked dull and lifeless, but alert and bright.

The remaining food was carefully divided. Each person wrapped a small portion and tucked it into their clothes, pressing it close to their bodies as if it were treasure, guarding it with instinctive caution born from years of hunger.

Once the eating was done, however, a question naturally surfaced.

Where were they supposed to go next?

This was not only a problem for the common folk. It was just as much a dilemma for the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers.

"General Xing," Ma Xianglin said as he approached Xing Honglang, his expression turning serious, "we now face two pressing issues. First, how to deal with the bandits. Second, how to resettle these common folk."

Xing Honglang nodded slowly. "We definitely cannot send them back to Daning County. The town is still far too dangerous. There are no proper defenses, and we cannot leave troops there forever. The moment we withdraw, the roaming bandits will return. And next time, the Chuang Wang may not be as merciful."

Ma Xianglin frowned. "Then how do you intend to resettle them?"

"Other than relocation, there is no better option," Xing Honglang replied calmly. "We will move them south, far away from the areas the bandits frequent."

Ma Xianglin hesitated. "Relocating several thousand people is no small matter. If there is no farmland for them at the destination, they will not be able to survive in the long term."

"General Ma, you need not worry," Xing Honglang said with a light laugh. "I will take them to my territory and arrange work for them."

Ma Xianglin's eyes immediately lit up. "You are planning to have them join you in smuggling salt?"

"Hey!" Zhang Fengyi cut in sharply. "Why do your eyes sparkle every time someone mentions salt smuggling?"

Ma Xianglin defended himself without shame. "It is profitable. I also want to earn money so the people of Wan Shou Zhai can eat meat."

Zhang Fengyi let out a helpless sigh. "Can we not aspire to something a little greater?"

Ma Xianglin shot back at once. "Is making sure our villagers have meat to eat not aspiring to something greater? Then what is? A general gaining fame while standing on a mountain of corpses?"

At those words, the surrounding atmosphere suddenly turned heavy.

Indeed.

For a general, which was truly the greater achievement? To carve out glory atop countless bones, or to ensure that the people under one's protection could eat their fill?

The group fell into a brief, somber silence, each person lost in their own thoughts.

Just then, Zheng Daniu's head popped out of nowhere. "If a great general earns merit, does that mean he gets ten thousand bones to chew on as much as he likes? That sounds incredible. Bone soup is better than meat."

Everyone froze.

Zao Ying reacted instantly, grabbing Zheng Daniu and dragging him away. "Do not blurt things out at moments like this. You will make everyone think you are an idiot."

"But bone soup really is delicious," Zheng Daniu insisted stubbornly.

Zao Ying sighed. "When we get back, I will treat you to pork bone soup."

Zheng Daniu's eyes went unfocused as drool nearly escaped his mouth. "Instructor Zao is truly a good person."

Zao Ying punched him squarely on the shoulder, hard enough to make him stagger. "Stop calling me Instructor Zao all the time. That sounds too distant. What kind of relationship do we have, anyway?"

"That is true," Zheng Daniu said seriously after thinking for a moment. "Good buddies? Is that intimate enough?"

Zao Ying collapsed on the spot, unable to get back up.

Xing Honglang stepped forward and addressed the refugees in a clear, steady voice. "Everyone, you have eaten your fill, regained your strength, and you still have some food saved for later. You can hold out for a few more days. But if you return to Daning County, it will be extremely dangerous."

The common folk naturally understood. Fear flickered across many faces, and they looked at Xing Honglang with a mixture of anxiety and hope, not knowing what choice to make.

"If you trust me," Xing Honglang continued, pointing toward the three large cargo ships still docked by the riverbank, "then board my ships. Follow my people and go to a safe place. There will be others waiting there to arrange work for you. You can live there for now. Once the bandit trouble in the north subsides, it will not be too late to return to Daning County."

How could they not trust her?

She had given them flour and meat with her own hands. Any commoner with a clear mind knew that this woman, plain in appearance yet steady in bearing, was a good person.

She might not have looked imposing, but her heart was kind.

"We trust the General!"

"We will follow the General!"

"Good," Xing Honglang said decisively. "Then board the ships in groups and depart."

Once the arrangements were settled, Xing Honglang turned back to Ma Xianglin. "General Ma, the common folk will leave by ship from here. As for us, I am afraid new tasks await."

Ma Xianglin nodded gravely. "Now that the people are resettled and we have provisions, we must continue pursuing the bandit army. The bandits have already withdrawn from Puxian and Changning County. Their next move will surely be north. With their current numbers, small towns will not satisfy them. They are very likely headed for Taiyuan."

Xing Honglang had already considered this possibility. However, she had no intention of continuing north toward Taiyuan. It was simply too far. The Gao Family Village Militia relied heavily on gunpowder and bullets, and their logistics could not sustain extended operations far from their base.

A Chassepot Rifle unit could consume the labor of a thousand men in just two minutes.

Unlike armies that relied purely on cold weapons and could march thousands of li as long as they had grain, the Gao Family Village forces could not casually stray far from their supply lines.

With no other choice, Xing Honglang cupped her fists. "General Ma, I am only the garrison commander of Puzhou. I cannot venture too far from my post. This location is already more than three hundred li from Puzhou. Continuing north might be suitable for you, but it is not appropriate for me. The furthest I can go is the vicinity of Pingyang Prefecture."

Ma Xianglin considered her words carefully. Her reasoning was sound. She was, after all, a pacified bandit leader. If she remained within her designated territory, the court would have nothing to say. But if she roamed freely far from it, suspicion would inevitably fall upon her.

With that in mind, Ma Xianglin could only cup his fists in return. "In that case, let us part ways here and proceed on separate paths."

Xing Honglang returned the gesture. "The green mountains remain, the waters continue to flow. We will meet again."

Ma Xianglin burst out laughing. "Hahaha, that farewell truly sounds like something from the jianghu. Let me try as well. The green mountains do not..."

Zhang Fengyi shot him a sharp warning look.

Ma Xianglin immediately swallowed the rest of his sentence.

Soon after, Ma Xianglin led the White Pole Soldiers away. With fine flour and luncheon meat carefully packed away and their morale high, the White Pole Soldiers resumed their march northward, continuing the pursuit of the bandits.

Xing Honglang remained by the riverbank, overseeing the evacuation of the three thousand common folk. Boat after boat departed, carrying them toward Puzhou. Only after the last group was safely on its way did she turn toward the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun.

"What should we do next?" she asked respectfully. "Please instruct us."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun fell silent for a long moment, then spoke. "Return to Pingyang Prefecture. Hold the line and prevent the bandits from moving south. Consolidate what we already control. As for the north, for now, we can only entrust it to Song Tongyin, the Governor of Shanxi."

Chapter 575 They Even Want to Snatch People Now

The refugees from Daning County sat crowded aboard large cargo ships as the fleet turned southward, the current carrying them steadily along.

Ordinarily, people from the north were not known for their skill on the water, but Daning County lay beside the Xinshui River, and this made its people different from most. Even if they had never rowed a boat or cast a fishing net themselves, nearly everyone had taken ferries since childhood, crossing back and forth often enough that the motion of water no longer felt entirely alien.

The ships swayed and rocked as they traveled downstream, wooden hulls creaking softly beneath their feet, yet surprisingly few of the refugees grew seasick. The river stretched for more than a hundred li, but with the current in their favor, the journey would take less than half a day.

Suddenly, a sharp cry rang out from one of the ships.

"Look ahead, quick, look ahead! There's a bridge! Such a huge bridge!"

The shout spread like fire through dry grass. Refugees scrambled toward the railings, clutching at one another as they craned their necks to see, and only then did they realize that the ships were nearing Dragon Gate Ferry.

The moment the Dragon Gate Yellow River Bridge came fully into view, the refugees fell into stunned silence.

Even those who had been leaning weakly against the rails, faces pale from nausea, straightened at once, their spirits lifted as if the sickness had never existed.

"That bridge is unbelievable!"

"So grand... so majestic!"

"How could anyone build something like this?"

Exclamations rose and overlapped, voices buzzing with disbelief, until a crewman standing at the bow turned back toward them, laughing as he spoke. "Why are you all making such a fuss? This is a divine bridge, carried down from the Celestial Realm by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself."

A collective gasp swept through the crowd.

Then someone pointed frantically toward the eastern end of the bridge. "Look there! At the bridgehead. There's a fortress, gray and white, built right beside it."

The refugees' gazes shifted as one. At Dragon Gate Ferry, a cement fortress now stood firmly in place, its walls pale and imposing, bearing the name Longmen East Fortress.

Stationed there, of course, was Shi Jian.

Last time, when he had carried out what was described as the "meritorious defense of Dragon Gate Ferry," repelling Lao Huihui and the Eight Great Kings, Cheng Xu had even written a memorial on his behalf, one that Cheng Xu himself could barely endure rereading once it was finished. Yet after the memorial was submitted, Wang Cheng'en, Shi Jian's superior, had chosen to accept it at face value and immediately petitioned the court to recognize Shi Jian's achievements, even promoting him to the rank of thousand-household commander.

With the promotion came another four hundred garrison soldiers.

Originally, Shi Jian had commanded six hundred garrison troops. Gao Family Village then transferred two hundred of their own soldiers to him. All told, his forces now amounted to four hundred Gao Family Village soldiers and six hundred garrison troops.

Later, Hong Chengchou, Supreme Commander of the Three Borders, issued a direct order for him to guard Dragon Gate Ferry and prevent bandits from crossing the river. From that moment on, Shi Jian was effectively stationed there permanently.

At this very moment, Shi Jian stood atop the walls of Longmen East Fortress, a telescope pressed to his eye as he scanned the river from left to right. Before long, he spotted three large cargo ships approaching downstream, each one packed so tightly with people that the decks seemed ready to overflow.

His eyes lit up at once.

Without hesitation, he hurried down from the fortress, striding quickly toward the ferry crossing, waving both arms with enthusiasm as he faced the oncoming ships.

Wang Tang leaned out from the bow, laughing when he saw him. "Brother Shi! What's all this? Standing there waving like a lighthouse on the shore."

Shi Jian laughed back. "Are those three ships full of refugees from the north?"

"That's right," Wang Tang replied. "Instructor Xing ordered me to escort these refugees to Puzhou City for resettlement."

Shi Jian's eyes widened. "Instructor Xing's orders, not Dao Xuan Tianzun's?"

Wang Tang paused to think it over. "Now that you mention it, Dao Xuan Tianzun didn't give any specific instructions about where they should be settled."

Shi Jian broke into a broad grin. "Then don't send them to Puzhou. Leave them all here with me."

Wang Tang stared at him, momentarily speechless.

Shi Jian rubbed his hands together, clearly delighted with his own idea. "Look at this place. Dragon Gate Ferry just gained a bridgehead fortress, but the supporting facilities are completely lacking. The nearby towns and villages haven't developed fast enough to keep up. This is a bridgehead that Dao Xuan Tianzun personally ordered us to build and manage properly. If we don't have enough manpower and fail to develop it well, wouldn't that be letting Dao Xuan Tianzun down?"

Wang Tang could only laugh and shake his head. "You're actually trying to snatch people now?"

"I have no choice but to snatch them," Shi Jian said earnestly. "I'm desperately short on manpower here. The only residents we have are some people from Hejin County who wandered over. The moment they see that Hejin County is safe again, they turn around and run straight home. None of them are willing to stay here at the dock and work in peace."

Wang Tang spread his hands. "That's just human nature, isn't it? Everyone loves their home and wants to return to their roots."

"That's not the point," Shi Jian insisted. "The point is that I need people. Dragon Gate Ferry sits right on the riverbank, at the border between Shanxi and Shaanxi. Once bandits start causing trouble, no one wants to come anywhere near this place. Without people, how can we develop it? Puzhou is a major prefectural city, overflowing with manpower they don't even know what to do with. Let me keep these northern refugees. Please."

After listening to his long-winded argument, Wang Tang found himself nodding despite himself. It actually made a great deal of sense.

"Fine," he finally said. "Leave them here with you. I still have several more trips to make anyway. There are about three thousand people in total. I'll bring them all here. That should solve your manpower problem."

Shi Jian was overjoyed. "I knew you were a reasonable man."

"But if Instructor Xing comes looking for trouble," Wang Tang added quickly, "don't expect me to get involved."

Shi Jian waved dismissively. "Instructor Xing is reasonable too. She won't make trouble for me."

With just a few sentences, the two young men completed their quiet division of spoils.

The three cargo ships soon docked at the pier. Long wooden gangplanks were lowered, connecting ship and shore, and the crewmen shouted loudly, "Everyone disembark! From now on, you can settle down and live peacefully here."

The refugees aboard the ships were utterly bewildered.

Earlier, Wang Tang and Shi Jian had been shouting to one another across a fair distance, their voices raised to carry over the wind and water. The refugees had heard every word clearly.

They had heard talk of "snatching people," and none of it made any sense to them. All their lives, they had only heard of local officials complaining about the burden of resettling outsiders, never of officials fighting over refugees.

Why would anyone want to snatch a group of poor, miserable people like us?

They would have to feed us, house us, and even allocate land. That was nothing but extra expense and trouble.

Yet here they were, being fought over.

The refugees stepped onto the dock one after another, spreading out loosely. This first batch, the three shiploads, numbered roughly a thousand people in total. Shi Jian walked up to them with a broad smile and stopped before the crowd.

"Welcome to Dragon Gate Ferry," he said. "Once you're here, you won't have to worry about food or shelter anymore. See that fortress over there? Every day, food will be distributed at the gate. No one here will starve to death."

The refugees' eyes lit up, excitement rippling through the crowd.

Shi Jian went on, his tone warm and confident. "Of course, merely not starving isn't enough, is it? Who doesn't want to live a better life? If you're willing to work, you can earn wages."

That was perfectly reasonable.

The refugees leaned forward instinctively, ears pricked, waiting for what came next.

Shi Jian then produced the standard wage schedule from Gao Family Village and displayed it openly, listing positions across all kinds of trades and labor.

The refugees stared, and then gasped as one.

"What? The wages here are actually this high?"

There was nothing left to hesitate over.

People surged forward eagerly to sign up, voices overlapping, hands raised, and in the blink of an eye, Dragon Gate Ferry gained a massive influx of new labor.

Shi Jian's face split into a grin so wide it nearly reached his ears, while Wang Tang, watching from the side, couldn't help wondering whether Xing Honglang would be angry when she found out. After a brief moment, he shook the thought away.

Ah, forget it.

Chapter 576 We'll Go All In, No Matter the Cost

After the river channel was widened, cargo ships began arriving in Jishan County, Jiangzhou, without pause.

They came one after another, sliding into the docks as if the river itself had finally remembered its duty.

At the same time, waterwheels were being erected along both banks of the river.

Not delicately.

Not patiently.

But urgently.

For several days straight, rain had fallen without rest. The sky showed no intention of stopping; if anything, it looked offended that no one was praising it for its diligence.

Yet the carpenters worked on.

Their clothes were soaked through, their hair plastered to their foreheads, sleeves heavy with water. Hammer blows rang out beneath the rain, dull but relentless. Nobody complained. Nobody slowed down.

Jishan County was the agricultural backbone of Jiangzhou. Everyone knew this. If Jishan prospered, Jiangzhou would follow. If Jishan failed, then no amount of clever governance or emergency measures would matter.

So the waterwheels had to be built.

And they had to be built now.

Mo Xiaopin stood by the riverbank, hands clasped behind his back, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep.

As Baojia head, militia instructor, and—through sheer accumulation of duties—the actual administrator of Jiangzhou, he had been living inside a constant state of worry.

For days now, he had been organizing farmers, assigning labor, checking progress, calculating how much time remained before spring plowing, then recalculating it again because the first number was never reassuring enough.

It was already the winter of Chongzhen's fourth year.

The New Year was close.

Spring plowing would follow immediately after.

Time wasn't just tight. It was actively hostile.

Just as Mo Xiaopin was mentally sorting through another list of unresolved issues, a vessel appeared upstream.

"...Eh?"

He turned his head.

That ship was wrong.

It wasn't a cargo vessel. No stacked crates, no familiar silhouette.

It was a pleasure boat.

The kind used by high officials to drink wine, listen to music, and recite poems about rivers they didn't actually manage.

On the Yellow River, of all places.

Mo Xiaopin felt his scalp tighten.

Sailing such a boat here was reckless at best, suicidal at worst. The Yellow River didn't care about elegance. It ate boats and reputations with equal enthusiasm.

Then he noticed something else.

No sails.

No oars.

"...Ah."

Understanding clicked into place.

One of those boats.

One of Mr. Bai's.

Which meant—

Important people.

Very important people.

Mo Xiaopin immediately abandoned his previous task and hurried toward the dock, straightening his clothes as best he could while running.

The cabin door opened.

A young lady stepped out first.

She looked delicate and reserved, her posture careful, her movements hesitant. At a glance, she appeared no more than sixteen or seventeen—a proper young miss who had likely grown up in courtyards, not riverbanks.

Behind her followed several young men.

Not servants.

Students.

Their clothing was plain, but their bearing was unmistakable. Straight-backed, alert, eyes sharp with the confidence of people who had been educated properly and knew it.

Mo Xiaopin's heart sank.

Children of high-ranking families.

The kind whose fathers might smile politely while filing memorials that destroyed careers.

He stepped forward quickly and bowed deeply.

"Esteemed young sirs, young madam—welcome to Jiangzhou. I am Mo Xiaopin. You may call me Overseer Mo. May I inquire—"

Before he could finish, the young lady startled visibly and took half a step back, slipping behind the group as if she'd been caught doing something wrong.

Mo Xiaopin nearly bit his tongue.

Too loud. Too sudden. I frightened her.

The young men, however, showed no displeasure. They returned his salute properly, without arrogance or disdain.

One of them spoke clearly, "Overseer Mo, we are from Gao Family Village, Chengcheng County, Shaanxi. We are chemistry interns."

"...Chemistry?"

"...Interns?"

Mo Xiaopin blinked.

He didn't understand the words, but he understood the danger. Any title that sounded scholarly—and especially one associated with Gao Family Village—was not something to treat lightly.

He bowed again. "Honored guests, if you are unfamiliar with the area, I would be honored to guide you around Jiangzhou."

At that moment, all the young men turned their heads in unison.

They looked behind them.

At the young lady.

Mo Xiaopin froze.

She's the one in charge?

Then the young men spoke together, voices respectful:

"Teacher San, please decide."

Teacher.

Mo Xiaopin felt his brain stumble.

This timid girl was—

San Shier's daughter.

Miss San.

A chemistry teacher at Gao Family Village School.

Director of the Gao Family Village Chemical Factory.

A name he had heard more than once, always with reverence.

Unfortunately, also someone painfully shy.

Under everyone's gaze, Miss San forced herself to step forward. She cleared her throat softly, hands clenched at her sides.

"We... um... we are unfamiliar with this place," she said quietly. "Having Overseer Mo guide us would be... very helpful. Shouldn't you all thank him?"

The interns immediately bowed.

"Thank you, Overseer Mo."

Miss San visibly relaxed, though only slightly—as if she'd loosened a knot by one finger-width.

Mo Xiaopin, meanwhile, was deeply confused.

If she were simply a noble's daughter, the deference would make sense. But teacher?

He asked cautiously, "Teacher San... may I ask what brings you to Jishan County?"

Miss San's face flushed.

"Ji—Jishan County is... an important agricultural region," she began, then hesitated. "Since ancient times... it has relied on farming... the Fen River... good irrigation..."

She paused, swallowed, and forced herself onward.

"This area will require large quantities of celestial fertilizer in the future. Transport alone won't be sufficient. A large chemical fertilizer factory must be built locally."

Mo Xiaopin stared.

His mind attempted to process the sentence.

It failed, retreated, and tried again.

She turned to her students.

"Your primary task here is to learn how to build a fertilizer factory from nothing."

"Yes, Teacher San!" the interns replied in unison.

Mo Xiaopin opened his mouth. Closed it. Then tried again.

"Uh... so... what exactly... should I—"

Miss San's face turned red.

"I—I didn't explain clearly... um... it's just..."

She stalled again.

After struggling through three incomplete sentences, she waved her hand weakly.

"Interns... please explain."

The students immediately surrounded Mo Xiaopin, talking excitedly about celestial fertilizer, yields, soil exhaustion, production, factories, and future expansion.

Mo Xiaopin listened carefully.

He nodded at appropriate moments.

He smiled when they smiled.

After a long while, he understood one thing clearly:

This "celestial fertilizer" could dramatically increase crop yields.

Everything else... he'd leave to Dao Xuan Tianzun.

In his heart, Mo Xiaopin had already decided.

These people were clearly trusted by Dao Xuan Tianzun. Their parents were undoubtedly core members of the Daoist Sect. Whether this venture made money or not no longer mattered.

Goodwill was priceless.

Even a loss would be worth it.

He straightened his back and smiled broadly.

"Teacher San! If this celestial fertilizer truly benefits agriculture and increases yields, then it is a great blessing to the people and the nation!"

He clenched his fist.

"As an administrator of Jiangzhou, I cannot hesitate. I will go all in—even if I must sell everything I own. Count me in!"

Miss San blinked.

The interns froze.

Then, very quietly, she smiled.

And somewhere beyond the rain, Dao Xuan Tianzun's will continued to move—patiently, relentlessly—like water turning a wheel.

Chapter 577 Snowflakes Fluttering

While Jishan County bustled with optimism—hammer blows ringing, furnaces roaring, the chemical factory expanding at a pace that made accountants dizzy—

Xi'an Prefecture was quietly proving that progress did not travel well.

Trouble had arrived at the government-operated Celestial Fertilizer store.

During their previous inspection tour of Chengcheng County, Wu Shen and Shi Kefa had carefully discussed the fertilizer trade with Liang Shixian. Afterward, Gao Family Village's first batch of middle school graduates—children who now treated abacuses like extensions of their fingers—had calculated costs again and again, squeezing margins until even a magistrate would nod approvingly.

The final price was reasonable.

Painfully reasonable.

Almost offensively honest.

Shi Kefa personally oversaw the procurement of a large batch of Celestial Fertilizer and arranged its transport to Xi'an, where it was sold through the official state store.

Last year, Chengcheng County had supplied Xi'an with free fertilizer for trial use. The results had been so dramatic that farmers began speaking of it in reverent tones, as if it were halfway between manure and divine intervention.

Thus, when the store reopened this year, it became an instant sensation.

Farmers from the Wei River basin—whose lands had narrowly escaped drought—queued from dawn. Some came carrying baskets, others sacks, some simply stood in line clutching coins as if afraid the fertilizer might evaporate if they blinked.

Everything was proceeding exactly as planned.

Which was precisely why something had to go wrong.

Land ownership in the Great Ming did not end with the common people. The gentry owned land. Officials owned land. And above them all stood the imperial nobility, whose estates were so vast that maps politely pretended not to notice.

In Xi'an Prefecture, there was one estate that towered above all others:

The Prince of Qin's Mansion.

At present, Prince Su of Qin, Zhu Yihuan, was deceased. The new Prince of Qin had yet to be formally enfeoffed—a delay born of the Emperor and civil officials locked in one of their habitual stalemates. As a result, Zhu Cunji, the heir apparent, effectively governed the estate.

And govern it he did.

The Prince of Qin's mansion controlled enormous tracts of land. The richest fields surrounding Xi'an—especially those hugging the Wei River—were almost entirely under its banner. Even in famine years, even during disasters, those fields produced grain with insulting consistency.

Naturally, such an estate had its eye on Celestial Fertilizer.

Not a little.

Not "enough."

They wanted all of it.

And preferably, they wanted it cheap. Or better yet—free.

Thus, on this perfectly ordinary day, a minor steward from the Prince of Qin's estate arrived at the fertilizer store with a large entourage of household retainers.

"Arrived" was perhaps too gentle a word.

Tables were smashed first.

Chairs followed.

Then the fertilizer.

Clubs rose and fell with professional enthusiasm.

By the time the dust settled, the store manager lay on the floor, blood streaming from his scalp, painting half his face red.

The steward prodded him with the end of his club, like a butcher testing meat.

"We offered you a chance," the steward sneered. "Sell to the Prince's estate at a discount. You refused. So tell me—wasn't this your own fault?"

The manager clutched his head, voice trembling. "Y-you can't do this! This shipment was personally overseen by Lord Wu Shen and Lord Shi Kefa! The price is fixed by decree—unchangeable—"

Thwack.

The club came down again.

"Wu Shen?" the steward barked. "Shi Kefa?" He laughed. "Who the hell are they? And who the hell do you think I am?"

The manager fell silent.

At that moment, a furious shout rang out from the doorway.

"STOP THIS AT ONCE!"

Shi Kefa strode in, snatched the club from the steward's hand, and thundered, "Have you gone mad?! This is a government establishment! You assault people openly—has the law ceased to exist? Is there no justice left in Xi'an?!"

The steward looked him up and down, unimpressed.

"Well, well. Lord Shi." He smirked. "I suggest you don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Doesn't belong?" Shi Kefa shook with rage. "I am the Judicial Commissioner of Xi'an! Criminal law is precisely my business!"

The steward laughed softly. "Then tell me, Lord Shi—does your authority extend to the Prince of Qin's estate?"

Shi Kefa snapped back, "Even the Prince of Qin must obey reason!"

The steward's eyes hardened.

"Today, I choose not to."

He turned and shouted, "Move it!"

The retainers immediately resumed hauling fertilizer.

"STOP!" Shi Kefa roared. "Who dares lay a hand on it?!"

For a heartbeat, the men hesitated.

Then the steward laughed louder. "Move it all! I want to see what Lord Shi plans to do about it!"

Shi Kefa spun and shouted, "Guards! Arrest them!"

Silence.

He turned.

The constables and yamen runners who had followed him were gone.

Vanished into the crowd like mist.

They were local men. And local men knew one thing very well:

You could offend an official.

You could not offend the Prince of Qin's estate.

Shi Kefa stood frozen.

The steward burst into laughter. The retainers followed suit, hoisting sacks and crates. In moments, the store was stripped bare—every last grain of Celestial Fertilizer carted away under broad daylight.

Shi Kefa could only watch.

"I will memorialize this!" he shouted hoarsely. "I will impeach the Prince of Qin's mansion! Just you wait!"

The steward waved dismissively. "Go ahead. See where that gets you."

The street fell silent.

The manager and his assistant lay groaning on the ground. The onlookers stared, faces tight with suppressed fury—but no one spoke. No one stepped forward.

The farmers scattered, hopes crushed beneath their feet.

Tears streamed down Shi Kefa's face.

"How... how could this happen...?"

The fertilizer had been purchased with imperial funds.

And Shi Kefa knew—absolutely knew—it would never be recovered.

Even if the Emperor heard of it, nothing would happen. The Emperor always felt he owed the Prince of Qin. To trouble him over fertilizer? Unthinkable.

The Celestial Fertilizer meant for the people had been swallowed whole by the Prince's estate.

Next year, the peasants' fields would yield barely enough to pay taxes.

The Prince's lands, enriched by stolen fertilizer, would double their harvest—and contribute not a single copper to the treasury.

A perfect cycle had existed. Buy fertilizer cheaply. Sell at a modest profit. Reinvest. Increase yields. Increase taxes. Feed the state.

That cycle had been smashed in an afternoon.

Shi Kefa collapsed, sobbing.

"Why... why must it be like this...?"

Snow began to fall.

Xi'an's endless winter rain finally surrendered to snowflakes drifting down in silence, whitening the streets, burying blood, burying footprints, burying everything.

Through the haze, Shi Kefa recalled Gao Yiye's words at Gao Family Village:

"Advanced productivity requires an equally advanced political system.

A rotten structure will strangle progress."

Why did those words surface now?

He was a loyal subject of the Great Ming. Surely—surely—there was a rebuttal.

He searched his mind.

Found nothing.

He sank into the snow.

By the time Wu Shen arrived, Shi Kefa was half-buried, a silent, hunched snowman.

Wu Shen pulled him up, brushed snow from his robes, and sighed.

"Come," he said softly.

"Let's swallow our pride... and go back to Chengcheng County."

Snow continued to fall.

Chapter 578 Something Like This Actually Happened

Chengcheng County.

Outside the city walls, an enormous factory squatted across the plain like a steel-and-brick beast that had decided, very politely, not to crush the county beneath it.

It wasn't arrogance—just necessity.

Chengcheng County, from one end to the other, barely scraped together two square kilometers. There was simply no way it could swallow a fully integrated factory that handled spinning, weaving, dyeing, tailoring, and embroidery, all in one place. So the factory was built outside the walls, where land was cheap, skies were open, and nobody complained about noise unless it interfered with gossip.

High concrete walls ringed the compound. At all four corners stood watchtowers, and in those towers stood guards.

Female guards.

Strong-backed, sharp-eyed women militia, bows slung over their shoulders, arrows feathered and ready. From a distance, the place didn't look like a factory at all—it looked like a brand-new county town that had decided to skip bureaucracy and get straight to productivity.

And the factory truly was staffed entirely by women.

At the very beginning, a handful of men had been hired—mostly tailors, because certain old habits died slowly. Unfortunately for them, the Chengcheng Technical Workers School opened shortly afterward

and promptly abducted every last one of those male tailors, upgrading them on the spot into "tailoring instructors."

Just like that, the factory lost its final traces of masculinity.

What remained was a square-kilometer Daughter Kingdom.

The name, naturally, came from Chun Hong.

She was one of the four secretaries, clever, lively, and utterly uninterested in rigid titles. After hearing the women jokingly call the place "our little kingdom," she shrugged and made it official.

"Fine," she said. "Daughter Kingdom Textile Factory it is."

Nobody objected.

Early morning light crept across the compound as the factory stirred awake.

In the women's dormitories, rows of workers rose from their beds, washing up, braiding hair, and—more importantly—gossiping with the efficiency of seasoned professionals.

"Hey, did you hear?" one whispered loudly enough for three rooms to hear. "Xi'an's a mess again."

"Oh?" another replied, splashing water on her face. "From where did you hear that?"

"Elder Brother Li, the cargo hauler. He came back from Xi'an last night."

"Don't keep us hanging!"

"They say the Prince of Qin's residence snatched all the Celestial Fertilizer straight out of the government store. In broad daylight! Lord Wu Shen's furious, Shi Kefa nearly exploded on the spot."

Someone laughed. "Shi Kefa's still a Jinyiwei, and even he gets bullied. That Prince's residence really has no shame."

"No shame?" another scoffed. "In Xi'an, the Prince of Qin is the law. Is heaven. How can heaven be lawless?"

A brief pause.

Then someone narrowed her eyes. "Hold on. How did Elder Brother Li tell you all this?"

The room fell silent.

Outsiders weren't allowed into the factory. Everyone knew that.

One girl slowly turned. "Yaya... did you sneak out again?"

Yaya froze.

And then chaos erupted.

"Ohhh—so that's it!"

"Yaya, when is Elder Brother Li going to marry you?"

"Didn't he say he'd marry you after earning silver on this Xi'an trip? Don't tell me he ran out of money again?"

Xi'an, imperial politics, fertilizer theft—instantly forgotten.

Somewhere far away, the fate of the empire quietly lost to romantic gossip.

At that moment, a head popped in beside them.

"Wow," a bright voice said. "That sounds interesting. Tell me too."

The women turned.

And collectively inhaled.

"S-Saintess?!"

Gao Yiye stood there smiling, hands clasped behind her back, eyes shining with unmistakable curiosity.

She giggled. "Don't stop on my account. I came to see Chun Hong."

Flustered, someone blurted out, "Factory Manager Chun is in the innermost building—the leadership dormitory!"

"Thank you!" Gao Yiye waved cheerfully and walked off, then turned back. "Oh—when Yaya and Elder Brother Li get married, remember to invite me. I'll come drink the wedding wine."

Yaya's face went crimson.

"T-thank you, Saintess! I definitely will!"

"Me too!" someone shouted reflexively.

At that moment, the Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidery stitched into Yaya's cotton thread chestpiece spoke calmly:

"You must also inform me."

The dormitory exploded into screams.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun—!"

The embroidery smiled faintly, then its threads relaxed, returning to stillness as Gao Yiye and her escort moved away.

Only then did the women breathe again.

"Every time the Saintess appears, I feel like my soul's being inspected."

"Did you see her guards? Some of them are really handsome."

"What? Why didn't you tell me to look?!"

"You were bowing so hard your forehead nearly hit the floor."

"Aren't you scared?"

"Scared of what? Dao Xuan Tianzun and the Saintess are kind. They're not like those officials who love kneeling more than justice."

"Then let's follow them!"

"Right! Go see the handsome soldier boys!"

With laughter and footsteps, a wave of women followed after.

Up ahead, Gao Yiye walked calmly.

Behind her walked Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi.

Flat Rabbit's gaze was fixed straight ahead, expression solemn, posture rigid, like a monk escorting scripture.

Zheng Gouzi, meanwhile, looked like he was afraid his eyes might miss something important.

He nudged Flat Rabbit. "Hey. That girl over there. Radiant."

Flat Rabbit snorted. "Fair faces bring ruin."

Two steps later.

"Look! That one's smiling at us."

Flat Rabbit replied coolly, "Paint fades. Bones remain."

"She waved!"

"Women dull the edge of the blade."

Zheng Gouzi finally snapped. "Damn it! Rabbit, are you even a man?!"

Flat Rabbit replied calmly, "No. I'm a male rabbit."

Zheng Gouzi fell silent.

Flat Rabbit continued, hands behind his back. "I walk this world not for romance, but for righteousness. While chaos still reigns, how can one speak of settling down?"

Zheng Gouzi waved him off. "Talking to you is a waste of perfectly good scenery."

They arrived at Chun Hong's residence.

Chun Hong rushed down, eyes lighting up as she grabbed Gao Yiye's hands. "Saintess! What brings you here?"

"I missed you," Gao Yiye said simply. "I've had more free time lately. Thought I'd walk around, see how my sisters are doing."

Chun Hong smiled. "Everything's running smoothly. Production's steady, embroidery's improving, silver's flowing in from Xi'an."

"Good!" Gao Yiye laughed. "We should drain those rich people dry and hand the silver to our workers."

Chun Hong sighed softly. "You can't drain them. Their pockets are bottomless. Whatever silver flows out, they'll pull it right back—with interest."

Gao Yiye fell quiet.

Chun Hong lowered her voice. "Saintess... have you heard? In Xi'an... even Wu Shen and Shi Kefa were bullied. The Prince of Qin's residence seized the Celestial Fertilizer outright."

Gao Yiye froze.

"...Something like this actually happened?"

The words hung in the air.

Light as snow.

Heavy as iron.

Chapter 579 The Final Trump Card

Gao Yiye had come to the Daughter Kingdom Textile Factory purely to pass the time.

A casual visit. Sisterly chatter. Maybe a cup of tea, a bit of gossip, and a walk among humming looms to clear her head.

She had not expected to walk straight into imperial-level nonsense before even finishing her first sentence.

When Chun Hong mentioned the Prince of Qin's residence openly looting the Celestial Fertilizer, Gao Yiye felt an odd mixture of amusement and irritation—like discovering that a textbook example had suddenly crawled out of the book and started robbing people in broad daylight.

As the person responsible for ideological education in Gao Family Village, her studies had long ago drifted away from poetry and etiquette and straight into the anatomy of power. Rent-seeking. Feudal privilege. Structural rot.

Everything she had learned was now standing in Xi'an, holding a club.

She shook her head softly.

At that moment, the female sentinel stationed at the northwest watchtower suddenly cupped her hands and shouted at the top of her lungs:

"—Officials from the imperial court have arrived in Chengcheng County!"

The words rippled through the factory like a stone dropped into water.

Female workers rushed toward the gates, sleeves flying, craning their necks toward the northeast road.

Gao Yiye blinked, surprised. She exchanged a glance with Chun Hong, then calmly led her guards toward the entrance as well.

In the distance, a small procession approached.

Only a dozen or so people. Two horses. No banners. No gongs. No ceremonial nonsense.

On the horses sat two men whose backs looked noticeably heavier than when they had last passed through Chengcheng County.

Imperial Censor Wu Shen.

Xi'an Judicial Commissioner Shi Kefa.

Both men wore expressions so bleak that even their official robes seemed to have lost color. Gone was the sharp confidence, the righteous posture. What remained was exhaustion, frustration, and the unmistakable look of men who had just slammed headfirst into reality.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun, embroidered in golden thread on Gao Yiye's chest, chuckled softly.

"They've come asking for help."

Gao Yiye startled. "Ah—Dao Xuan Tianzun, you're here!"

"I've always been here."

Her cheeks warmed slightly.

Right. Always.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun continued lazily, "They'll go see Liang Shixian. You should join the fun. While you're at it, give them another round of ideological education."

Gao Yiye smiled helplessly. "They're very... rigid. That lesson won't be easy."

"If they understand, good. If not, so be it," the Dao Xuan Tianzun replied. "Relics of the old society—those who can be reformed, reform them. Those who can't..."

He paused.

"...replace them."

"Understood."

She didn't hurry. She walked at an unhurried pace, guards following behind, arriving at the county yamen shortly after Wu Shen and Shi Kefa.

Inside the hall, Liang Shixian rushed out to greet them.

All unnecessary formalities—bows, tea, polite compliments—were silently skipped. Everyone present knew there was no mood for theater.

Shi Kefa went straight to the point, voice hoarse.

"Magistrate Liang... the Celestial Fertilizer we purchased from Chengcheng County... has all been seized by people from the Prince of Qin's residence."

Liang Shixian's eyebrows twitched.

Wu Shen sighed deeply, like a man whose lungs had finally given up.

Liang Shixian said carefully, "Sir Shi is the Judicial Commissioner. Sir Wu is an Imperial Censor. You both can submit memorials directly to His Majesty. If two memorials—"

"It's useless," Wu Shen interrupted, rubbing his temples.

"Impeaching minor officials still works. Impeaching the Prince of Qin's residence..." He laughed bitterly. "You know the ending before the ink dries."

Liang Shixian fell silent.

His mind immediately spun up, habit taking over.

Memorial submitted.

Emperor expresses concern.

Prince of Qin symbolically reprimanded.

One unlucky steward dragged out.

Someone gets flogged. Or executed.

Everyone applauds justice.

And then—

The Celestial Fertilizer remains right where it is.

"...Sigh," Liang Shixian said at last. "The Emperor would issue a token rebuke. The Prince's residence would sacrifice a scapegoat. But the fertilizer would never come back."

Wu Shen nodded grimly. "Exactly."

Shi Kefa clenched his fists. "Which means state-run Celestial Fertilizer distribution... is finished."

Liang Shixian frowned. "Why? If some was stolen, couldn't you simply purchase more?"

Wu Shen laughed bitterly. "With what silver?"

Liang Shixian hesitated. "But Sir Wu... everyone says you arrived with a hundred thousand taels..."

Wu Shen snorted. "A hundred thousand taels? I, Wu Shen, would like to see it myself. To pull ten taels out of my pocket, I'd have to pawn my official seal."

Liang Shixian was speechless.

Shi Kefa took a deep breath. "Magistrate Liang, we came today to ask shamelessly... for a consignment of Celestial Fertilizer on credit. Once sold, we'll repay you in silver."

Liang Shixian's eyelid twitched.

Credit.

The deadliest word in commerce.

From ancient workshops to modern factories, nothing killed producers faster than "just take it on credit."

He spread his hands slowly. "About that... these fertilizers are not produced by an official workshop."

Wu Shen frowned. "Then who manages them?"

"That would be—"

A clear female voice cut in smoothly.

"That would be me."

Everyone turned.

Gao Yiye stepped forward.

Liang Shixian's face lit up. "Saintess!"

Shi Kefa's heart skipped.

The Saintess of the Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect...

Only Wu Shen, unfamiliar, examined her carefully.

White robes. Gold and silver embroidery. Calm posture. Guards behind her.

Not a merchant.

Not a common gentrywoman.

Wu Shen cleared his throat. "Madam... the Celestial Fertilizer factory belongs to your household?"

Gao Yiye smiled gently. "You could say that. My husband's surname is Li. He has several enterprises here. The fertilizer factory is one of them."

Wu Shen's eyes brightened.

Excellent.

He straightened his back and spoke solemnly, finally revealing the card he had been holding the entire journey.

"By imperial decree, this official is inspecting Shaanxi and overseeing disaster relief. His Majesty has granted me special authority to raise supplies among the populace."

He paused.

"And to grant privileges in return."

Shi Kefa glanced sideways.

Here it comes.

Wu Shen continued, voice firm. "Those who contribute significantly may receive honorary titles, official caps, or even nominal ranks. Madam—if your Li family is willing to consign fertilizer on credit..."

He leaned forward slightly.

"...this official guarantees your family's smooth entry into officialdom."

Silence fell.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun, embroidered on Gao Yiye's chest, let out a soft, almost amused chuckle.

The final trump card had been played.

Unfortunately—

It was being offered to the wrong god.

Chapter 580 Arriving in Xi'an

Gao Yiye smiled.

It was the kind of smile that bloomed at exactly the wrong time—polite, composed, and faintly amused, as if she'd just heard a joke that was technically treason but emotionally very funny.

Buying and selling official posts.

An old Ming classic. Vintage corruption. A legacy craft passed down like porcelain—fragile, expensive, and guaranteed to shatter the moment anyone pretended it was righteous.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun had never approved of such things.

During her ideological lessons, he had explained the matter with surgical clarity: once offices could be bought, governance became a market stall, loyalty became a receipt, and the people became inventory that nobody bothered to count properly.

And yet—

Most of the time, these stories involved greasy officials, furtive bribes, and ink-stained hands trembling over ledgers.

This time?

The emperor himself was running the stall.

No disguise. No intermediaries. Just desperation dressed in dragon robes.

A soft, amused chuckle echoed inside her consciousness.

"When a man has only one shred of dignity left," the Dao Xuan Tianzun said lightly, "he tends to throw it at the floor himself—so no one else can say they made him do it."

Gao Yiye's cheeks warmed.

"That kind of remark isn't suitable for a young woman," she murmured inwardly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, you're becoming increasingly mischievous."

She paused, then added quietly, "Especially after that comment last time about how I'd look 'more pleasantly plump' if I gained weight."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed, unrepentant.

Wu Shen was still standing there, waiting for an answer, his carefully prepared "final trump card" hovering awkwardly in the air like an offering nobody had agreed to accept.

Gao Yiye didn't respond immediately.

Instead, she turned her gaze to Shi Kefa.

"Minister Shi," she asked calmly, "when the Prince of Qin's household seized the celestial fertilizer... what did that make you think of?"

Shi Kefa's heart slammed violently against his ribs.

In an instant, dangerous phrases flared through his mind—advanced productive forces, backward power structures, structural contradictions—

He shuddered.

Then, like a man trying to fling a spider off his shoulder, he shook his head fiercely, as if physical motion could dislodge treasonous enlightenment.

"No," he said stiffly. "Nothing at all."

Gao Yiye smiled.

She did not pursue the matter.

Some seeds, after all, sprouted better when watered later.

Her gaze returned to Wu Shen.

"Minister Wu," she said, voice gentle, "if I extend credit for another shipment of celestial fertilizer... can you guarantee it won't be seized again?"

Wu Shen opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Opened it again.

"Well... ah... this..."

Yes.

That was the heart of the problem.

He thought carefully, visibly thinking himself into a corner.

"I can post guards," he said finally. "Increase patrols. Secure the fertilizer shop. I will absolutely prevent the Prince of Qin's household from interfering again."

Gao Yiye tilted her head slightly.

"That won't work."

The words were soft. Almost apologetic.

"You're a civil official," she continued. "You don't command troops. At best, you can mobilize local constables and garrison soldiers."

She paused.

"And they're all from Xi'an."

The silence thickened.

"Which local soldier," she asked mildly, "would dare offend the Prince of Qin's household?"

Wu Shen felt the answer land on his chest like a sack of bricks.

"If the Prince's men arrive," Gao Yiye went on, "those guards won't stop them. They'll help carry the fertilizer—carefully, even. Possibly with smiles."

Wu Shen said nothing.

Shi Kefa rubbed his temples.

This wasn't speculation. This was reality, spoken out loud with embarrassing clarity.

Gao Yiye concluded, "Unless you use my people."

Wu Shen looked up. "Your people?"

"They're not from Xi'an," she said. "They don't live under the Prince of Qin's shadow. They don't eat his rice."

Her eyes were calm.

"They'll guard the fertilizer. And if someone comes to seize it..."

She hesitated.

The word came out softer than intended.

"...they'll fight."

There was a brief, awkward pause.

Then—

"Beat them flat!"

The shout exploded from behind her.

Flat Rabbit grinned broadly, baring his teeth like a man who'd been waiting his entire life for that cue.

Yes, it was improper.

Yes, guards weren't supposed to interrupt their leader.

But Flat Rabbit had never been one for etiquette. In Gao Family Village, he was famous for respecting exactly two things: orders he liked, and fights he could win.

And in this moment, his enthusiasm neatly compensated for the gentle tone Gao Yiye had used.

Wu Shen raised an eyebrow. "You really dare confront the Prince of Qin's household?"

Flat Rabbit snorted.

"Villains who bully the common folk?" he said cheerfully. "There isn't a single one I wouldn't dare hit. This Flat Rabbit roams the jianghu for exactly this reason—righting wrongs and cracking skulls."

Wu Shen murmured, "I see."

A madman, he concluded.

Shi Kefa leaned forward. "If he dares to strike," he said quietly, "then I dare to shield him."

Wu Shen felt the same.

The Prince of Qin's household was powerful—but power meant different things to different people.

Civil officials weren't afraid of princes.

They were only afraid of losing before they could write about it.

As long as no formal troops were mobilized—only household retainers—the aftermath would be endless memorials, accusations, counter-accusations.

And in that battlefield?

The pen always bled more than the sword.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa exchanged a glance.

Agreement passed between them without words.

Wu Shen turned back to Gao Yiye.

"Miss Gao," he said firmly, "your people will guard the shop. If conflict arises, I will personally bear all consequences."

Gao Yiye smiled.

"Then there will be no problem."

The next morning, wagons filled Chengcheng County's streets.

Celestial fertilizer—stacked, sealed, guarded.

Rain had fallen across Shaanxi and Shanxi. Snow followed.

The old saying went: auspicious snow promises a good year.

Which meant land would be planted again.

Which meant fertilizer would be fought over again.

Gao Family Village had prepared dozens of wagons, forming a convoy long enough to turn heads and tighten throats.

At the front rode Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi, leading a hundred militia members.

No armor. No flintlock rifles.

Only blades.

Flat Rabbit laughed loudly.

"Xi'an!" he roared. "This Flat Rabbit has arrived! My first stop on my journey of chivalry—and of course it's the grandest city around!"

Zheng Gouzi rolled his eyes. "Without armor or rifles, our advantage is thin. Don't get yourself butchered by the Prince of Qin's household."

Flat Rabbit waved dismissively. "Only small men worry about equipment. A true hero needs nothing but cloth robes and a three-foot blade."

Zheng Gouzi covered his face.

Flat Rabbit stroked his weapon lovingly. "Today, this Flat Rabbit shall use this blade to uphold peace under heaven!"

"May I punch you now?" Zheng Gouzi asked flatly.

At that moment, a straw-hatted figure atop a wagon lifted his head.

"Xi'an's in sight."

Flat Rabbit squinted.

Then froze.

"DAO XUAN TIANZUN?!"

Both men nearly fell off their horses.

"Why are you here?" they exclaimed.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled faintly.

"For fun."

Which, somehow, was never the whole truth—but was never a lie either.

As Li Daoxuan's vision drew closer to Xi'an, the ancient capital began to reveal itself.

One more push.

One more spark of order.

One more fraction of well-being.

And the city would open itself fully before him.

A city that had seen everything.

And was about to see more.