

## Great Ming 581

### Chapter 581: The Wilful Mynah Bird

Flat Rabbit had been riding at the head of the convoy, chest puffed out, laughter echoing loud enough to scare birds off rooftops.

Then he saw that figure.

The straw hat.

The fan.

The aura that said I am watching you misbehave.

His swagger shrank by at least thirty percent on the spot.

"Oh no..." Flat Rabbit muttered, lowering his voice. "Dao Xuan Tianzun saw me showing off again."

Zheng Gouzi snorted. "It's not the first or second time. If Dao Xuan Tianzun actually cared, your rabbit head would've been served as an appetizer long ago."

Flat Rabbit thought about it seriously.

"...That's true."

In all honesty, Dao Xuan Tianzun was absurdly tolerant of a troublemaker like him. Too tolerant, even. The kind of tolerance that made people forget how dangerous disappointment could be.

Zheng Gouzi leaned closer and whispered, "By the way... have you noticed something off about this Tianzun avatar?"

Flat Rabbit squinted. "You mean how it feels... newer?"

"This one's different from the usual," Zheng Gouzi said. "This is that one, isn't it? The special model."

Flat Rabbit's eyes lit up. "I noticed too! This is the latest version. Built by Song Yingxing, Young Master Bai the sculptor, and a whole gang of senior engineers. Fifty taels a month per person!"

Zheng Gouzi scratched his chin. "I heard it's called... Test-01?"

Flat Rabbit frowned. "What's 'Test' mean?"

Zheng Gouzi shrugged. "No idea. Dao Xuan Tianzun named it himself."

They weren't wrong.

The body Li Daoxuan was using this time was unlike any before.

This wasn't clay.

This wasn't wood.

This was the culmination of Gao Family Village's technical obsession: Steel-Boned Silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun — Test-01.

Inside was a steel skeleton—solid, precise, terrifyingly durable. The joints rotated smoothly, hands could grasp, fingers could curl. Over that skeleton, layers of silicone were applied, sculpted inch by inch by craftsmen who were very aware of whose body they were shaping.

Every contour was painstakingly realistic.

Every detail refined.

Except one.

Below the abdomen, the structure was... flat.

Suspiciously flat.

The sculptors had unanimously decided that some things were better left to imagination. Too small would be insulting. Too large would also be insulting. So they simply removed the problem entirely.

Wisdom born of fear.

This time, the clothes weren't sculpted onto the body. They were worn.

And Li Daoxuan, being Li Daoxuan, took that as an invitation.

Silks.

Fine robes.

The unmistakable look of a wealthy young master who had never been told "no" in his life.

In his right hand: a folding fan.

In his left: a birdcage.

Inside the cage sat San Shier's beloved mynah bird.

Li Daoxuan had borrowed it for authenticity.

After all, what kind of rich young master didn't walk around with a loud, ill-mannered bird?

They reached Xi'an's city gates.

Shi Kefa was already waiting.

The guards didn't inspect the convoy. They didn't even hesitate. The gates opened cleanly, smoothly, obediently.

Dozens of wagons loaded with celestial fertilizer rolled into Xi'an.

From a shadowed corner of the street, an agent of the Prince of Qin's estate watched silently. He slipped back, gestured twice, and two lackeys melted into the crowd like oil into water.

Shi Kefa had come to greet Flat Rabbit.

Instead, he found himself staring at a young master.

He looked left.

Looked right.

Something about this man felt familiar. Very familiar.

He had seen a silicone Dao Xuan Tianzun by the Yellow River.

He had seen the Dao Xuan Tianzun in Gao Family Village.

But this one wore silk, not a Daoist robe.

Shi Kefa hesitated. "And... this gentleman is?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled lightly. "Li Daoxuan. Head of the Li family. I just happen to share a name with a rather famous ancestor from the Tang Dynasty."

Hehehe.

Shi Kefa's heart jumped.

The Li family.

This Li family.

The one that owned half of Gao Family Village. The one with money, manpower, technology, and terrifying connections.

Shi Kefa clasped his hands deeply. "I never expected the Li family head to be so young."

Li Daoxuan waved his fan. "My wife is young. Would it make sense for me to be old?"

Shi Kefa paused.

That... actually made sense.

Gao Yiye was barely past twenty. She was the principal wife, not a concubine. A principal wife's age usually matched her husband's.

Yes. Perfectly reasonable.

Shi Kefa leaned in. "Squire Li, your visit to Xi'an this time—is it for...?"

"Of course I'm here to back you," Li Daoxuan said casually. "Celestial fertilizer is about people eating or starving. Letting the Prince of Qin's estate run wild would be... uncouth."

Shi Kefa felt his spine straighten.

He came personally.

That alone said everything.

This man stood above ordinary gentry. Above ordinary merchants. With Dao Xuan Tianzun behind him, he was something else entirely.

Shi Kefa lowered his voice. "As for the Prince's heir—"

"Can't get it up!"

The mynah bird screamed.

Shi Kefa nearly inhaled his own tongue.

Li Daoxuan sighed. "Ah—my apologies. The bird's owner lacks discipline."

Shi Kefa waved frantically. "No, no—forget it!"

"The Prince's heir was initially unaware," Shi Kefa continued hurriedly. "It was his subordinates acting on their own. But after Lord Wu and I impeached him, he's now fully informed—and furious. He says he'll protect his people and fight us to the end."

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow. "Oh? That bold?"

"He resents civil officials," Shi Kefa said bitterly.

"Why?" Li Daoxuan asked.

Shi Kefa sighed. "When the previous Prince of Qin died, a new one should've been enfeoffed immediately. But everyone knows what that means—land grants. Xi'an's farmland is already mostly in the Prince's hands. Granting more would've been unbearable."

"So we blocked it," Shi Kefa said. "Delayed it. Again and again."

Li Daoxuan scoffed softly.

Shi Kefa continued, "The heir believes the court owes him land and title. Taking celestial fertilizer, to increase yields, is—"

"Can't get it up! Can't even touch women!"

The bird struck again.

Sweat poured down Shi Kefa's face.

"Squire Li... your bird..."

Li Daoxuan smiled indulgently. "Charming, isn't it?"

He tapped the cage. "Good bird. Extra meat tonight."

Shi Kefa's thoughts derailed completely.

Does it eat meat? Insects count as meat? Why am I thinking about this?!

They finally reached the celestial fertilizer shop.

Or what was left of it.

Doors smashed.

Furniture overturned.

A perfect portrait of what "acting recklessly" looked like in practice.

Shi Kefa gestured. "Squire Li... I leave this to you."

Li Daoxuan surveyed the ruin.

"No problem," he said lightly. "I'll handle it."

Shi Kefa watched him carefully.

"Handle it," he thought.

Yes.

This man was definitely not a normal person.

#### Chapter 582: They Are Watching

Shi Kefa brought with him a full contingent from the government-run Celestial Fertilizer Store—clerks, porters, record-keepers, and men whose sole qualification in life appeared to be the ability to carry heavy sacks without complaining too loudly.

Carts rolled in one after another.

Wooden wheels creaked.

Horses snorted.

Sacks thudded onto the ground with the kind of dull sound that suggested food for the land, not poetry.

The Celestial Fertilizer was unloaded piece by piece, carried into the shop, then stacked deep inside the rear warehouse. It wasn't a quiet operation by any standard. Dozens of carts came and went, clogging the street so thoroughly that even idle dogs had to reroute their afternoon naps.

Naturally, the surrounding residents were stirred.

Doors cracked open.

Windows lifted a finger's width.

Idle men suddenly remembered urgent business nearby.

Before long, a crowd gathered.

"Another shipment?" someone whispered, craning his neck.

"Master Shi brought in more Celestial Fertilizer," another confirmed, voice heavy with awe—and concern.

A third sighed, already exhausted on behalf of everyone involved.

"The Prince of Qin's residence will probably come seize it again in a few days, won't they?"

"Don't say that so loudly!"

"Oh dear... this again."

"What a mess. A real mess."

"A dogfight," an old man muttered, spitting to the side. "Two vicious dogs. No matter who wins, someone's getting fur stuck in their mouth."

"That's not fair," someone objected weakly. "Master Shi and Master Wu actually want the people to have fertilizer. They want crops to grow."

"Yes, yes," the old man replied, unimpressed. "Good intentions still get trampled when the dogs start biting."

While public opinion simmered like an unattended pot, Li Daoxuan strolled past the shopfront.

Left hand: a birdcage, the little creature inside hopping restlessly.

Right hand: a folding fan, snapping open and closed with leisurely indifference.

He looked less like someone in the middle of a political confrontation and more like a gentleman who had wandered out purely to admire how chaos was progressing.

"Flat Rabbit," Li Daoxuan said casually, not even turning his head.

"Zheng Gouzi."

The two stiffened at once.

"Yes!"

"Here!"

"I'll leave this place to you," Li Daoxuan said, tone light, as if he were asking them to water a plant.

Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi bowed so deeply their foreheads nearly struck the ground.

Li Daoxuan laughed. "No need to look like you're about to be buried alive. I'm just going for a walk."

He lifted the birdcage slightly, as though saluting the scene, then ambled off.

The folding fan swayed.

The bird chirped.

Soon enough, Li Daoxuan disappeared into the winding streets and crooked alleys of Xi'an City.

Shaanxi had endured five years of drought.

Five years was long enough to grind optimism into dust.

Xi'an, on the surface, was still bustling. Shops opened. Streets stayed busy. Voices filled the air. But beneath that noise was a rot that no amount of shouting could cover.

Every alley told the same story.

Refugees hunched against walls.

Families pressed together under shop awnings.

Faces drawn tight, eyes dulled by hunger and cold.

These weren't locals. They were people who had run out of land, out of water, out of choices. They had come to the city believing somewhere must be better.

The city, unfortunately, had run out of better to give.

Summer had at least allowed them to sleep outdoors without dying immediately. Winter was less forgiving. Rain turned to sleet. Sleet to snow. Cold crept into bones and refused to leave.

Li Daoxuan slowed his steps.

He watched.

Silently.

Xi'an lay beyond the reach of his field of vision—over a hundred li too far. He couldn't simply reach down and pluck misery away like a weed.

He had extended a hand through the Celestial Fertilizer.

Whether that hand would be grasped—or bitten—was still unclear.

Li Daoxuan reached into his sleeve, pulled out a handful of broken silver, and set it gently on the ground near a huddled group of refugees.

No announcement.

No lecture.

No miracle.

Then he continued on, birdcage swaying, fan tapping against his palm.

Xi'an City, Northeast Sector. Xi'an City, Northeast Sector.

The Prince of Qin's Residence.

Known proudly as the "Foremost Princely Fief Under Heaven."

Walls within walls.

Moats guarding moats.

A city nested inside another city, like paranoia perfected through architecture.

Grand halls stood immaculate.

Gardens bloomed despite the drought.

Stone paths remained clean enough to shame temples.

Even in the chaos of the late Ming, the Prince of Qin's residence had proven remarkably good at one thing: surviving while everyone else bled.

In the rear garden, beneath carefully pruned trees, a corpulent man reclined with his head resting on a young woman's lap.

Fruit juice dripped down his fingers as he ate.

This was Zhu Cunji, heir to the Prince of Qin. Thirty-seven years old—and still an heir.

That single fact haunted him more than ghosts.

The former Prince of Qin, Zhu Yihuan, had died back in the forty-sixth year of Wanli. Now it was the winter of Chongzhen's fourth year.

More than a decade.

Still no formal investiture.

Still no title.

Still an heir.

Zhu Cunji believed—deeply, passionately—that the Emperor and the civil officials owed him.

The longer they delayed, the more convinced he became.

Such was human nature: once you decide the world owes you, everything you take feels justified.

"That position should've been mine long ago!" Zhu Cunji snarled, venting to his favored concubine. "The title, the lands, everything around Xi'an. All of it!"

He spat the words like poison.

"Those civil officials keep dragging their feet. Disgusting. Absolutely disgusting."

He snorted. "We took a little Celestial Fertilizer, and suddenly they're crying to the Emperor, impeaching me?"

Just then, a servant rushed in.

"Report! Another shipment of Celestial Fertilizer has arrived."

Zhu Cunji paused mid-bite.

"Oh?" His eyes narrowed. "Another?"

The servant lowered his voice. "Your Highness... should we seize it again? The last time caused quite the uproar. The impeachment memorials haven't even reached the capital yet."

Zhu Cunji rolled his eyes.

"Of course we seize it."

He sneered. "If I don't make noise, how will they remember I exist?"

He believed firmly in one philosophy:

The louder you cry, the faster you're fed.

"If I don't stir trouble," he continued, "the Emperor might think I'm content being ignored. I need him seeing my name every day."

Shi Kefa.

Wu Shen.

"Perfect," Zhu Cunji said. "Both can write directly to the Emperor. Let them."

The servant hesitated. "This time, they didn't use local runners. They went to Chengcheng County and invited a gentry member to manage things."

"Oh?" Zhu Cunji raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"A descendant of the Tang imperial family. The Li clan. I heard the fertilizer comes from his family."

Zhu Cunji laughed, sharp and ugly.

"So what if he's Tang royalty?"

He slapped the concubine's thigh.

"I'm Ming royalty. This is the Great Ming, not his Great Tang."

The servant nodded eagerly. "Exactly, Your Highness."

"Take a few men," Zhu Cunji ordered. "Empty the store."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Zhu Cunji laughed again, pulling his concubine closer.

"Forget these annoyances. Let's enjoy ourselves."

The Celestial Fertilizer store reopened after hurried repairs.

Tables straightened.

Chairs replaced.

The signboard rehung.

Behind the counter stood Wang Tang, a logistics squad leader, dressed in a plain long gown.

He looked refined. Polite. Almost scholarly.

He looked absolutely nothing like someone who belonged there.

Flat Rabbit stared at him, then burst out laughing.

"Xiao Tang, you look like you wandered into the wrong life."

Wang Tang smiled calmly, refusing to defend himself.

Just then, Dao Xuan Tianzun—Test Subject 01—walked in, chuckling.

"The belief that merchants must look greedy is outdated," Li Daoxuan said lightly. "In the new era, merchants should appear dignified. Let vulgarity die where it belongs."

Flat Rabbit stuck out his tongue, wisely choosing not to mock Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Instead, he pointed at the empty shop.

"We've reopened, hung the sign, posted prices, even beat the gongs. Not a single customer."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Of course," he said. "As long as the Prince of Qin's residence hasn't made its move, no one will dare step inside."

He closed his fan with a snap.

"They're waiting. Watching. Waiting to see who bleeds first."

Flat Rabbit scoffed. "Cowards."

Li Daoxuan's gaze drifted toward the street.

"They're weak," he said quietly. "And weak people don't get the luxury of bravery."

Then, almost thoughtfully:

"But when those in power mistake fear for obedience..."

"...the reckoning always comes."

The shop remained empty.

But unseen eyes were everywhere.

They were watching.

Chapter 583: A Fight Breaks Out

Li Daoxuan set a rattan chair in the corner of the fertilizer store and slowly reclined into it.

The moment his weight settled, the chair let out a protesting groan, the woven rattan creaking and whining as if it were being wronged. The sound grew sharper, more pitiful, as though the chair itself were voicing a silent accusation.

This was only natural.

Li Daoxuan's true weight was far beyond that of any ordinary human. To a piece of furniture made for mortal use, his body was nothing short of an unanticipated calamity.

The rattan chair shuddered beneath him, releasing a series of drawn-out squeaks, each one sounding more aggrieved than the last.

"Squeak... squeak..."

"Fertilizer for sale, come and buy your fertilizer!"

Wang Tang, acting as the temporary manager of the fertilizer store, stood at the entrance holding a tin megaphone and shouted toward the street until his voice echoed between the buildings.

"Use it properly and your harvest next year will double, guaranteed! Winter's almost over, spring is right around the corner. If you don't buy now, it'll be too late! Buy fertilizer today and receive a free gift! Every customer gets a gift!"

At the mention of a free gift, the villagers who had been lingering at a distance finally mustered a bit of courage. A few stepped closer, exchanging wary glances, and one of them called out hesitantly, "What kind of gift?"

Wang Tang answered without missing a beat, "An invoice."

The villagers froze, faces blank with confusion.

"What's an invoice supposed to be?" someone asked.

Wang Tang explained patiently, "It's a written document proving that you bought something. It records the price and details of the transaction. There are two copies. I keep one, and you take one home."

The crowd erupted at once.

"What use is that nonsense?"

"Who needs such a thing?"

"What are we supposed to do with a piece of paper?"

Wang Tang's expression turned solemn. "How can you say it's useless? This document proves your purchase. If there's a problem with the fertilizer, you can bring the invoice back to demand a refund or an exchange. More importantly, if everyone insists on getting invoices when they buy things, there will be proper records of how much merchants sell. That way, they can't underreport their earnings and cheat the imperial court."

The villagers muttered among themselves, unimpressed. "Still sounds useless."

Wang Tang opened his mouth, then closed it again, completely at a loss.

From the rattan chair in the corner, Li Daoxuan watched the scene unfold and could not help laughing out loud. "Hahaha. Wang Tang, you're a bit too early. Far too early. Don't rush things."

"Alright, alright." Wang Tang let out a long sigh and waved his hand in surrender. "No more of that. The free gift is flour. We'll give out flour."

The moment the word "flour" left his mouth, the villagers' eyes lit up as if someone had struck a spark in dry straw.

Yet even so, no one dared to step into the fertilizer store.

They still remembered the unresolved conflict between the Prince of Qin's household and this very shop. To walk inside now and buy fertilizer would be no different from openly slapping the Prince of Qin in the face.

And just as that thought settled in their minds, it became reality.

A junior steward from the Prince of Qin's household arrived, striding down the street with more than a dozen retainers behind him.

"Make way, make way! What are you all staring at?" the steward barked twice.

In an instant, the villagers scattered like startled birds, retreating far away. No one dared linger in front of the shop any longer. They hid behind walls, trees, and corners, peeking out cautiously.

The street in front of the fertilizer store emptied in the blink of an eye.

Li Daoxuan remained reclined in his chair, unmoving, as though nothing in the world concerned him. Wang Tang, on the other hand, took two steps forward and stopped at the entrance, his expression calm but his gaze sharp as he looked at the people approaching from the Prince of Qin's household.

The steward swaggered up arrogantly. "Looks like Shi Kefa knows what's good for him," he said with a sneer. "Sending more fertilizer over to our Prince of Qin's household, hm? You there. Go move it."

Wang Tang smiled faintly. "You're a steward from the Prince of Qin's household, right? You only brought ten men. That won't be enough. We've delivered dozens of cartloads this time. If you want to take it all, wouldn't it be better to bring more people?"

At first, the steward assumed Wang Tang was backing down.

Then he realized something was wrong.

This fellow was mocking him.

The steward's eyes narrowed as he stared at Wang Tang. "So you're the new manager?"

"Just arrived," Wang Tang replied with a polite smile. "I hope you'll show some leniency."

"Save the slick talk," the steward snapped. "Get out of my sight before you get hurt."

Wang Tang laughed softly. "Steward, you dare strike people here because you assume the Emperor won't punish the Prince of Qin over a small matter like this. But let me ask you something. If you were beaten here instead, do you think the Emperor would punish a civilian official for something so trivial?"

A flash of unease crossed the steward's heart.

This man...

He sized Wang Tang up again. Young, fair-skinned, with the look of a refined scholar. The sort who relied on words, not fists.

What am I afraid of?

Without warning, the steward lunged forward and threw a punch straight at Wang Tang's face.

But Wang Tang was no helpless scholar.

He was a logistics soldier from Gao Family Village. Any soldier, logistics or frontline alike, had undergone proper military training. That included grappling techniques, joint locks, and the introductory forms of Ghost God Fist.

To Wang Tang, the steward's punch looked painfully slow.

He reached out, seized the man's arm, twisted sharply, then turned his body and swung the steward around like a windmill before slamming him hard into the ground.

Thud.

The sound was heavy and dull. The steward felt as though every bone in his body had shattered. Pain flooded his senses, pinning him to the ground, unable to move even a finger.

The dozen or so retainers behind him exploded in fury.

"How dare you!"

"You struck someone from the Prince of Qin's household!"

"You're defying heaven itself!"

With a roar, they surged forward all at once.

They meant to overwhelm with numbers, but unfortunately for them, the fertilizer store was not empty.

Flat Rabbit, who had been waiting in the back room, was the first to charge out. His hand went straight for his sword, but Zheng Gouzi followed close behind and pressed down on his wrist.

"Wait," Zheng Gouzi said quickly. "Don't kill anyone yet. If we start with killing, we lose the moral high ground."

Flat Rabbit immediately understood. He released the sword hilt, clenched his fists, and rushed forward.

One of the retainers was swinging at Wang Tang's side when Flat Rabbit intercepted him. With a fierce shout, he kicked the man squarely, sending him flying backward.

"Even the Prince of Qin's household must follow reason!"

The fallen steward, writhing on the ground, roared back in rage, "When have we ever bothered with reason when dealing with people like you? Damn it, fight!"

With those words, the fertilizer store's side had firmly claimed "reason."

Anyone with eyes could tell which side the onlookers would support.

Now that reason was on their side, they could strike without restraint.

Zheng Gouzi rushed in, grabbed one retainer, and drove a punch deep into his stomach, folding him in half like a cooked shrimp. Then Zheng Gouzi lifted his knee and smashed it into the man's chin with a sickening thump.

The retainer's head snapped back violently, and he collapsed on the spot, completely unconscious.

At that moment, the dozen or so militia soldiers hiding in the back room all rushed out.

They deliberately matched their numbers, one militia soldier for each retainer from the Prince of Qin's household. But while the numbers were equal, their strength was not.

Fists and feet collided in rapid succession. Dull thuds echoed through the shop, mixed with cries of pain, furious shouts, and desperate curses.

One retainer took a heavy kick from Flat Rabbit and stumbled backward several steps before collapsing heavily beside Li Daoxuan's rattan chair.

He planted his hands on the ground, trying desperately to push himself up.

Li Daoxuan, still reclined, casually clenched his fist and tapped the man on the head.

Thwack.

Though Li Daoxuan's hand was covered by a thin layer of silicone, the steel skeleton beneath was unyielding. The blow sent a shock of agony straight through the retainer's skull.

The man let out a shrill scream, clutching his head with both hands, and collapsed back to the ground, utterly defeated.

Chapter 584 The Power of One

In just a few breaths, more than a dozen retainers from the Prince of Qin's household were lying scattered across the ground like discarded sacks.

None of them could get up.

And none of them had escaped with light injuries.

One man's arm hung at an unnatural angle, the joint clearly dislocated, swaying uselessly with every shallow breath he took. Another had been beaten until his face no longer resembled a face—eyes swollen shut, cheeks puffed up, skin mottled purple and black. The most miserable of all was the fellow

Li Daoxuan had personally struck: his scalp had split open, blood streaming down his forehead and into his eyes, painting his vision red.

The steward was in no better shape.

Wang Tang had slammed him so hard into the ground that his bones nearly rattled apart. He staggered to his feet, clutching his chest, breathing raggedly. Rage and disbelief twisted his expression into something ugly.

"You..." he spat, pointing at them with a trembling finger. "You people are something else."

He sneered. "We wouldn't dare touch Wu Shen or Shi Kefa. But you lot?" His lips curled. "You're nothing. Just wait."

Wang Tang smiled, mild and polite.

"We'll be waiting."

The steward's face darkened. He roared, "Let's go!"

The retainers scrambled up in a panic, half dragging, half supporting one another as they fled down the street. In moments, they vanished around the corner, leaving behind only trampled snow and scattered bloodstains.

The villagers of Gao Family Village burst into laughter. Someone even whistled loudly at the retreating figures.

Flat Rabbit was practically glowing. "Wow! I never thought Dao Xuan Tianzun would personally join the fight!" he exclaimed. "When Dao Xuan Tianzun smashed that guy on the head—ah! That feeling was incredible!"

Zheng Gouzi nodded repeatedly. "Indeed. Completely unexpected."

Li Daoxuan leaned back in his lounge chair, rocking gently. The old wood creaked rhythmically beneath him. He smiled faintly, saying nothing.

So this is what it feels like, he thought.

Honestly, it's quite fun.

Much more satisfying than casually reaching down from the heavens and crushing ants.

The sensation stirred an old memory.

Thirty-Two Middle School.

Back then, there were always a few hooligans lurking outside the school gates. One day, a girl from his class had been harassed. She ran back crying, and the moment she spoke, every boy in the class rushed out.

None of them knew how to fight.

But numbers had their own kind of courage.

They surrounded the hooligans and unleashed a chaotic storm of punches and kicks. Li Daoxuan, hidden in the crowd, had managed to land two solid kicks and one punch.

Even now, the memory made him smile.

It had felt... very good.

Wang Tang glanced at him and murmured, "Dao Xuan Tianzun seems to be in a good mood. He's smiling."

Flat Rabbit laughed. "Of course! We were beating up bad people—how could Dao Xuan Tianzun not be happy?"

Zheng Gouzi chuckled. "That's true. Hehe."

Wang Tang's expression grew serious. "Next time, they won't send just a dozen men."

He continued calmly, "If I'm not mistaken, they'll bring fifty or sixty next time. And they'll be armed—clubs, staves, things meant to injure without drawing blood."

Flat Rabbit cracked his knuckles eagerly. "Then my Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord—"

"Don't use a sword," Wang Tang interrupted sharply. "Stick to weapons that don't draw blood."

Zheng Gouzi lowered his voice. "But Dao Xuan Tianzun already made someone bleed. That guy's head was pouring."

Wang Tang laughed. "Dao Xuan Tianzun used his fists."

He waved his hand. "As long as we don't brandish lethal weapons in the streets, even a cracked head counts as a reasonable brawl. Remember—nominally, we serve under Wu Shen and Shi Kefa."

His tone turned solemn. "If we cross the line, it's Wu Shen and Shi Kefa who'll be impeached. Good officials are rare. If they're dismissed and replaced with corrupt trash, that would be far more troublesome."

The others exchanged looks, then burst into laughter.

"That's true," they agreed.

That very night, heavy snow fell over Xi'an.

Behind the fertilizer shop, in the open yard, Flat Rabbit was busy sculpting a snowman.

Or rather—

A snow rabbit.

A fat one.

So plump that if it were real, it would provide a very respectable amount of meat.

He was admiring his work when Li Daoxuan emerged from the side room and waved him over.

"Rabbit Lord," Li Daoxuan called casually.

Flat Rabbit nearly jumped out of his skin. "Dao Xuan Tianzun!" he cried. "Please—please don't add 'Lord' when calling me! I can't bear such an honor!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Nicknames are for fun. Don't take them so seriously."

Still flustered, Flat Rabbit insisted, "Please... just call me Flat Rabbit."

"Alright," Li Daoxuan said. "Flat Rabbit, come with me. Let's slip out quietly and do some good."

Flat Rabbit's eyes lit up. "Oh? Do good deeds?"

That topic struck him right in the heart.

Li Daoxuan instructed, "Go check the last fertilizer cart. There are black bags on it. Grab one at random."

Flat Rabbit ran off immediately.

Moments later, he found the cart piled high with black bags. He reached for one casually—

—and nearly strained his back.

The bag didn't look large, yet it weighed more than two hundred jin.

He tore it open and froze.

Inside were clipped silver fragments, cut into small, irregular pieces.

Gritting his teeth, Flat Rabbit hoisted the bag onto his back and staggered out, face flushed red, breath coming in gasps. He dropped it beside Li Daoxuan.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he panted, "there's so much silver! I'm exhausted!"

Li Daoxuan laughed softly. "What do you think I called you for? Come on. Let's take a walk."

Flat Rabbit already understood. His exhaustion vanished instantly.

"Oh—yes! Yes!"

The two slipped quietly out of the fertilizer shop.

Though the shop looked relaxed, it was under tight security. Wang Tang had arranged patrols, wary of further trouble from the Prince of Qin's household. Guards watched not only the shop, but the surrounding streets as well.

When Li Daoxuan and Flat Rabbit left, the sentries noticed immediately.

But none dared stop them.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun wished to leave, who would be foolish enough to interfere?

Naturally, they pretended to see nothing.

Snow swirled through the streets of Xi'an, settling endlessly on rooftops and shoulders.

Li Daoxuan felt no cold.

His steel-boned, silicone-structured body ignored it completely.

But when he thought, I want to feel it, the chill instantly seeped in.

Like flipping a switch.

Convenient, he mused.

He pointed toward a narrow alley. "Look there."

Flat Rabbit stepped closer and peered inside.

Several figures were huddled together in the corner—refugees, pressed close for warmth, bodies trembling beneath thin layers of cloth.

"Give them silver."

Flat Rabbit untied the bag, scooped up a handful of clipped silver, and placed it before them.

The refugees stared in disbelief.

Then they dropped to their knees with heavy thuds, kowtowing repeatedly.

Li Daoxuan pulled Flat Rabbit away before gratitude could turn into commotion.

As they walked, Flat Rabbit whispered, "Dao Xuan Tianzun... my heart aches. Seeing suffering like this— it's unbearable."

Li Daoxuan remained silent.

Flat Rabbit continued softly, "This bag is only a bit over two hundred jin. It won't be enough, will it? I should have carried more... but my strength is too small..."

Li Daoxuan finally spoke.

"That bag is as heavy as your strength," he said.

He paused.

"That," he continued calmly, "is how many lives your kindness can reach."

Flat Rabbit stopped walking.

Li Daoxuan added, "One person who tries to save the world alone will only learn where his limits are."

Only then did Flat Rabbit truly understand.

This was not just charity.

It was a lesson.

"Come," Li Daoxuan said. "Let's keep distributing."

He continued quietly, "Do not despise what you can do just because it is not enough."

"Let them eat a few full meals this winter," he said. "That is already good."

Chapter 585 Leave It to You

The two figures moved through the darkened streets of Xi'an.

Whenever they spotted a sheltered alley, they slipped inside to take a look. If they found refugees huddled within, they would leave behind a handful of clipped silver—nothing more, nothing less.

They walked, gave, and moved on.

Before long, the pouch of silver was empty.

Flat Rabbit immediately turned and sprinted back toward the fertilizer shop. He found the large cart, hoisted another heavy sack of silver onto his shoulder, and returned to the streets, resuming his rounds alley by alley.

The first two trips were manageable.

By the third, his breathing grew ragged. White clouds of breath burst from his mouth as he staggered forward, legs heavy, shoulders screaming in protest.

Just as Dao Xuan Tianzun had said—his strength alone was pitifully limited.

Even if Dao Xuan Tianzun provided endless silver, how much could one man carry?

How many trips could he make?

Saving the common people of the world was not a matter of goodwill alone.

When they were more than halfway through the third sack, they arrived at Xi'an's most prosperous street.

Snow fell thickly, yet the street blazed with warmth and indulgence. Lanterns glowed like fire. Laughter spilled from taverns. Scholars recited verses over wine, their sleeves heavy with perfume and arrogance. Brothels hummed with music and pleasure.

Flat Rabbit snorted. "Hmph! 'Behind crimson gates, wine and... what was the rest again?'"

Dao Xuan Tianzun replied evenly, "'Behind crimson gates, wine and meat rot; along the roadside, people freeze to death.'"

Flat Rabbit nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes! Dao Xuan Tianzun truly knows everything."

Dao Xuan Tianzun gestured ahead. "Look at the corner."

Flat Rabbit followed his gaze.

By the side entrance of a large tavern, a group of refugees waited in silence, huddled together like shadows. Moments later, a table of scholars finished their feast and stood to leave.

A waiter hurried over to clear the dishes.

He scraped the leftovers—bones, cold rice, half-eaten scraps—into a wooden basin with loud clattering sounds. Then, glancing around nervously, he slipped toward the side door while the manager wasn't looking.

He cracked the door open just enough to pass the basin outside.

The refugees surged forward instantly, grabbing handfuls of scraps, stuffing them into their mouths as if afraid the food might vanish.

The waiter whispered urgently, "Quiet! Don't make a sound. If the manager catches me, I'll be fired—and you won't get anything next time."

The refugees nodded frantically. Their movements slowed.

Inside the tavern, the manager's thunderous voice erupted.

"Siwa! Siwa! Where the hell are you sneaking off to?"

"I told you to dump the leftovers for the pigs! Where did you crawl off to?"

The waiter flinched. "Coming! Coming! I was just... relieving myself!"

"Lazy ox! Lazy horse!" the manager roared. "Always full of piss and shit!"

The waiter returned meekly, enduring a storm of curses as the manager twisted his ear viciously.

Flat Rabbit's eyes burned. "Damn it! I'll kill that manager!"

"No."

Dao Xuan Tianzun shook his head.

"Do not commit evil in the name of justice," he said calmly. "That man is petty and cruel, but he does not deserve death."

Flat Rabbit clenched his fists.

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued, "Killing is easy. Deciding who should die is hard. If you cannot tell the difference, you are not a hero—you are merely a reckless demon."

Flat Rabbit fell silent.

Dao Xuan Tianzun asked, "Think carefully. What is the best solution right now?"

Flat Rabbit frowned, brain working furiously.

After a long while, his eyes lit up. "Dao Xuan Tianzun! Let's find the owner of this tavern, buy it, kick out that manager, and promote the waiter to manager!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled faintly. "A good thought. Still wrong."

Flat Rabbit froze. "Why?"

"Can the waiter read?" Dao Xuan Tianzun asked.

"Can he keep accounts?"

"Can he manage people, suppliers, taxes, officials?"

He continued evenly, "You saw his kindness and mistook it for competence. That mistake ruins more lives than cruelty ever does."

Flat Rabbit swallowed.

"If the tavern collapses in a few months," Dao Xuan Tianzun went on, "what then? If guilt crushes him and he hangs himself, will your kindness have saved anyone?"

Flat Rabbit stared. "I... I didn't think that far."

He fell silent again.

Then—understanding struck.

"I know!" he said quickly. "We buy the tavern. We transfer a literate, numerate man from Gao Family Village to serve as head manager. Then we hire this waiter as assistant manager."

Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded. "This time, you're right."

He added, "Remember this. Tomorrow, investigate who owns this tavern. If it can be bought, acquire it. Do exactly as you said."

Flat Rabbit beamed. "Following Dao Xuan Tianzun, I'm learning more every day."

Dao Xuan Tianzun said calmly, "Xi'an is different from Gao Family Village. We cannot openly seize control—doing so would invite disaster."

He continued, "What cannot be done openly must be done quietly. We'll begin by taking over businesses across every trade in this city."

He placed a hand on Flat Rabbit's shoulder.

"You have many flaws," he said, "but you possess one rare virtue. You are not greedy for wealth, nor lustful for women."

He glanced at the glowing street. "In a city soaked in indulgence, you will not lose yourself. Sugar-coated bullets won't pierce you."

"So," he concluded, "I'll leave Xi'an to you."

Flat Rabbit was overwhelmed. "Thank you for trusting me, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"I only said half," Li Daoxuan replied. "You also possess flaws most people don't."

Flat Rabbit was instantly speechless.

"Go," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "Distribute more silver."

Flat Rabbit groaned. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, I really can't carry any more. Hauling hundreds of jin through these streets will kill me!"

"Then we continue tomorrow night," Dao Xuan Tianzun decided.

Flat Rabbit sighed deeply.

At dawn.

As the sky barely brightened, the doors of Xi'an's official grain store shook violently under the pounding of fists.

Wu Shen, the imperial censor most attentive to disaster relief, was roused immediately.

He threw on his padded robe and rushed outside.

A dense mass of refugees pressed against the grain store gates, shouting and jostling. Those in front hammered on the doors.

"Open up! It's daybreak! Hurry!"

The grain store manager yanked the door open, face sour. "What's the noise? Even if I open, you can't afford anything."

"We have money!" the refugees shouted together. "We have money now!"

The manager stared.

Hands spread open.

Silver fragments glittered in every palm.

The manager was dumbstruck. "What... what is this?"

Wu Shen, standing nearby, was equally stunned. "Where did all this silver come from?"

But that wasn't the important part.

Money existed.

That was reality.

Wu Shen raised his hand sharply. "Sell them grain."

The store burst into motion. Weighing, bagging, hauling—everyone worked at once.

Each refugee spent a few qian of silver and received a dou of grain—ten catties.

Mixed with wild vegetables, bark, and roots, eaten carefully—

It would keep them alive for dozens of days.

And sometimes—

That was enough.

#### Chapter 586 Time to Settle Accounts

With the grain stores selling at inflated prices, the government swiftly accumulated a staggering amount of silver.

Wu Shen's heart bloomed like a flower in spring.

"Money," he murmured in disbelief. "I finally have money again."

Unfortunately for him, the warmth of that silver hadn't even had time to reach his palms—

Before Li Daoxuan appeared at the entrance of his residence.

The man strolled in casually, birdcage in hand, as if out for a morning walk.

"Lord Wu," Dao Xuan Tianzun said pleasantly, "I hear the refugees of Xi'an recently encountered a stroke of fortune and purchased quite a lot of grain from the government stores."

Wu Shen's heart sank.

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued lightly, "That must mean your coffers are rather full now."

Wu Shen swallowed.

"And the celestial fertilizer," Dao Xuan Tianzun added, tilting the birdcage slightly, "was purchased on credit from my side. Since money has arrived, it seems... appropriate to settle old accounts."

If Wu Shen had been a corrupt official, he might have tried to dodge.

But he wasn't.

He was upright to the point of inflexibility—a scholar whose bones were harder than iron when it came to promises.

A debt was a debt.

And so, with visible pain, Wu Shen watched as the silver he had just acquired flowed back—coin by coin—into Dao Xuan Tianzun's hands.

When it was done, Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled faintly.

"Lord Wu," he said, "with the refugees buying grain like this, your stores must be nearly empty by now."

Wu Shen sighed heavily. "If this continues two or three more times, the government granaries will be completely drained."

"That's easy to fix," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied. "I still have grain in my own stores."

Wu Shen looked up sharply.

"You may purchase it on credit," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "Sell it as relief grain. You are a man who repays his debts—I trust you."

Wu Shen's face lit up like a lantern.

"On credit?" he exclaimed. "That's wonderful! I'll take it—every bit of grain you have!"

Their agreement had barely been concluded when panicked shouts erupted outside.

"The Prince of Qin's men!" someone cried.

"They're heading for the celestial fertilizer shop again!"

"There are a lot of them—and they're carrying clubs!"

Wu Shen's expression changed instantly.

Dao Xuan Tianzun, however, chuckled softly.

"No need to panic," he said. "My people are already there."

He turned. "Come. Let's watch."

The grain store and the celestial fertilizer shop were close—half a street and one turn away.

Wu Shen rushed ahead in a frenzy.

Dao Xuan Tianzun followed at an unhurried pace. Walking too fast would disturb his bird.

By the time he reached the corner, the street before the fertilizer shop had already descended into chaos.

This time, the Prince of Qin's household guards had abandoned all pretense.

No shouting. No warnings.

They raised their clubs and charged like street thugs, intent on smashing first and talking later.

The Gao Family Village Militia responded instantly.

Clubs were pulled from beneath the counters.

Fifty men surged forward.

Fifty against fifty.

The rule was simple: never let the enemy know how much strength you truly have.

The crowd scattered at once.

Everyone in Xi'an knew better than to stand between imperial kin and civil power.

In moments, the entire street became a battlefield.

Clubs whistled through the air.

Bodies slammed into stone.

This was Xi'an.

Ordinarily, military officers would have intervened.

But this was a fight between royal blood and bureaucratic backing.

The military pretended not to see.

The Provincial Governor pretended not to hear.

The Prefect pretended not to exist.

And so the outcome would be decided by fists.

Zheng Gouzi twisted aside, narrowly avoiding a downward strike. His own club crashed into a retainer's thigh with a dull crack.

The man screamed and collapsed.

Zheng Gouzi didn't hesitate—he followed up with savage blows, efficient and merciless.

Another retainer rushed in from the side.

Before he could land his strike, a militia member intercepted the blow with a sharp crack.

Zheng Gouzi seized the opening and sent the man flying.

The Prince of Qin's retainers surged again—several charging at once.

Suddenly, Flat Rabbit let out a strange cry and rolled low across the ground.

His club became a blur.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Shins shattered.

Anyone who had ever been struck there knew—this pain went straight to the soul.

A whole row of retainers collapsed screaming.

One man, seeing Flat Rabbit crouched low, thought he had the advantage.

He raised his club and smashed downward.

Flat Rabbit planted his palms, launched himself upward, and slammed his forehead into the man's jaw.

Thump.

The retainer flew backward, unconscious.

From the very beginning, the outcome had been obvious.

This wasn't a battle.

It was a beating.

The Prince of Qin's men broke.

They fled toward the street corner—

Straight toward Wu Shen.

One retainer, eyes wild, swung his club at him.

The steward beside him nearly screamed in terror and kicked the man aside.

"Are you insane?" he hissed. "Hit servants if you must—but never a principal official! You'll doom the Prince!"

Before he could finish—

Smack.

Wu Shen's palm struck his face.

It was an ordinary slap.

No technique. No strength.

But it carried all the fury of an honest man humiliated.

The steward burned with rage—but rage was useless now.

He lowered his head and fled.

Straight into Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The steward recognized him.

The Prince of Qin's people had investigated thoroughly—this man was merely a descendant of a Tang-era branch line, no official rank, just a local gentry.

Wu Shen couldn't be touched.

But this man?

The steward raised his club and brought it down.

Dao Xuan Tianzun lifted his arm.

Thwack.

The club struck.

Then—

CRACK.

The wood splintered.

The steward froze.

Iron Cloth Shirt? Golden Bell Shield?

What kind of monster is this?

Before the thought finished—

Dao Xuan Tianzun's fist moved.

THWACK.

It felt like being struck by solid iron.

No give.

No mercy.

The steward screamed and flew backward, nose shattered, teeth exploding from his mouth in a spray of blood.

Before he could even crawl—

The Gao Family Village Militia arrived.

To strike Dao Xuan Tianzun himself?

That was blasphemy.

Clubs fell like rain.

Thud.

Crack.

Thud.

Had Dao Xuan Tianzun not forbidden killing, the man would have died on the spot.

As it was, survival was... uncertain.

Finally, a few terrified retainers dragged the broken steward away.

They fled toward the Prince of Qin's manor—

Leaving the street behind them soaked in silence.

Chapter 587 The Covert Struggle Begins

Wu Shen spat viciously in the direction where the Prince of Qin's servants had fled.

Then he turned around to inspect the condition of "his own people."

To his astonishment, not a single person from Dao Xuan Tianzun's side was injured.

They stood relaxed, breathing steady, expressions calm—as if they had just finished moving furniture rather than smashing fifty men into the street.

Wu Shen laughed out loud. "Not one injured! What incredible skill!"

Dao Xuan Tianzun replied mildly, "If they managed to get hurt fighting a group of household servants, they'd be crying all the way home once the punishment started."

Wu Shen blinked. "With subordinates this capable... you'd still punish them?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun only smiled.

Wu Shen didn't pursue the question. He turned his gaze outward.

The common folk, emboldened now, had begun creeping back onto the street. At first only a few. Then more. Soon, entire groups stood watching openly, faces lit with excitement as they stared at the empty road where the Prince of Qin's men had just been chased off.

Some sharper minds were already calculating silently.

Fifty men were sent—and defeated.

Sending more servants would cross a line.

Once things escalated beyond this, impeachment would be inevitable.

No matter how favored the Prince of Qin was, the Emperor would not tolerate him openly parading a private army through Xi'an's streets.

Which meant—

The open struggle was over.

From here on out, at most, it would be covert maneuvering.

And covert struggles were not something ordinary people needed to fear.

A bold farmer suddenly rushed into the fertilizer shop.

"I want to buy celestial fertilizer!"

That single shout was like striking flint.

"I want some too!"

"So do I!"

"Me as well!"

The crowd surged forward.

Wang Tang straightened his clothes—still slightly rumpled from the earlier fight—and calmly returned behind the counter.

He smiled. "Everyone, no need to rush. One by one. Please form a line."

He continued, "Everyone who buys fertilizer will receive a complimentary gift, as well as a receipt. Fair dealing—no cheating the old, no bullying the young."

Wu Shen frowned slightly. "A receipt?"

Wang Tang's eyes lit up immediately, and he launched into an enthusiastic explanation—what a receipt was, how it recorded transactions, how it protected both buyer and seller.

Wu Shen listened carefully.

Then he spread his hands. "Sounds... rather useless."

Wang Tang's expression dimmed.

If even an upright official found it pointless, what chance did the common people have of understanding its value?

Too early, he thought.

Just as Dao Xuan Tianzun said—still too early.

Wu Shen, however, was in excellent spirits.

In his mind, this confrontation with the Prince of Qin had already ended in a clear, staged victory.

Satisfied and triumphant, he returned home.

That night.

Dao Xuan Tianzun summoned Wang Tang, Flat Rabbit, and Zheng Gouzi.

"The enemy's overt attacks will most likely stop here," he said calmly. "What you must guard against next are methods far more extreme."

Flat Rabbit tensed. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... do you mean he'll raise troops and attack us?"

"No," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied. "He wouldn't dare."

He paused, then added, "As for covert moves—those require patience and planning. He won't rush."

Setting that aside, he turned to Flat Rabbit.

"News of today's clash—and our victory—will spread throughout the city in less than half a day. Our reputation will rise sharply."

He continued, "You should begin carrying out the task I assigned you last night."

Flat Rabbit straightened instantly. "Understood! I'll act immediately."

He turned to Wang Tang. "You're literate and good with numbers. Come with this Senior Rabbit."

Wang Tang was startled. He subconsciously glanced toward Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Seeing Dao Xuan Tianzun smile and nod, Wang Tang followed. "Alright. I'll go."

The two walked out of the fertilizer shop, turned two streets, and arrived at the large restaurant they had observed the previous night.

Flat Rabbit planted his hands on his hips. "Our mission is simple."

"We're buying this place."

Wang Tang gasped. "What?! Don't be reckless!"

Flat Rabbit snorted. "Reckless? Dao Xuan Tianzun personally approved this."

Then his grin widened. "And not just this one."

"We're going to buy, buy, buy."

"Every property we can get our hands on in Xi'an Prefecture."

"We can't occupy Xi'an openly..."

"But we can become its uncrowned kings."

He burst into laughter. "Wahahaha!"

Wang Tang froze.

Then—understanding hit him.

Xi'an was too important.

If Gao Family Village openly took it, that would be war.

But if they quietly controlled its businesses—

Food.

Clothing.

Housing.

Transport.

They would hold the lifeblood of both officials and civilians.

Wang Tang's blood surged.

"This... this is exactly what I was trained for!" he said excitedly. "All those years of reading and calculating—this is where it all matters!"

Two hours later.

Flat Rabbit swaggered out of the restaurant with Wang Tang at his side.

In his hands was a thick stack of documents.

Land deeds.

Property titles.

Even the indentures of several miscellaneous workers.

Under Dao Xuan Tianzun's terrifying funds, the restaurant had changed hands without resistance.

No one could withstand celestial gold.

If one sphere wasn't enough—

Two always were.

Flat Rabbit faced the assembled staff.

"From today onward," he announced, "this Senior Rabbit is your new boss."

He sneered. "And let me be clear—I am an autocratic, tyrannical, overbearing, uncultured, and unreasonable boss."

"Anyone who resists me—out."

Every employee thought the same thing:

He really does look like a villain.

Flat Rabbit pointed at the manager. "You. You're cursing me in your heart right now, aren't you?"

The manager's eyes flew open. "!!!"

"Scram," Flat Rabbit said flatly.

The manager panicked. "No! Master, I truly wasn't—"

Shing.

Flat Rabbit drew his sword halfway from its sheath.

"Scram."

A wave of killing intent washed over the manager.

He didn't argue again.

He packed his things and fled.

Once he was gone, Flat Rabbit sheathed his sword and pointed at a young waiter.

"You."

"I like the look of you."

"From today onward, you're the assistant manager."

The waiter stood frozen. "M-me? This humble one... I can't even write..."

Flat Rabbit thought to himself: Dao Xuan Tianzun was right. This fellow really can't write.

Good thing he'd been warned.

He smiled. "That's fine. You're only the assistant manager."

"I'll assign a chief manager later. He'll handle the writing, accounting, and coordination."

"You just help run the place."

The waiter nearly wept. "Thank you, Master!"

Flat Rabbit laughed. "Oh, one more thing."

"From now on, leftover food won't be fed to pigs."

"You decide how to handle it."

The waiter nodded furiously.

The covert struggle—

Had officially begun.

Chapter 588 Flipping Their Cards

The young waiter—now officially the deputy manager—was so happy he nearly forgot how to stand properly.

"All the leftover food... can really be given to the poor in the alley?"

Flat Rabbit stood with his hands clasped behind his back, chest puffed out, radiating the air of a tyrant CEO who had just completed a hostile takeover.

"Yes," he said calmly. "Every scrap."

The deputy manager's eyes shone. Then responsibility, like a bucket of cold water, poured down his spine.

"B-but... if we don't feed the pigs," he asked anxiously, "what will the pigs eat?"

Flat Rabbit's lips curved into a smile that did not belong to a kind man.

"Kill the pigs," he said lightly.

The entire kitchen fell silent.

"Distribute the pork to the poor," Flat Rabbit continued. "Call it an opening celebration. Benefits for the people."

The deputy manager's joy surged again—then immediately tangled itself into another knot.

"But... but then we won't have pigs anymore! What will we do when customers order twice-cooked pork? Braised pork? Shredded pork?"

Flat Rabbit froze.

His confident tyrant aura cracked, just a little.

"Ah..." he muttered. "This..."

Wang Tang burst out laughing.

"Don't worry," he said, waving his hand. "We're already planning to build a pig farm outside Xi'an. Once it's running, pork will be delivered regularly. Restaurants won't need to raise livestock anymore."

The deputy manager finally relaxed, as though his soul had been returned to its proper place.

With the immediate arrangements settled, the restaurant was temporarily left under his care. As for the official manager—Gao Family Village would later select an outstanding graduate from its middle school.

That was a matter for tomorrow.

Flat Rabbit strode out with Wang Tang, sunlight washing over his face. His grin widened.

"So," he said, rubbing his hands together, "what do we buy next?"

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun said to buy everything we can... but honestly, I don't even know where to start."

Wang Tang's gaze shifted slightly—to the signboard across the street.

Mule and Horse Exchange.

He lowered his voice. "Rabbit Master, clothing, food, housing, and transportation—these four control a city."

"Let's start with them."

Flat Rabbit's eyes lit up.

"Transportation!" he exclaimed. "Excellent!"

They strode forward together, walking like incarnations of capital itself.

Money gods descending upon mortals.

While Flat Rabbit and Wang Tang were tearing through Xi'an like a flood of silver, Li Daoxuan himself appeared outside the Prince of Qin's residence.

Birdcage in hand.

The mansion's gates loomed solemn and imposing. The street in front of them was utterly deserted.

Ordinary people avoided this place instinctively.

Li Daoxuan didn't approach directly. Instead, he entered a restaurant diagonally opposite, took a private room on the second floor, and sat by the window.

From there, the Prince of Qin's residence lay fully within view.

The conflict had entered its second phase.

Open confrontation was over.

Now came the underhanded struggle.

Li Daoxuan did not want his people to be outplayed here.

So he decided to personally flip the enemy's cards.

Since ancient times, covert struggles had followed one iron rule:

Whoever controls intelligence controls fate.

The Prince of Qin's residence was not yet inside his diorama's direct field of view, so Li Daoxuan couldn't use "focus."

But he still had co-sensing.

As long as a Dao Xuan Tianzun statue existed inside the residence—no matter how small, no matter its form—he could enter through it.

Facing the opulent mansion, Li Daoxuan activated co-sensing.

Instantly, countless faint anchors appeared before him.

Near and far. Large and small.

He couldn't tell what they were or where they led.

That meant only one thing.

Trial and error.

He chose the nearest anchor to his front-right and slipped through.

The world shifted.

Li Daoxuan found himself in a cramped, dilapidated room—clearly a servant's quarters. The furnishings were poor. He was perched atop a table.

On that table lay a book.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun: Demon Slayer."

He had landed on the image printed on its cover.

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly.

So even the Prince of Qin's servants are reading this now.

Just as the thought settled, the door creaked open.

A maid entered—wearing coarse hemp clothing, movements unpolished. She was clearly new, likely sold into service not long ago.

She shut the door.

Then she began to undress.

Fast.

Too fast.

Li Daoxuan's heart jolted.

Heavens—no, no, no.

This was a girl trapped by fate. He had no interest in stealing her dignity.

He immediately switched co-sensing.

The scene changed again.

This time, he hovered above a stable.

Horses stood in rows, lowering their heads to eat fodder.

On one saddle hung an embroidered cloth—Chengcheng embroidery, a local specialty, once sold only to nobles and high officials.

Tigers. Horses. Qilin. Phoenixes.

And now—mixed subtly among them—

Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The girls of Chengcheng County had stitched him in without ceremony, without fear.

These embroideries had become perfect co-sensing anchors.

Still, a stable wasn't very interesting.

Li Daoxuan was about to move again—

When voices entered.

A group of men walked in, dressed like wandering martial artists, but their bearing was unmistakable.

Soldiers.

One muttered, "The Prince of Qin's heir is furious this time—ordering us to disguise ourselves as bandits."

Another snorted. "Those civil officials overreached. They brought in who-knows-what big shots to guard the fertilizer shop—and even beat our people."

"How could His Highness not be angry?"

"Where's the ambush?" someone asked.

The leader spoke coldly. "The only route from Chengcheng County to Xi'an. Find a forest. Hide."

"Once the fertilizer sells out, they'll transport more."

"We intercept them."

"And slaughter everyone."

A sharp intake of breath followed.

"If this leaks—"

"Then don't let it leak," the leader snapped. "Fail, and you kill yourselves. Do not be captured alive."

Silence fell.

Their lives belonged to the Prince of Qin.

They mounted their horses and rode out of the city.

The embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun swayed at a saddle's edge, accompanying them northward.

They rode fifty li—beyond the Wei River, near what would one day be called Gaoling.

There, beside the official road, they hid in the woods.

Waiting.

For the fertilizer convoy.

Li Daoxuan withdrew his consciousness.

His expression was calm.

But his eyes were cold.

So that's your card.

Chapter 589 Summoning the Embroidered Uniform Guard

Seeing that the ambushers had settled into position and stopped moving, Li Daoxuan withdrew his co-sensing.

With a soft whoosh, his consciousness returned to the test-01 body.

The very instant he came back, a trembling voice reached his ears.

"S-sir... sir... please don't scare me like that... just... just move a little..."

Li Daoxuan turned his head.

A restaurant server stood before him, face pale, eyes wide with fear. Only when he saw Li Daoxuan's head move did he finally exhale.

"Phew... you finally moved," the server said weakly. "You've been sitting here without blinking for so long—I thought you'd... passed away."

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "I was contemplating life. Why all the fuss?"

The server nearly collapsed. "All the dishes you ordered... they're completely cold..."

Li Daoxuan waved his hand. "That's fine. Take them all and give them to the poor people in the alley next door. I'm already full—from contemplation."

The server was rendered speechless.

Li Daoxuan picked up his birdcage, descended the stairs at a leisurely pace, and watched as the server poured the untouched dishes into basins and distributed them among the refugees in the nearby alley.

Only after that did he stroll back toward the Celestial Fertilizer shop.

At this time, Flat Rabbit and Wang Tang were still sweeping through Xi'an like a financial plague. The shop itself was guarded by Zheng Gouzi and the other brothers.

Li Daoxuan beckoned.

Zheng Gouzi hurried over immediately, face bright with eagerness. "What are your commands, Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Go invite Wu Shen and Shi Kefa."

Zheng Gouzi cupped his hands and departed at once.

Before long, both officials arrived.

They were in high spirits.

The Celestial Fertilizer shop was operating smoothly—farmers lined up in orderly queues, purchasing fertilizer either to prepare for spring planting or to lay down base fertilizer during winter plowing.

Recent rain and snow had soaked the land well.

A bountiful harvest next year was almost guaranteed.

Wu Shen clasped his hands and laughed. "Master Li, thanks to your people guarding this place, the Prince of Qin's estate hasn't dared stir up trouble again!"

Shi Kefa smiled as well.

Li Daoxuan, however, spread his hands. "You won't be smiling for long."

Wu Shen blinked. "What?"

Shi Kefa's expression stiffened instantly.

Li Daoxuan unfolded a map of Xi'an Prefecture and pointed to a patch of forest north of the Wei River.

"According to my intelligence," he said calmly, "the Prince of Qin's estate has deployed men here—disguised as bandits—to ambush our fertilizer transport convoy and kill everyone involved."

The room went dead silent.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa both sucked in a sharp breath, as though the air had been torn from their lungs.

Wu Shen's face darkened. "Is this intelligence... reliable?"

Li Daoxuan merely smiled.

Zheng Gouzi snorted from the side. "You two sirs still don't quite understand Master Li's methods. His intelligence has never been wrong."

Wu Shen's brows knotted tightly.

Shi Kefa lowered his voice. "Then I will immediately summon the Embroidered Uniform Guard."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Good. Constables and local troops are useless against a princely estate. Only the Embroidered Uniform Guard can handle this."

Wu Shen hesitated. "Sir Shi... can they truly be relied upon? Since the fall of the Eunuch Party, the Embroidered Uniform Guard and the Eastern and Western Depots have all declined. You didn't even deploy them to protect the fertilizer shop."

Shi Kefa clenched his jaw. "That was precisely because it was only a shop. Deploying the Guard then would have allowed the Prince of Qin to accuse us of abusing imperial authority."

"But if his estate dispatches assassins disguised as bandits," Shi Kefa continued coldly, "then this becomes a major case."

"Deploying the Embroidered Uniform Guard is not only justified—it is mandatory."

"And don't underestimate them," he added. "Dealing with a few personal guards of a princely estate is well within their capability."

Wu Shen nodded. "Good. Capture them alive. Don't kill them all."

Shi Kefa bowed. "Understood."

The two officials then cupped their hands to Li Daoxuan.

"Thank you for this intelligence, Master Li. Next, we'll need the Li family to cooperate in... a little performance."

Li Daoxuan smiled. "Naturally."

"Gouzi."

Zheng Gouzi stepped forward. "Present!"

"Prepare the convoy," Li Daoxuan said. "The fertilizer is nearly sold out. We'll send carts back to Chengcheng County for several dozen more loads."

Zheng Gouzi grinned. "Leave it to me."

Once everyone had departed, Li Daoxuan lay down comfortably inside the fertilizer shop.

This time, there was no need to sit opposite the Prince of Qin's residence.

He closed his eyes.

And activated co-sensing again.

Let's see how many anchors Xi'an has given me.

In the blink of an eye, he appeared inside a bookstore.

Stacks of "The Tale of Dao Xuan Tianzun Exterminating Demons" were already on sale. Nearby were titles like Soaring High and Treading Through the Firmament.

Another leap—

He landed on a silk handkerchief held by a noble young lady. Chengcheng embroidery shimmered upon it, Dao Xuan Tianzun stitched delicately into the pattern.

The girl reached out and touched the embroidery lightly.

"Oh... Chengcheng embroidery really is exquisite."

Li Daoxuan focused on the sensation.

Soft. Warm.

Not bad, he thought. Not bad at all.

Another jump—

A slum.

A half-person-tall clay statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun stood crookedly. Its facial features were crude, abstract, and unmistakably skewed.

The moment Li Daoxuan entered it, he felt his mouth tilt sideways.

A Crooked-Mouth Dao Xuan Tianzun?

A group of poor people knelt before it, murmuring prayers.

Another jump—

Suddenly, candlelight flooded his vision.

He found himself inside a building whose furnishings made him pause.

This was not Chinese.

It was Western.

A church.

There's a Western church in Xi'an?

Li Daoxuan looked down.

He had co-sensed onto a small clay statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun placed upon a table. It was abstract, almost unrecognizable.

A middle-aged man in Chinese robes and a foreign missionary were studying it intently.

The missionary spoke in broken Chinese.

"Sir Wang... is this the Dao Xuan Tianzun who recently appeared in Xi'an?"

The man nodded. "Yes, Father Jin Nige. This so-called 'immortal' is not a Daoist deity at all."

"It is most likely the false god of a heretical cult," Sir Wang continued calmly. "But its spread is... astonishing."

"It proliferated the moment it entered Xi'an—far faster than Catholicism ever did."

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow.

Sir Wang... Father Jin Nige...

That made things very convenient.

He withdrew his consciousness, opened the internet, and began searching.

With the pinyin Jin Nige, plus Xi'an, Wang, and Catholicism—

The cards were already flipping themselves.

Chapter 590 This Is Clearly Science

A torrent of information flooded into Li Daoxuan's mind.

He had co-sensed into the Catholic church on Sugar Mill Street—the first Catholic church in Xi'an.

It had been established in 1625, when the Ming official Wang Zheng invited the missionary Jin Nige to purchase land and build it. Officially, it was called the Church of the Heavenly Mother.

The name had never changed.

Many transmigrators before him had relied on Western missionaries as allies—using them as pipelines for firearms, clocks, astronomy, geometry, and other scraps of Renaissance knowledge.

Li Daoxuan didn't need that.

If he wanted technology, he could pull full technical documentation straight out of the world beyond the box—blueprints, formulas, manufacturing processes—clean, complete, and infinitely scalable.

Missionaries were unnecessary.

But Wang Zheng?

Wang Zheng was different.

Wang Zheng was one of the late Ming's greatest scientific minds, known alongside Xu Guangqi as "Southern Xu and Northern Wang."

In his youth, he studied hydraulics, wind power, and heavy machinery, compiling his findings into *New Treatises on Various Instruments with Diagrams*. Later, he collaborated with the Swiss missionary Nicolas Trigault to translate *Illustrations of Wonderful Machines of the Far West*, introducing statics, centers of gravity, buoyancy, specific gravity, and compound machines to China.

This man was not merely curious.

He was dangerously competent.

If I can pull him over, Li Daoxuan thought, the entire technological acceleration of the Ming can skip decades.

At that moment, Jin Nige spoke hesitantly.

"Mr. Wang... are you suggesting that Catholicism should spread itself using the same methods as the Dao Xuan Tianzun sect?"

Wang Zheng nodded slowly.

"Comic books. Grain relief. Public performances dramatizing divine legends," he said. "These methods are efficient. Extremely so."

"More importantly," he added, "Western scientific knowledge must be spread alongside faith. Only then will the people truly gain understanding."

Jin Nige's face tightened with embarrassment.

"I would like to," he admitted, "but... our funds are insufficient."

Wang Zheng sighed.

"Funds," he said softly. "Then there is nothing to be done."

He turned his gaze toward the clay statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

"That unorthodox sect," he continued, "has astonishing resources. They flood Xi'an with books, sell stories while giving away grain. Their influence expands faster than wildfire."

"Catholicism cannot compete," he concluded. "Not at all."

Jin Nige asked uneasily, "Such a sect spreads openly in Xi'an... and the Emperor remains unaware?"

Wang Zheng shook his head.

"Memorials have surely reached the throne. But His Majesty will not read them closely."

"The empire is vast. Strange sects rise and fall everywhere. As long as no rebellion occurs—no White Lotus-style disaster—the court ignores them."

"Even if rebellion does occur," Wang Zheng said bitterly, "the Emperor glances once, then leaves it to the local officials."

A trace of worry crossed his face.

"I only hope this sect harbors no ill intentions."

Li Daoxuan laughed silently.

Ill intentions?

I have ambitions large enough to frighten history itself.

Jin Nige stood and reached for the statue.

"Then this thing should be discarded."

Wang Zheng stopped him.

"Do not be careless," he said. "One may doubt gods, but one must show respect."

"I will take it home."

Thus, Li Daoxuan followed Wang Zheng into a carriage.

The wheels rattled.

The Wang family courtyard came into view.

And Li Daoxuan nearly burst out laughing.

The courtyard was crowded with statues:

Buddha.

Guanyin.

The Grand Pure One.

The Primordial Celestial Worthy.

Ksitigarbha.

Erlang Shen.

Guan Yu.

Jesus.

The Holy Mother.

Buddhism. Daoism. Catholicism. Folk belief.

Everything.

Now, Dao Xuan Tianzun joined the pile.

Wang Zheng bowed solemnly.

"May all gods and Buddhas bless the Great Ming," he prayed, "grant favorable weather, and secure peace for the realm."

Li Daoxuan sighed.

"Believe in one god and you're devout," he muttered.

"Believe in a hundred, and suddenly they need you."

Wang Zheng understands this logic perfectly.

Wang Zheng lit incense, bowed twice, and turned to leave.

Then—

The clay statue spoke.

"Wang Zheng."

Cracks spread across its surface.

Mud and sand fell away as a deep, echoing voice reverberated through the room, like a mountain demon awakening beneath the earth.

"Wang Zheng."

Wang Zheng jumped in terror.

"Who?! Who speaks?!"

He scanned the statues wildly. The Dao Xuan Tianzun statue had been shoved into a corner, half-hidden behind a Maitreya Buddha.

Li Daoxuan continued.

"Your desire to spread science is admirable..."

"...but you have chosen the wrong allies."

Wang Zheng froze.

"What...?"

"Catholicism," the voice said evenly, "harbors its own intentions."

"You should seek the Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect."

Wang Zheng's pupils contracted.

He turned.

The clay statue's mouth collapsed, half its face crumbling to the floor.

Silence.

For a long time, Wang Zheng did not move.

He paced the room again and again.

After half an hour, he finally picked up the shattered statue, trying—and failing—to reattach the broken face.

At last, he clenched his teeth.

He rushed out.

At the bookstore, he slammed his palm on the counter.

"Give me a complete set of Legend of Dao Xuan Tianzun Exterminating Demons."

The shopkeeper hesitated. "Sir... these are mostly bought by common folk."

"Less talk," Wang Zheng snapped. "More books."

Seven volumes were handed over.

"They're not finished," the shopkeeper added. "It only reaches the Heavenly Lord descending in a celestial vehicle..."

Wang Zheng opened the book.

His eyes locked onto the illustrations.

"...Celestial vehicle?"

His breath caught.

"This..." he murmured, fingers trembling.

"...this is clearly science."