

Great Ming 601

Chapter 601 You Play a Role

Xing Honglang's division began its preparations in earnest. When the troops finished assembling, several thousand men standing in loose but disciplined ranks, she rode to the front and raised her voice so it carried clearly across the open ground.

"Reclaim Hedong City!" she declared. "Do not let a single bandit escape!"

The soldiers answered in unison, their voices surging like a wave. "Understood!"

Nearby, the subordinate from the Salt Administration Commissioner's office watched the scene in silence, his eyes sweeping over the formation. He could not help but feel a quiet shock rise in his chest. These troops are no joke at all, he thought. Just how much illicit salt did Xing Honglang sell back then to build this kind of force? The armor on the soldiers gleamed under the light, and the flintlock rifles in their hands looked no less formidable than those carried by the Divine Engine Battalion itself.

His gaze lingered on the thousand riflemen at the center of the formation, and another thought crept into his mind. With this many guns, taking Hedong City should be easy enough. But is the Salt Administration Commissioner still alive in there? Have we already come too late?

As if sensing his unease, Xing Honglang turned her head and looked straight at him. "You go on ahead," she said calmly. "Inform the Salt Administration Commissioner that my reinforcements will arrive shortly."

The subordinate nodded hastily, swung himself onto his horse, and galloped off toward Hedong City. The moment his figure disappeared into the distance, the atmosphere among the militia soldiers changed at once. Laughter burst out across the ranks, and the grim, murderous resolve they had worn a moment earlier dissolved like frost under the sun.

Xing Honglang raised her voice again. "Listen carefully. When you load your flintlock rifles later, load only gunpowder. No lead bullets. Do you understand?"

The riflemen answered as one. "Understood!"

"Good." Her expression hardened slightly. "As long as this is clear. If anyone forgets and accidentally kills one of our own brothers, do not blame me for enforcing military law on the spot."

At that moment, Gao Chuwu poked his head out from the side, grinning. "If Xu Dafu from the Ordnance Bureau were here, he would probably make everyone hand over their lead bullets right now."

Xing Honglang was briefly taken aback, then broke into a broad smile. "Chuwu!"

"Honglang!" Gao Chuwu answered back.

With a heavy thud, the two embraced. After releasing him, Xing Honglang turned back to the troops. "Everyone, hand over your small pouches of lead bullets to your squad leaders. The squad leaders will collect them and keep them safe."

The riflemen were already organized into ten man squads. They moved quickly, handing over their ammunition without complaint. In a short time, every squad leader had collected the lead bullets, ensuring that each soldier carried nothing but gunpowder. The arrangement was foolproof.

Xing Honglang waved her hand, her smile widening. "Alright. Let's go. Time to go beat up our own people."

Inside Hedong City, Chen Baihu was also busy inspecting his men's "equipment."

Each subordinate carried a small waterskin filled with chicken blood, tucked carefully beneath their clothes.

Chen Baihu laughed loudly as he looked them over. "You all know what to do, right?"

The men roared with laughter. "We do!"

He grabbed one soldier from the ranks and dragged him forward. "You. Come here. Act out getting shot and dying."

He pointed at him and made a sharp sound with his mouth. "Bang!"

The soldier collapsed to the ground with a thud, writhing and rolling as he squeezed the waterskin, chicken blood spilling out dramatically. He groaned, struggled, then staggered to his feet, took two more steps, and was still very much alive.

"Damn it!" Chen Baihu bellowed, his face darkening. "Why aren't you dead after all that?"

The soldier answered honestly, "Deep down, I don't want to die."

Chen Baihu glared at him. "You don't want to die, but you have to!"

"Give me a few more seconds," the soldier pleaded. "I'll really be dead then."

At that moment, Tie Niaofei came out from the inner room, leaning on a crutch as he limped closer. "Alright, stop fooling around," he said. "Dao Xuan Tianzun said Xing Honglang's people will be here soon."

The effect was immediate. Everyone straightened, spirits lifted.

"Prepare for battle!"

Chen Baihu laughed again. "After this, we can go find Brother Nanfeng."

Cheers erupted. "Oh yeah!"

Six hundred former Guyuan border soldiers surged toward the west gate of Hedong City.

Outside the city, the subordinate who had ridden ahead earlier sat frozen in the woods. He had been sent to notify the Salt Administration Commissioner, but when he returned, he discovered that Hedong City had already changed hands. The soldiers patrolling the walls were no longer government troops but rebels, and a massive banner with the words "PAY UP" fluttered above the battlements, making the whole city look like the lair of violent debt collectors.

He did not dare enter. He could only sit there, staring blankly at the city walls. After an unknown amount of time, lost in his thoughts, he heard voices approaching. Turning his head, he saw Xing Honglang's army advancing. Perhaps because they were moving quickly, they had brought no heavy siege equipment. There were no cannons, no catapults, no battering rams, nothing of the sort.

She had brought only a thousand riflemen, two thousand soldiers armed with cold steel, and twenty scaling ladders. Xing Honglang did not order an immediate assault. Instead, she reined in her troops and sent one man forward alone. Lao Nanfeng rode up to the city walls and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Listen up, you thick headed bandits inside! I am Lao Nanfeng, chief commander under General Xing of the Puzhou garrison. I advise you to open the gates at once and surrender. Otherwise, you will be chopped to pieces and fed to the dogs. Not a single one of you will be spared!"

When the Guyuan soldiers on the walls saw Brother Nanfeng, their former superior, their eyes filled with tears. They had never imagined that their first reunion after prison would happen like this. Chen Baihu stepped onto the parapet and shouted back, "Who do you think you are, barking orders? Hedong City is mine now! If the old emperor wants it back, he should come here himself, kneel down, and call me 'Daddy' a few times!"

Lao Nanfeng shouted, "How dare you!"

Chen Baihu threw his head back and laughed. "Hahahaha!"

In the next instant, Lao Nanfeng moved. He swiftly pulled a rifle from behind his back. A sharp bang rang out, white smoke billowed, and the shot echoed across the walls. At the same moment, Chen Baihu let out a shrill scream, flipped backward, and tumbled down, blood spraying high into the air. He hit the ground, struggled once, then went stiff, his eyes closing as he lay motionless.

The soldier who had failed to "die" properly earlier could not help but admire him inwardly. Chen Baihu's acting is better than mine. No wonder he's a centurion and I'm just a nobody. Chen Baihu cracked one eye open slightly and whispered, "Pay attention, kid."

After "killing the bandit leader" with a single shot, Lao Nanfeng laughed loudly. "Attack!"

Xing Honglang's troops surged forward at once.

The Guyuan soldiers on the walls hurriedly raised their bows, but Xing Honglang's men fired first. Bang, bang, bang, bang. Hundreds of flintlock rifles discharged together, the sound terrifying. The Guyuan soldiers fell one after another. Some writhed on the ground, some lay still, some struggled to die properly, and others seemed to finish an entire internal monologue before collapsing. White doves scattered into the air as blood splashed across the stone.

The casualties were heavy.

Below the walls, soldiers slammed the scaling ladders into place with dull thuds. The militia swarmed upward. During their training in Gao Family Village, they had practiced climbing, running, and scaling walls until it became instinct, and now they moved as easily as children at play. In moments, they were over the walls. Rifles fired wildly, and the "bandits" screamed in agony. In the blink of an eye, more than a hundred "rebels" fell. Leaderless, the rest could only drag away the bodies of their fallen comrades, open the north gate, and flee in total disarray.

Thus, Hedong City was "recaptured."

Chapter 602 Bringing You into a World of Glamour

The people of Hedong City heard only thunder.

Gunfire boomed outside the walls. Battle cries shook the ground itself. The noise rolled through the streets like an earthquake, rattling doors and sending dust drifting from ceiling beams.

Once again, the townspeople were terrified.

Families huddled together inside their homes, doors bolted, windows shuttered. No one dared peek outside—not even through a crack.

Before long, they heard panicked cries echoing through the streets:

"The bandit army is fleeing!"

"They're defeated!"

Some time later, the sound of boots and armor entered the city.

Government troops.

Even then, no one dared open their doors.

These days, government soldiers were not necessarily better than bandits.

Some people even sighed quietly behind closed doors.

"That bandit group... honestly wasn't that bad."

"They didn't kill anyone, didn't burn houses, didn't loot."

"All they did was confiscate the Salt Administration's dirty money. What crime is that, really?"

"Hearing they've been defeated makes one feel strangely disheartened."

"I just hope these government troops don't start plundering instead."

By the time these murmurs spread, Xing Honglang had already ridden into the city.

The Salt Administration's subordinate followed close behind.

They hadn't gone far when they reached the entrance to the marketplace.

The subordinate's eyes immediately locked onto a familiar sight.

The Salt Administration official's head—

swaying gently from a tall pole, turning slowly in the morning breeze.

He had expected this.

Seeing it with his own eyes, however, drained him of words.

He could only cup his hands toward Xing Honglang in silent greeting, his mouth opening but producing nothing.

Xing Honglang, on the other hand, widened her eyes in shock.

"This is terrible," she said gravely. "The Salt Administration official has been murdered by bandits. The garrison here must be either dead or scattered."

She turned to him, concern etched perfectly onto her face.

"What are we to do now?"

The subordinate swallowed.

"Perhaps... General Xing should temporarily take charge of the city."

Xing Honglang frowned immediately.

"How could I?" she said. "I am the Commander of Puzhou. My duty is to guard Puzhou. If some rogue bandits were to attack it while I'm away, wouldn't I be guilty of dereliction of duty?"

The subordinate forced a bitter smile.

"Hedong governs Xie Lake," he said. "It is the empire's most important salt-producing region in Shanxi. Losing Hedong would be catastrophic—far more serious than losing Puzhou."

He paused, then added carefully:

"If General Xing secures Hedong, the merit far outweighs the risk. The newly appointed Governor would never fault you."

And that was the truth.

Governor Song Tongyin had already been dismissed by the Chongzhen Emperor. His replacement, Xu Dingchen, had only just taken office—his chair not even warmed yet.

At a time like this, what Xu Dingchen wanted most was stability. No new disasters. No fresh chaos.

If he heard that Xing Honglang had decisively secured Hedong and protected the empire's salt reserves, not only would he refrain from blaming her—he would praise her.

Xing Honglang sighed, as if burdened.

"Then," she said slowly, "I suppose I'll have no choice but to remain here... for the time being."

The subordinate tasted bitterness all the way down his throat.

He bowed quickly, made an excuse, and left. He wanted no part in whatever came next.

Xing Honglang rode straight to the Salt Administration Yamen.

Once inside, she seated herself behind the main desk as if she'd always belonged there.

Moments later, a soft sedan chair entered from the rear.

Inside was Zhao Sheng, the Dian Dengzi.

He laid out the yamen's documents and began flipping through them at speed.

Salt quotas.

Xie Lake production.

Salt worker numbers.

Village layouts.

Transport routes.

Zhao Sheng's lips curled into a smile.

Heh.

From this day forward, the empire's salt reserves were—

Gao Family Village's salt reserves.

And they would be managed very carefully indeed.

Meanwhile—

Chen Baihu was being carried out of Hedong City on the backs of his men.

He lay limp, eyes closed, face pale, every inch the picture of a freshly deceased bandit leader.

Behind them, Lao Nanfeng led troops in hot pursuit.

One fleeing.

One chasing.

They moved swiftly, leaving the city far behind.

After crossing the Sushui River, the terrain became nothing but barren hills and wilderness.

The fleeing group suddenly stopped.

Chen Baihu sprang to life.

He leapt down, stretched his limbs, and burst into loud laughter.

Around him, "dead" Guyuan soldiers also revived one by one, groaning theatrically as they stood up.

Moments later, Lao Nanfeng's troops arrived.

Chen Baihu stepped forward and clasped his hands.

"Brother Nanfeng!"

Lao Nanfeng laughed so hard his shoulders shook.

"Old Chen! You're out too! Hahaha—so all the brothers made it out!"

"Hahahaha!"

"Brother Nanfeng!"

The six hundred former Guyuan soldiers looked nothing like the hollow-eyed, terrified men who had fled the border years ago.

They were energetic. Bright-eyed. Full of life.

Lao Nanfeng nodded approvingly.

"Good. Very good."

Then he chuckled.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun told me you'd come out—and that the first thing you'd do was fight me. Scared me half to death."

Everyone laughed.

"Same here!"

Chen Baihu asked eagerly, "Brother Nanfeng, we'll follow you again, right? You'll lead us into battle?"

Lao Nanfeng waved dismissively.

"Battle my ass. Battles never end."

He spread his arms wide.

"What I'm bringing you into now... is a world of glamour. A true world of glamour."

"Hahahahaha!"

The men erupted in cheers.

"We've been waiting for that world for years!"

"First," Lao Nanfeng said, "hand over all the spoils. No hiding anything."

No one objected.

Gold.

Silver.

Jewels.

Everything taken from the Salt Administration's residence was piled up—quickly forming a small mountain.

"These go to the village treasury," Lao Nanfeng explained. "Don't get jealous. Stick with us, and you'll have more money than you can ever spend."

He grinned.

"Let me tell you—organizing concerts is insanely profitable."

Everyone laughed.

"What's a concert?"

"You'll find out when we get back."

As they chatted, the golden-thread figure on Lao Nanfeng's chest stirred.

Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke calmly:

"When you served as border soldiers in Guyuan, how much military pay did the court owe each of you?"

Lao Nanfeng immediately bowed.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Everyone followed suit.

Chen Baihu answered honestly, "About thirty-six taels of silver per man."

Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded.

"The pay owed to you by the court was always yours by right."

"The money embezzled by the Salt Administration official was, in essence, also the court's money."

"Therefore, it is entirely just for you to reclaim your wages from that fund."

A pause.

Then Dao Xuan Tianzun said lightly:

"Count the spoils. Distribute forty taels to each man."

"Consider it your successful wage recovery."

"Any remaining silver shall enter the village treasury."

The men exploded with joy.

"Many thanks, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun truly looks after us!"

"Such a reasonable deity!"

They cheered, jumped, and flung helmets into the air.

Some helmets came down hard—

thud—

right onto someone's head.

Agonized curses followed.

Lao Nanfeng laughed loudly.

"Enough celebrating. Take the money, strip off the bloodstained armor, change into plain clothes. Fix your hair, trim your beards."

"Then return to Puzhou in small groups—quietly."

"Understood!"

They moved quickly.

Each man took his forty taels. Armor was removed. Appearances altered.

Soon, they scattered like ordinary travelers.

Lao Nanfeng escorted the remaining treasure back to Gao Family Village, then returned to Hedong to report to Xing Honglang:

"The pursuit failed. The bandits escaped."

At a time when bandits covered the land like weeds—

Who could possibly track where a few more had gone?

Chapter 603 These People Were Redeemed by Dao Xuan Tianzun

Lao Nanfeng, dressed in plain clothes, led his more than six hundred veteran subordinates through the bustling streets of Puzhou City.

Six hundred-plus men on the streets was a truly imposing sight. And with everyone in civilian clothes instead of military uniforms, they looked even more intimidating.

Ordinary people, seeing this, might have thought a gang of thugs was out for a stroll, and quickly scrambled for cover.

But their fears were quite unfounded!

These six hundred men had just finished several years of labor reform. And what was paramount in such a camp? Discipline, obedience, and never causing trouble, of course.

So, while they appeared formidable, these six hundred men were actually more disciplined than ordinary citizens, moving through the streets and alleys with utterly exemplary conduct.

What's more, they had developed the habit of reporting their every action.

"Lao Nanfeng! I need to relieve myself," a soldier called out, raising his hand.

"Damn it all," Lao Nanfeng grumbled, annoyed. "For something like that, what the hell do you need to ask permission for? Just go to the latrine by the road and come back!"

The soldier flushed, muttering, "Ah, it's just a habit."

No sooner had that man ducked into the latrine than another raised his hand.

"Lao Nanfeng, I fancy those fried dough twists at the roadside stall. Can I buy a couple?"

Lao Nanfeng roared, "It's your own money! Damn it, if you want to buy them, just buy them! Why are you asking me?"

The soldier replied, "Uh, well... it's a habit."

Lao Nanfeng chuckled ruefully. "Oh, never mind, never mind. You'll get over it in a few days."

Chen Baihu sidled up to Lao Nanfeng, whispering, "Nanfeng Ge, didn't you say you were putting on a concert, something about a 'Flower World' being very exciting? Hurry up and take the brothers to see it!"

Lao Nanfeng grinned. "Absolutely. All of you, follow me!"

The large group, chuckling amongst themselves, soon arrived in front of a brothel.

At the sight of the brothel, the expressions on the faces of those six hundred men instantly became a sight to behold. Many reached into their clothes, feeling for their forty taels of silver...

The forty taels of silver, specially bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun, was their back pay for three long years. If they went all in, they might just win a beauty's favor at the brothel.

Just as these thoughts blossomed, they heard Lao Nanfeng's scolding chuckle.

"I know what you're all thinking, but damn it, keep your money tucked away and don't get wild! Dao Xuan Tianzun doesn't permit us soldiers to engage in such disreputable affairs. This silver is your three years of hard-earned military pay, don't foolishly blow it all on women in one go!"

The soldiers mumbled,

"Uh... but it's been so many years since we've been with women."

"Our wives and children back at the Guyuan military settlement, they must all be..."

"No point dwelling on it. They've either remarried or died."

At this, a wave of melancholy washed over the soldiers.

When they first rose in rebellion, they knew they faced a death sentence, an almost certain demise, and that their entire clan could be implicated. So they had given all their belongings to their wives and children, then "sent them away" for their own good.

Many years had since flown by, and amidst the chaos of war, lost in the vastness of humanity, with Guyuan and the northern Shaanxi region being major hotspots for roving bandits, it was impossible they would ever find their wives and children again.

Lao Nanfeng clapped them on the shoulders.

"Damn it all, snap out of it! A new life awaits you. Look, look, look! Up ahead is the concert venue I organized!"

Ahead, a magnificent, spacious venue appeared. A stage, about the size of a basketball court, was covered by a rain canopy. All around the stage were rows of seats. The very front comprised luxurious chairs for VIPs, the middle section held ordinary stools for general admission, and the economy seats at the back consisted entirely of long benches.

Chen Baihu exclaimed, "Oh, isn't that just a big opera stage?"

"Opera stage, my foot!" Lao Nanfeng retorted. "This is called the 'Puzhou Grand Theater'."

Chen Baihu wondered, "Why does the name sound so odd?"

Lao Nanfeng kicked Chen Baihu to the ground.

"Damn it, the name 'Grand Theater' is where the celestial maidens dance in the immortal realm! I've brought a name from the heavens to the mortal world, how magnificent and refined is that? How dare you call it 'odd'? Are you looking for death?"

Startled, Chen Baihu hastily backed down.

"Nanfeng Ge, don't hit me, I was wrong!"

Lao Nanfeng chuckled.

"The Grand Theater only starts performances at night. During the day, it's the girls' rehearsal time. I'm telling you, only insiders are allowed to watch rehearsals. By my grace, you all get to come and see it."

The men quickly showered him with praise.

"Nanfeng Ge truly looks after his brothers!"

The group settled into the audience seats. Though there were over six hundred of them, once seated, they were completely quiet, not making a single sound. They were exceedingly well-behaved.

Soon after, several young women appeared on stage.

They weren't wearing stage makeup or costumes, but ordinary dresses, having come up to rehearse. They hadn't expected that as soon as they stepped onto the stage, they would find over six hundred stalwart men sitting silently in the audience.

The sight terrified them. With a scream of terror, their faces drained of color, and they spun around to flee.

Lao Nanfeng quickly stood up.

"Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, I'm right here!"

The young women heard Lao Nanfeng's voice and turned their heads.

"Oh? Master, so you were here!"

Lao Nanfeng smiled.

"These are my brothers-in-arms. I brought them to watch the rehearsal. Don't be scared, just practice as you usually do."

Only then did the young women's hearts calm somewhat.

As long as these men weren't villains, they no longer felt stage fright. They stepped to the center of the stage, cleared their throats, and began to practice, singing and dancing.

At this performance, the six hundred-plus border soldiers below immediately let out a collective, "Wow!"

Mesmerized! Utterly captivated!

Ten years garrisoning the border, then several more imprisoned in labor reform—it had truly been many, many years since they had witnessed such song and dance. Moreover, the young women on stage were not mere village performers, but of the caliber of courtesan queens. Their beauty, voices, singing, and dancing were each of the absolute highest caliber.

Far beyond what any ordinary woman could achieve.

The soldiers listened, utterly entranced...

Some reached into their clothes, pulled out their reclaimed military pay, and instinctively wanted to toss it onto the stage.

Seeing this, Lao Nanfeng quickly interjected,

"Don't be foolish! Keep your money safe. If you throw that money up there, it'll instantly land in my pocket. How the hell could I take it?"

Only then did the soldiers remember that this was Lao Nanfeng's establishment.

They awkwardly tucked their money away.

Chen Baihu leaned into Lao Nanfeng's ear, whispering,

"Nanfeng Ge, you have such discerning taste! These beauties, surely they're all your women, right?"

Lao Nanfeng chuckled, scolding him.

"What are you thinking? They don't belong to me. They're just virtuous courtesans I redeemed from the brothel."

Chen Baihu snickered.

"You redeemed them, so doesn't that make them yours? Don't tell me they're not!"

Lao Nanfeng shook his head.

"On paper, I redeemed them, but actually, it was silver given by Dao Xuan Tianzun. After they were redeemed, the first thing Dao Xuan Tianzun instructed me to do was to tear up their contracts of indentured servitude right in front of them. Then, I signed 'employment contracts' with them. They're just like the workers in our factories, earning wages for their labor."

Chen Baihu gasped, "What?"

Chapter 604 One-Hit K.O

Centurion Chen was a little dazed, not quite understanding.

Old Nanfeng chuckled. "Dao Xuan Tianzun said that a person being sold like a commodity is a tragedy of this world, a tragedy of backward social systems, and something that should bring sorrow to everyone. Only by ensuring, as much as possible, that others aren't bought and sold, can we and our families avoid becoming commodities ourselves in the future."

Centurion Chen mused, "Ah... I don't quite get it."

Old Nanfeng replied, "That's exactly right, if you don't understand. Dao Xuan Tianzun speaks of celestial principles; it would be strange if you did. Only the children in the school who study the Heavenly Book can comprehend them."

Centurion Chen was speechless.

Old Nanfeng poked Centurion Chen's forehead with a finger.

"Don't overthink it. Just be happy. Enjoy a few years in this Flower World Star Agency, marry a wife, have a child, send the child to learn the Heavenly Book, so they can keep up with the celestial principles. Then we can die content, understand?"

Centurion Chen's spirits lifted. "Understood!"

At that moment, the girls rehearsing on stage changed again. This time, it was an entire group, five of them, who immediately began singing and dancing, swirling across the stage. It was a fierce, joyful song.

The atmosphere ignited instantly.

Old Nanfeng stood up, smiling at his subordinates behind him.

"The girls on stage are rehearsing hard, so we, the audience, should rehearse too! Let's practice doing 'the wave,' for when we need to energize the venue for me later..."

Everyone looked puzzled. "What's 'the wave'?"

Old Nanfeng explained, "The person at the very end stands up first, raises their hand, then sits down. Then the person next to them stands up, raises their hand, sits down..."

These were soldiers, after all, accustomed to long periods of drill training. They understood at once.

Soon, they mastered the essentials of performing 'the wave,' and they did it better and more uniformly than ordinary audiences who spontaneously started 'the wave' in later generations. Each person's rise and fall maintained perfectly identical timing—it was simply flawless.

Old Nanfeng exclaimed, "Good heavens, I never thought the army could be used for this! Why bother fighting? You should just specialize in this from now on!"

Everyone laughed in unison.

"No way, we'd rather stick to fighting battles."

That same evening...

The concert officially began; the rehearsal was over.

Fewer tickets were sold that day, over six hundred less than usual, because more than six hundred seats had been occupied by "special guests." Fortunately, the concert venue had expanded, now capable of accommodating far more spectators than when it first opened. When completely full, it could hold five thousand people, so selling six hundred fewer tickets wasn't a significant issue.

As the concert reached its peak, those six hundred "special guests" suddenly started doing 'the wave.'

Other audience members had never seen "the wave" before and immediately found it novel and entertaining. Many spontaneously joined the ranks, and the entire five thousand spectators in the Puzhou Grand Theater had an absolute blast.

Even Qiu Qianfan, the Prefect of Puzhou, stood up with the crowd, waving his hand, then sitting back down... He repeated this for several rounds, so thrilled that he was practically puffing out his beard.

Wang Zheng, protected by a retinue of household guards, set off in a carriage toward Chengcheng County.

He genuinely wished to see what scientific technologies the immortal known as Dao Xuan Tianzun had brought to this world, and if they surpassed those introduced by Catholicism.

In his youth, he had believed in Buddhism, but later found it to be of little practical use. He then turned to Daoism, only to discover that aside from some advancements in chemistry, it too was rather ordinary in other respects. It was when he encountered Catholicism that he realized it offered a wealth of Western scientific and practical technologies, leading him to accept baptism.

His creed was simple:

"Whichever religion is useful, that's the one I belong to."

Currently, Catholicism ranked highest in his estimation!

"Master, ahead is Dali County. After passing through it, we will reach Chengcheng County."

Wang Zheng nodded. He had been to Dali County before; it was a rather unremarkable place. He had no intention of stopping to rest, preferring to pass through as quickly as possible.

Just as this thought crossed his mind, he heard a subordinate exclaim in shock,

"Huh? What in the world is that?"

"That thing can actually move!"

His household guards outside were chattering excitedly.

Wang Zheng was a naturally curious man. Hearing the commotion outside, he couldn't possibly not look. He lifted the carriage curtain and peered out, instantly feeling bewildered. The official road between Dali County and Chengcheng County wasn't the usual dirt path; it was a strange, hard, grayish-white road.

At that moment, on this peculiar road, a remarkably large and strange vehicle was slowly advancing, heading directly toward Wang Zheng and his retinue.

The strange vehicle moved very slowly, as if burdened by an immense weight.

In fact, it truly was heavily burdened; it was carrying several large looms.

Wang Zheng recognized it at once.

"This! This is the solar car mentioned in 'The Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon-Slaying Chronicle'!"

He was utterly astonished. When he had read about this vehicle in the book, he had been somewhat skeptical, finding it hard to believe. But seeing it now with his own eyes, its sheer size was truly breathtaking.

That such an enormous vehicle could move simply by being exposed to the sun was truly unfathomable.

Wang Zheng called out,

"Stop, stop! I want to get a good look at that large vehicle!"

Wang Zheng's convoy halted.

His household guards ran forward, blocking the road. Consequently, the colossal, strange vehicle also came to a gradual stop.

A head emerged from the vehicle—it was Song Yingxing—who angrily questioned the obstructing guard,

"Why are you blocking my path?"

The guard, unaware of Song Yingxing's importance, was about to retort arrogantly when Wang Zheng quickly stepped forward, waved his guard away, and bowed respectfully to Song Yingxing.

"I am Wang Zheng. Seeing this solar car, my curiosity was piqued, so I instructed my men to stop and observe. My subordinate misunderstood my meaning and blocked your vehicle. It was exceedingly rude, and I beg your forgiveness."

Seeing his impeccable manners, Song Yingxing's annoyance dissipated. He returned the bow with clasped hands.

"I am Song Yingxing. Your curiosity about this vehicle is natural; I am quite curious myself. I follow this vehicle around every day, pondering its exact principles."

Upon hearing this, Wang Zheng was overjoyed. This man before him appeared to be a fellow enthusiast in scientific study.

Wang Zheng quickly took a large step forward.

"My friend, have you discovered anything in your research?"

Song Yingxing explained,

"This vehicle likely uses solar energy. It absorbs heat from sunlight, converting that heat into electricity, which then powers a motor, driving the wheels... This is what I've deduced so far. However, I understand the 'why' but not the 'how.' I simply cannot comprehend the mechanism that transforms thermal energy into electrical energy."

Wang Zheng: "!!!"

Confound it, the moment he started speaking, I didn't understand a single thing he said!

With a soft thud, Wang Zheng collapsed to the ground. He had lost. The feeling of being knocked out with the very first move of an encounter was truly unsatisfying.

Chapter 605 We're Miles Ahead

Wang Zheng considered himself quite brilliant. He had, after all, translated Western texts and introduced a good deal of Western science and technology, harboring a quiet pride deep down, believing he understood many principles others did not.

Who would have thought the first person he'd encounter would be Song Yingxing? It was a crushing blow to his ego, a truly painful reality check.

It took him a moment to recover, scrambling back to his feet.

"In any case," he declared, "this contraption is a machine, and every machine operates by its own rules. Its propelling force must inherently be greater than its own weight. By thoroughly studying the dynamics of force, we will surely unravel its secrets."

At his pronouncement, Song Yingxing let out an intrigued "Oh?"

Such a statement wouldn't be surprising coming from the physics students in Gao Family Village, but hearing it from an outsider was quite unexpected.

Song Yingxing inquired, "Brother, it seems you have some knowledge of machinery?"

Wang Zheng replied, "I know a thing or two."

Song Yingxing chuckled, gesturing with his hand.

"Would you like to come up and take a ride?"

Wang Zheng was overjoyed.

"I can?"

Song Yingxing affirmed, "Of course!"

So, the two men sat side-by-side on the massive Solar Car, while Wang Zheng's household guards followed slowly on horseback along the dirt track beside the paved road.

The moment he boarded, Wang Zheng began to scrutinize everything around him, peering left and right, front and back. After a long while, he found nothing. With his current depth of knowledge, comprehending the Solar Car was impossible.

Song Yingxing sighed.

"Brother, it seems you can't quite decipher it either?"

Wang Zheng nodded.

"I can't! I understand the transmission shafts and other mechanical components of the wheels, but the fact that this vehicle draws its power from light... that's something I truly can't grasp."

Song Yingxing mused,

"After studying Physics, I've come to understand the principles of this vehicle, yet I only possess the theory without being able to conceive how to actualize it. Alas! How the thermal energy within sunlight is converted into electrical energy via a single panel, it's truly beyond my current capabilities, utterly beyond me."

Wang Zheng suggested,

"Since you can't achieve it, why not seek out the person who created this vehicle and ask them? With genuine sincerity in learning, and a willingness to spend some silver, they should be inclined to impart all their knowledge, shouldn't they?"

Song Yingxing shook his head.

"This vehicle isn't man-made; it was bestowed by an immortal, divinely crafted... so there's nowhere for me to ask."

Wang Zheng's eyes widened in astonishment.

Startled, he blurted out,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

Song Yingxing nodded.

"Yes, this is an immortal chariot sent down from the heavens by Dao Xuan Tianzun. Many aspects of it align with the laws of physics, yet many others defy physical explanation, leaving me utterly baffled to this day. Alas... one can only say that immortals are truly capricious. Either employ divine arts entirely, or rely purely on physics. What's the meaning of using half physics and half divine arts?"

Wang Zheng listened with a flicker of excitement. He wasn't as troubled as Song Yingxing; after all, he was a man who believed in Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, and science all at once. What was there to fret over if it used half of one and half of another? Even a quarter of each would be perfectly fine.

Wang Zheng stated,

"Brother, you are truly a kindred spirit, and it's clear you possess a wealth of knowledge. We connected instantly, so let us spend more time together in the future."

Song Yingxing replied,

"That would be excellent. Science thrives on extensive discussion. Dao Xuan Tianzun himself has stated that an academic atmosphere is crucial, and in that regard, our East has fallen behind. The West now boasts a vibrant academic culture; over a decade ago, Cambridge University in the West even hosted a debate on 'whether dogs can engage in syllogistic reasoning.' Alas, such an academic environment is certainly worth emulating."

Wang Zheng's gaze shifted to the several textile machines being transported on the vehicle.

"If I'm not mistaken, these machines should be textile looms, shouldn't they?"

Song Yingxing nodded.

"Precisely! These are textile machines manufactured in Chengcheng County, destined for a textile factory in Dali County. They are quite massive and come equipped with heavy steam engines, making ordinary transport rather challenging. So, we enlisted the aid of the immortal chariot to move them."

Wang Zheng's eyes swept back and forth over the textile machines.

"Were these contraptions also created using divine arts?"

Song Yingxing chuckled, a hint of pride in his voice.

"Heh heh, these were made by us, entirely by our own hands. No divine magic involved, just good old blacksmithing techniques."

Wang Zheng was thrilled.

"So that means I can learn this too?"

Song Yingxing offered,

"If you're interested, Brother, why not accompany me to the textile factory for a look?"

Wang Zheng affirmed,

"That would be absolutely splendid."

An hour later...

The steam-powered textile machines were installed within the factory, under Wang Zheng's careful observation throughout the entire process. Coal, transported from Heyang County, was fed into the steam engines.

Steam billowed forth as the power of boiling water set the mechanisms in motion, and the textile machines whirred to life. Technical female workers, "loaned" from Chengcheng County, led a large group of newly recruited female workers from Dali County, demonstrating how to use the steam looms to spin yarn and weave cloth.

Wang Zheng stood alongside them, taking on the role of an apprentice for the day.

As a male apprentice amidst a throng of female workers, he seemed somewhat out of place. However, he wasn't learning to spin yarn or weave cloth, but rather studying the machine's operational process, striving to deduce its underlying principles.

The more he watched, the more astonishing it became.

"Brother Wang, would you like to accompany me to Chengcheng County next?" Song Yingxing asked with a smile.

"There, you'll discover even more novel and fascinating things."

"Yes! Absolutely."

Wang Zheng was utterly captivated.

This single steam-powered textile machine alone completely overshadowed all the knowledge he had acquired through Catholicism.

"I feel this steam engine has even greater applications," Wang Zheng declared, his face alight with admiration.

"It is absolutely a machine that is miles ahead, miles ahead of the entire world, miles ahead of the West... miles ahead."

Song Yingxing retorted,

"While it's true it's miles ahead, I don't know why, but hearing that phrase just makes me want to punch someone."

Wang Zheng insisted,

"We must continue to be miles ahead!"

Song Yingxing threw up his hands.

"Alright, alright, 'miles ahead,' 'miles ahead!' You win. Let's go, come with me to Gao Family Village."

And so, the two men resumed their journey.

This time, they couldn't take the large Solar Car, for rain was once again falling from the sky. With the onset of winter in the fourth year of Chongzhen, the heavens frequently blessed the land with rain, a boon for the vast majority of farmers, but a devastating blow for the Solar Car.

The Solar Car public transport in Gao Family Village was frequently out of commission.

Song Yingxing climbed into Wang Zheng's carriage, resorting to traditional means of travel as they headed towards Gao Family Village.

Wang Zheng smiled.

"The divine Solar Car is wonderful, but it's useless the moment it rains. Oh dear. It seems we mortals must find our own solutions and not always rely on immortal treasures."

Song Yingxing nodded.

"Brother Wang, your words are spot on. Our resident genius from Gao Family Village, Young Master Bai, is currently working on a solution. Let's see if he can sort it out."

Chapter 606 The Young Genius, Young Master Bai

Rain drifted down in thin, cold threads.

By the time Wang Zheng's carriage finally rolled into Gao Family Village, it was already noon on the second day.

The drizzle had eased, but the chill lingered, soaking into clothes and bones alike.

Song Yingxing and Wang Zheng had transferred to the electric mini-train in Chengcheng County, so they disembarked straight at the station—stepping directly into the most bustling stretch beside Gao Family Village.

Naturally, the mini-train itself had left Wang Zheng shaken with awe. But after careful consideration, he classified it as yet another product of "half divine art, half physics."

Something extraordinary, yes—but fundamentally impossible for mortals to reproduce.

Which meant: not worth chasing for now.

He stretched his stiff shoulders and lifted his gaze toward Gao Family Village. The streets bustled, people moved with purpose, machines hummed quietly in the background. The whole place felt unreal, like a scene pulled straight out of a dream.

"This place," Wang Zheng muttered, unable to stop himself, "is unlike anywhere I have ever seen."

Song Yingxing smiled faintly. "Come. Let's go to the school. What you've seen so far is only the surface."

"Hm."

Wang Zheng took a few steps forward—

then suddenly froze.

A sharp "woo—" cut through the drizzle from up ahead.

It sounded like a whistle. Similar to a train's, yet softer... stranger.

He stopped. "What's that sound?"

Song Yingxing halted as well. A moment later, realization dawned, and he chuckled.

"Ah. It seems Young Master Bai has made progress again."

Wang Zheng's interest flared instantly.

"You mean the young genius you mentioned? The one trying to solve the solar divine carriage's inability to run in the rain?"

"Precisely."

Even as the words left his mouth, something emerged from the road ahead.

It was... strange.

A three-wheeled contraption, its frame entirely wooden, crude and boxy—looking for all the world like a battered old pushcart rescued from a junk heap. Yet at the front sat a bulging boiler, from which steam hissed and water audibly boiled.

The earlier whistle had come from it.

The vehicle rushed toward them at alarming speed.

At its helm stood a young man dressed in dazzling white robes, sashes fluttering wildly behind him. His features were strikingly handsome, almost unreal, and with the steam and rain swirling around him, he truly looked like an immortal descending upon the mortal world.

Song Yingxing opened his mouth.

"This is Young Master Bai—"

Before he could finish—

The vehicle blasted past them.

A voice echoed back in panic.

"AH—! I FORGOT TO INSTALL THE BRAKES AGAIN—!"

Song Yingxing sucked in a breath.

The bystanders lining the road gasped in perfect unison.

Young Master Bai shouted at the top of his lungs, "EVERYONE MOVE! MOVE! THE EXPERIMENTAL CAR HAS NO BRAKES! I CAN'T TURN—!"

People scattered like startled birds.

The strange vehicle hurtled forward, faster and faster, until—inevitably—it flew straight off the road and plunged into the fields ahead.

Crash!

The cart flipped.

Young Master Bai tumbled several times through the mud.

His pristine white robes were instantly transformed into something closer to a rag.

Then—he stood up.

Covered in dirt. Hair disheveled.

Grinning from ear to ear.

"It worked!" he shouted joyously. "I succeeded! Hahahaha!"

Only now did Wang Zheng fully understand.

"This vehicle... it uses the same power source as the textile machines."

Young Master Bai laughed loudly, mud dripping from his sleeves.

"That's right! A steam-powered vehicle! I've named it—the automobile!"

Wang Zheng stared at the overturned machine, its wheels still spinning uselessly in the air. His heart stirred with admiration.

"As long as there is boiling water," he murmured, "it can move on its own..."

But Song Yingxing frowned.

"Bai," he said slowly, "I see several serious flaws."

Young Master Bai's eyes lit up.

"Oh? You noticed too?"

Song Yingxing nodded. "The boiler is far too small. Its output is weak, which is why you dared only use wood for the frame and avoided iron entirely."

Young Master Bai sighed. "Exactly. I was afraid it wouldn't move at all if it were heavier."

"And because the power is weak," Song Yingxing continued, "it can't carry much coal. Which means its range is extremely limited."

Young Master Bai spread his hands helplessly.

"That's the biggest problem. It won't make it beyond the village."

At that moment, hurried footsteps thundered down the road.

A large group rushed over—Young Master Bai's graduate students, both assistants and disciples. Once they graduated, they would become elite engineers of Gao Family Village, each earning a staggering fifty taels of silver a month.

They worked like a well-drilled unit.

Some lifted the overturned automobile back onto the road.

Others hauled over a sack of coal and fed the boiler.

Young Master Bai leapt back onto the vehicle in one smooth motion.

"Continue testing!"

"Be careful, Teacher Bai!" the students shouted.

Laughing wildly, Bai waved at Song Yingxing.

"Song! Help me think—how do we improve the power? Increase load capacity? I can't think of everything alone—ah—!"

The automobile suddenly surged forward again.

"Oh NO—!"

"I FORGOT THE BRAKES AGAIN—!"

Once more, chaos erupted.

The automobile charged down the road, veered violently at a bend, and—

Splash!

It flipped into the fields again.

The students chased after it in horror.

"Teacher Bai! Are you hurt?"

Young Master Bai climbed up, coughing mud.

"I'm fine... but my automobile—!"

The wooden frame had finally given up. It lay shattered into splinters.

Young Master Bai collapsed onto the embankment, clutching his chest in agony.

"It's ruined... it's ruined...!"

The students hurried to console him.

"We'll build another one!"

"Find a carpenter!"

"Wood isn't strong enough!"

Young Master Bai snapped upright.

"Yes! We need lighter, stronger materials!"

"Aluminum?" someone suggested.

"Too soft!"

"Mix aluminum with iron?"

"Will it explode?"

"It shouldn't! Neither explodes!"

"...It really won't, right?"

"No! Definitely not!"

Young Master Bai groaned.

"My back... I think I hurt it..."

The students gasped.

"Quick! Take him to the doctor!"

They carried him off toward the hospital in the Merchant Village district, arguing animatedly about materials the entire way.

Wang Zheng stood rooted in place, mouth hanging open.

"Your village," he finally said, "is overflowing with vitality."

Song Yingxing smiled calmly.

"This is what we call an academic atmosphere. And we're still building it."

Wang Zheng nodded slowly.

"You truly are... far ahead."

Chapter 607 You Join Us Too

Hedong Circuit.

Xing Honglang's forces were now firmly stationed in Hedong City.

Zhao Sheng, accompanied by a group of clerks, had temporarily taken over the civil administration of the entire Hedong Circuit. Everyone present understood the reality of the situation clearly: the imperial court would not leave this vacuum unfilled for long. Before long, a new envoy would certainly be dispatched to take charge of the Salt Administration Bureau.

If Gao Family Village did not wish to immediately tear off all pretense and go to open war with the court, then—sooner or later—these administrative powers would have to be handed back.

Which meant that before the handover, everything that could be arranged had to be arranged.

Zhao Sheng rapidly scanned a thick roster, then decisively marked over a hundred names before handing it to Xing Honglang.

"Instructor Xing," he said calmly, "these marked individuals are willing to work as salt artisans for us. The rest... are unwilling to leave."

Xing Honglang took the list, glanced through it, and nodded without hesitation.

"I understand. When we report to the imperial court, we'll say that all of these people were killed by the rebels."

Zhao Sheng smiled faintly.

"Indeed. These people are now... deceased."

He then produced another sheet of paper and placed it on the table. A single number was written clearly upon it.

"This is the total amount of salt that can still be produced by the remaining artisans after we 'lost' a batch. From now on, all salt output reported by Hedong Circuit will be based on this figure."

Xing Honglang looked at the number, then laughed.

"Half the production?"

Perched on Gao Chuwu's shoulder, the puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun rattled and clattered with laughter.

"Yes—half!" it said gleefully. "Zhu Youjian will probably cry when he sees this. His belt is already pulled tight, and now his most important salt-producing region has been cut clean in two. He might even feel like smashing his head against a wall in the middle of the night."

Xing Honglang asked, "Dao Xuan Tianzun, will we really get away with this? Won't the court investigate?"

"Oh, they absolutely will!" the puppet laughed. "Zhu Youjian won't tolerate this kind of nonsense. He'll definitely send eunuchs to check whether the salt output here truly dropped by half."

Cheng Xu chimed in with a grin.

"Eunuchs are the easiest people to deal with. Give them some silver, and they'll tell Zhu Youjian whatever you want them to say."

The room burst into laughter.

At present, the entire Xie Lake region was under the firm control of the Gao Family Village militia. Their people had already visited the surrounding salt villages, offering generous wages to salt artisans willing to work for Gao Family Village.

Those who agreed were separated from those who refused and resettled in different villages.

From this point forward, all salt produced by cooperative villages would be transported directly to Gao Family Village. As for the salt produced by those who refused—

That problem was left entirely to the imperial court.

The only remaining uncertainty lay in the court's next move.

Whether Xing Honglang would be permitted to remain stationed in Hedong Circuit would determine whether all of these arrangements could truly take root.

Just then, the curtain at the door was lifted, and Tie Niaofei slipped inside.

Several days had passed. His injuries were fully healed now. He wore clean clothes, and the effigy of Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest gleamed brightly, no longer stained with blood.

He grinned as he walked in.

"Brothers! My wounds are healed. Starting today, I'm back in the game!"

Xing Honglang gave him a long, measuring look.

"All your men are dead, aren't they? Are you planning to run your trade alone from now on?"

"...Uh."

Tie Niaofei froze.

This was no trivial question.

He could recruit new men, yes—but without a loyal core, relying entirely on outsiders was dangerous. They could steal from him, murder him for his goods, or tear each other apart over profits.

If you already had twenty men and hired five more, the newcomers would be absorbed.

But if you had no men at all and hired twenty—

You might not survive the first trading run.

Tie Niaofei's expression slowly grew serious.

Xing Honglang smiled.

"Tie Niaofei, you're one of us now. Stop operating outside the system. Formally join Gao Family Village and become one of our managers."

Tie Niaofei stared.

"Huh? I can really do that?"

The puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun clattered loudly.

"You can."

With Dao Xuan Tianzun's word, how could it be impossible?

Tie Niaofei was overjoyed. He quickly clasped his fists.

"I'm just a salt smuggler. What virtue or ability do I have to deserve Dao Xuan Tianzun's favor?"

Cheng Xu laughed and spoke up.

"The fact that you didn't say a single word after being captured by the Jin merchants makes you a true hero. The organization needs people like you. Honestly, no exaggeration—if it were me, I'd have confessed before they even started torturing me."

Everyone stared at him.

Cheng Xu shrugged.

"What? What's wrong with confessing? If I'd confessed, the Jin merchants might've brought people to Puzhou City to assassinate Xing Honglang. Once they entered our territory, they wouldn't have been able to leave. That would've been much easier than attacking Hedong City ourselves."

He sighed.

"Instead, they escaped, and now we don't even know where to find them. What a headache."

Everyone burst out laughing.

...And disturbingly, his logic wasn't entirely wrong.

The puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed as well.

"Hahaha! Cheng Xu, you scoundrel—spouting nonsense and disrespecting a hero. I'm deducting five taels of silver from your military pay."

The laughter grew even louder.

With that, Tie Niaofei officially joined Gao Family Village's management. He was so excited that he immediately clasped his fists again.

"Since you all think so highly of me," he said solemnly, "I'll be bold and make one request."

Xing Honglang raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? What is it?"

Tie Niaofei's eyes burned with hatred.

"I want a strong team to hunt down the Jin merchants. They killed more than a dozen of my brothers. I swear I won't rest until I avenge them."

Dao Xuan Tianzun declared, without hesitation,

"Granted."

With those words, the matter was settled.

Zao Ying stepped forward, grinning.

"I'll go. My cavalry battalion hasn't seen much real combat lately anyway. Tracking people across long distances is exactly what cavalry are good at."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Cheng Xu concluded,

"Then it's decided. Zao Ying will assist Tie Niaofei. Go get your revenge first. When you return, we'll arrange a formal military position for you."

Just as the discussion wrapped up—

A Hedong Circuit bailiff rushed in, face tense, voice hurried.

"General Xing! The new Governor of Shanxi—Xu Dingchen—has arrived!"

Everyone exclaimed in surprise.

Oh?

The Governor of Shanxi had come.

Xing Honglang chuckled softly.

"Alright. I'll go meet this governor and hear what arrangements he plans to make."

Chapter 608 Inevitable Appointment

Xing Honglang stood beneath the east gate of Hedong City, personally overseeing the arrangements for the governor's welcome.

Cheng Xu, Zao Ying, Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, and the rest had all made themselves scarce. Court etiquette was stiff, tedious, and unbearable to them. Lao Nanfeng was still in Puzhou and not within the Hedong Circuit, so he was naturally absent as well.

Truth be told, Xing Honglang disliked such formalities just as much. But as the nominal leader on the ground, there was no escaping it. She could only grit her teeth and lead a formation of regular militia soldiers to receive the officials.

Soon enough, the procession arrived.

It was a grand and intimidating display—nearly two thousand people in total.

Not only had the newly appointed Governor of Shanxi, Xu Dingchen, arrived, but accompanying him was Shanxi's General-in-Chief, Wang Guoliang.

In fact, Wang Guoliang had been frightened half to death upon hearing that Hedong Circuit had fallen into rebel hands. The imperial salt storehouse could not be lost. He immediately scraped together fifteen hundred troops and rushed out.

Along the way, he encountered Xu Dingchen, who had only just entered Shanxi to assume office. The two decided to travel together.

When the three parties met, an avalanche of formal greetings followed—mutual compliments, polite concern, and hollow praise piled atop one another like bricks.

We will spare the reader a million words of insincerity and proceed directly to the substance.

Xu Dingchen spoke first.

"On my way to assume office, I learned—just after crossing into Shanxi—that Hedong Circuit had fallen to rebels. I was truly shaken. Fortunately, less than three days later, news reached me that General Xing had retaken the city. That was a great relief."

Xing Honglang replied promptly, "My official post is that of Puzhou garrison commander. Leaving my station to intervene in Hedong was, strictly speaking, improper."

"Nonsense!" Xu Dingchen interrupted at once. "Puzhou and Hedong are only seventy li apart. When rebels were wreaking havoc here, and you acted decisively as the Puzhou commander, what crime could that be? Had you waited for a formal appointment and transfer order, the opportunity would have been lost."

He sighed.

"If those rebels had held Hedong City for even one more day, the suffering of the common people would have been immeasurable. General Xing, your swift recapture of the city was a great merit."

Xing Honglang smiled inwardly.

If that's how you see it, then so much the better.

She bowed slightly. "Now that Your Excellency the Governor and the General-in-Chief have arrived, this humble general should return to Puzhou."

Xu Dingchen turned to Wang Guoliang. "The Salt Inspector is dead, and nearly a thousand garrison soldiers have been lost. How should Hedong City be handled from here on?"

Wang Guoliang's face flushed.

Handled how? he cursed silently.

Shanxi was already crawling with rebels. The previous governor, Song Tongyin, had been forced to abandon most of the province and retreat to Taiyuan just to hold the line. Although Taiyuan had survived, other cities were devastated, and Song Tongyin had paid for it with his post.

Wang Guoliang's own troops were stretched to the breaking point. Most were tied down in northern Shanxi, fighting Zijing Liang, Wang Ziyong, Chuang Wang, the Dashing General, and the West Camp's Eight Great Kings.

Even the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers sent as reinforcements were mired in chaos, with soldiers and bandits mixed together in a complete mess.

Where was he supposed to find troops to garrison Hedong?

Should he cut himself into three thousand pieces and turn into three thousand soldiers?

Leaning closer, Wang Guoliang lowered his voice.

"Your Excellency Xu, this humble general truly has no men to spare for Hedong."

Xu Dingchen frowned. "Then what should be done?"

Wang Guoliang subtly gestured toward Xing Honglang.

"She may be useful."

Xu Dingchen hesitated. "She was once a pacified rebel. What if she rebels again?"

Wang Guoliang explained, "She used to be a salt smuggler, but she can read, handle accounts, and manage enterprises. I've heard she's set up textile workshops, pig farms, chicken farms, and cotton fields in Puzhou. She's involved in everything."

Xu Dingchen raised an eyebrow.

Wang Guoliang continued, "Someone who has built that much property is extremely unlikely to rebel again."

Xu Dingchen nodded slowly.

There was truth in that. The more a person owned, the less willing they were to gamble everything. Otherwise, why would people say those with nothing fear nothing?

He also recalled the Emperor's words before his appointment: Xing Honglang had rendered meritorious service suppressing bandits and deserved reward. It was left to subordinates to decide how to commend her.

Now, promoting her seemed perfectly appropriate.

In chaotic times, rigid rules could not be followed too strictly.

Xu Dingchen slapped his thigh.

"Very well."

He turned to Xing Honglang and announced, "General Xing, you have rendered great service in suppressing bandits and rescuing Hedong Circuit. During this period, you have also stabilized the populace and managed the circuit in an orderly fashion. The reported losses among salt artisans and the adjusted salt output have been clearly documented."

"I will therefore make an exception and appoint you Hedong Circuit Military Preparations Commissioner, concurrently serving as Salt Administration Commissioner!"

Xing Honglang felt a surge of joy—but she deliberately hesitated.

"But Puzhou... this humble general still has many enterprises there."

Xu Dingchen smiled.

"I have reviewed your battle reports. It is said you have a capable subordinate, known as Lao Nanfeng, formerly a Guyuan rebel vice centurion. He joined due to unpaid wages, later reformed, and has since rendered repeated meritorious service. Such talent should not be wasted."

"I will appoint him as the new Puzhou garrison commander."

Xing Honglang lowered her head, suppressing a victorious smile.

It's done.

The 'optimal outcome' of Dao Xuan Tianzun's plan has appeared.

In truth, it wasn't so much the best outcome as the only possible one.

With Shanxi in utter chaos, what alternatives did Xu Dingchen truly have?

Ignore a proven commander and appoint some useless court-connected fool instead?

Once the arrangements were made, Xu Dingchen had no desire to remain. Northern Shanxi was burning, and he urgently needed to deal with it.

The Xuan–Da Supreme Commander, Zhang Zongheng, had been relentlessly impeaching Shanxi officials—one day for failing to supply border troops, the next for allowing rebel chaos to threaten frontier security.

The memorials had piled up before the Emperor like a mountain, and imperial patience was wearing thin.

Xu Dingchen spoke briskly.

"General Xing, I entrust Hedong to you. Defend it well, so that I may suppress the northern rebels without worry."

Xing Honglang clasped her fists.

"This humble general will give her life to the task."

With that, Xu Dingchen departed, leading Wang Guoliang northward at speed.

Just like that, Xing Honglang became Hedong Circuit Military Preparations Commissioner, stationed at the empire's most critical salt storehouse.

All of Zhao Sheng's prior arrangements could now be executed.

Half the salt artisans were "dead."

Half the salt quota would be delivered to the court.

As for the rest—

Gao Family Village would accept it all, with thanks and without apology.

Chapter 609 The Salt Fields Must Be Vast

In the southwestern reaches of Xie Lake, vast new salt villages were rising from the earth.

These were the welfare settlements—allocated housing—for the salt artisans who had "pledged allegiance to Gao Family Village."

Any skilled worker employed by Gao Family Village received three taels of silver per month, along with full room and board. Food was one thing, but housing had clearly been given even greater thought.

Rows of concrete-built houses stretched neatly along the southwestern shoreline of Xie Lake, uniform in shape and orderly in layout. From afar, the entire settlement looked clean, disciplined, and strangely comforting.

For safety's sake, the salt village was also surrounded by long concrete walls. Should bandits or rebels appear, these outer defenses alone would be enough to delay an assault for quite some time.

Inside the walls lay the true heart of the operation—

salt fields.

But calling them "fields" was almost misleading.

They sprawled outward like genuine farmland, wide, open, and shockingly vast.

The moment the salt artisans laid eyes on them, their scalps went numb.

This big?

How much lake water would this take?

Could we possibly carry all of it by shoulder pole and bucket?

One artisan, carrying his meager bundle of belongings, had just moved into the village when panic seized him. Spotting a Blue Hat nearby, he hurried over.

"My lord—!"

The Blue Hat turned around.

It was Song Yingxing.

Standing beside him was a freshly inducted "trainee Blue Hat," none other than Wang Zheng, who had recently joined Gao Family Village.

Song Yingxing asked calmly, "What is it?"

The artisan swallowed. "My lord, the houses are wonderful—truly wonderful. But these salt fields... aren't they dug a bit too large? To fill them with brine by hand... we simply don't have that many people."

Song Yingxing burst out laughing.

"So that's what you're worried about?"

He waved a hand. "Good. I came here today precisely for this."

The artisan blinked. "My lord... are you planning to help us carry water?"

Wang Zheng couldn't hold it in.

"Pfft—"

Song Yingxing coughed lightly, his expression turning faintly awkward. Still, he was already used to this sort of misunderstanding.

"Go," he instructed. "Gather all the salt artisans. You're about to see our newest machine."

The artisan shouted a few times, and soon the entire salt village assembled.

Once everyone had arrived, Song Yingxing gave a signal. The technical workers moved swiftly.

By the lakeshore, they assembled a massive, unfamiliar contraption. At its core sat a steam engine, solid and imposing. Around it were interlocking gears, rotating wheels, levers, and long pumping arms.

The salt artisans stared blankly.

They understood nothing.

Even Wang Zheng, standing among them, wore the eager, wide-eyed expression of a student who knew he was about to learn something important.

Song Yingxing raised his voice.

"This machine is called a steam water pump. Watch carefully. From today onward, none of you will ever need to carry water from Xie Lake on your backs again."

He opened the boiler, tossed in several chunks of coal, and lit the fire.

The steam engine rumbled, then roared to life.

Wheels turned. Gears meshed. The pumping arms began their steady rhythm.

With a thunderous splash, thick pipes plunged into the lake, drawing water upward and forcefully channeling it into the salt fields.

"—Wow!"

The crowd gasped in unison.

Water poured endlessly into the fields, faster and stronger than any human chain could ever manage. In no time at all, an enormous section of the salt field was completely filled.

Song Yingxing withdrew the pipes and turned back with a smile.

"Well? Still worried these fields are too large?"

The salt artisans erupted with excitement.

"Master, this is divine skill!"

"With this machine, we can produce several times more salt than before!"

Song Yingxing clapped his hands.

"Good. Then produce more."

He continued, "The wage system will also be reformed. From now on, you won't just receive a fixed salary. There will be a base wage, and on top of that, bonuses based on output."

The artisans exchanged glances.

"That's... allowed?"

Song Yingxing laughed.

"Why not? If one man produces a thousand catties of salt in a month, and another produces only five hundred—would you tolerate them earning the same?"

The artisans answered immediately.

"No! Absolutely not."

Song Yingxing nodded.

"Exactly."

Spring of the fifth year of Chongzhen arrived.

A season of rebirth.

The heavens had been merciful. From the previous winter onward, rain had come on time. By spring, gentle showers fell again and again, filling the land with life.

Shaanxi, Shanxi—regions long ravaged by drought—finally saw hope.

Countless displaced people, who had once begged in cities, returned to their ancestral homes. They took out the precious seeds they had protected even through famine—seeds they would rather starve than eat—and began spring planting.

With the people's hearts settled, the rebels faced a brutal truth.

Bu Zhan Ni's forces, having crossed back into Shaanxi, suffered repeated crushing defeats at the hands of Hong Chengchou in northern Shaanxi. In the past, rebel defeats often meant escape—and escape meant growth.

But now?

With land to farm, the common people chose to die guarding their fields rather than follow rebels.

Unable to sustain himself, Bu Zhan Ni personally executed his generals Shuangchihu and Zijinlong, then surrendered to the court.

Still, not all rebels were fools.

In the first month of Chongzhen's fifth year, Huntianhou, disguised as a rice merchant, infiltrated Yijun County. With help from insiders, he seized the city by night, then captured Bao'an and Heshui counties in succession.

Hong Chengchou issued mobilization orders, dispatching Cao Wenzhao and Zhang Quanchang to encircle and suppress him.

In the second month, Kefeitian and Hao Lin'an attacked Qingyang.

By the fourth month, Bu Zhan Ni reemerged once more, establishing seventeen outposts and sixty-four strongholds in Xichuan, launching attacks on Mizhi and Jiazhou.

Hong Chengchou responded decisively, ordering Shaanxi Regional Commander Wang Cheng'en to assemble three thousand elite troops.

Bu Zhan Ni was defeated—and finally beheaded.

In Jishan County, Bai Yuan held a stack of military reports.

Upon reading of Bu Zhan Ni's death, he sighed softly.

"So... Bu Zhan Ni is finally dead. We were old acquaintances."

Mo Xiaopin, standing beside him, nearly jumped.

"Good heavens, Master Bai—what did you just say?"

Bai Yuan laughed.

"Hahaha, I'm joking. Old adversaries, more like it. Back in the first year of Chongzhen, he crossed Huanglong Mountain and attacked my Bai Family Fortress. We fought him many times after that."

Mo Xiaopin finally relaxed.

"You scared me half to death."

Bai Yuan waved it off.

"Enough about rebels. Let's talk about spring planting. How is your fertilizer plant?"

Mo Xiaopin grinned.

"Thanks to you and the Third Miss, it's progressing smoothly. It's already producing large quantities, and it's proving invaluable this spring."

Bai Yuan nodded slowly.

The land was recovering.

And so, quietly, was the world.

Chapter 610 The Great Storm Arrives

Even as the farmlands of Jishan County rapidly adopted celestial fertilizer, seizing the heavens' generosity to drive astonishing increases in yield, the cotton fields of Puzhou were also quietly undergoing transformation.

They, too, had entered an era of scientific cultivation.

This year, the cotton fields had become Gao Family Village's foremost strategic priority.

Grain fields, they already had in abundance. But cotton—this was their first true large-scale attempt at cultivating an economic crop.

For years, Gao Family Village's textile industry had relied almost entirely on cotton supplied directly by Dao Xuan Tianzun. It worked—but everyone knew how precarious it was.

Within Gao Family Village, a number of clear-headed individuals—San Shier, Tan Liwen, Liang Shixian, Feng Jun, and a large cohort of middle-school graduates—had long recognized the danger.

What if one day, Dao Xuan Tianzun grew displeased?

What if the celestial cotton stopped descending into the mortal realm?

If that happened, the textile industry would collapse overnight, and the shockwaves would ripple outward, dragging down every other sector with it.

Thus, Gao Family Village mobilized its sharpest minds, dispatching wave after wave of technical experts to Puzhou, determined to raise cotton yields to the highest possible level.

Their objective was clear:

By next year, every textile workshop would rely entirely on Puzhou's cotton, no longer troubling Dao Xuan Tianzun with mundane mortal needs.

In April, at the threshold of early summer, Saintess Gao Yiye personally arrived in Puzhou.

Her usual "personal guards," Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi, had both been sent to Xi'an, so she was assigned a new escort detail.

They were impeccably obedient—almost too obedient.

Without Rabbit Lord, a great deal of fun was missing.

Still, Gao Yiye found joy simply standing among the cotton fields.

At present, not a single fluffy white cotton boll was in sight. Only waist-high green stalks stretched stubbornly upward, brimming with life.

Cotton farmers filled the fields, bent low between the rows, methodically clearing weeds.

And among them—

There was a tiny Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun, barely thirty centimeters tall, scampering through the furrows.

Now and then, he would seize a weed with both hands, grunt with effort, and yank it free.

Gao Yiye burst into laughter and chased after him.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun! Dao Xuan Tianzun, wait for me!"

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly darted beneath a cotton plant and vanished.

As expected, Gao Yiye rushed past him.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun? Where did you go?"

In the next instant, the little figure popped out from behind her, laughing openly.

The cotton farmers nearby couldn't help but smile.

"Please be careful, Saintess! Don't fall!"

Gao Yiye waved a hand. "It's fine! I won't fall and crush the cotton."

The farmers hurriedly replied, "We're not worried about the cotton—we're worried about you!"

She laughed again. "That won't do either. I'm waiting for the cotton to ripen so I can steal some myself!"

Cold sweat instantly broke out on several farmers' backs.

The Saintess... wants to steal cotton?

If she really steals it, are we supposed to arrest her or not?

Before they could reach a conclusion, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun poked his head out from beneath a cotton seedling.

"If she steals cotton," he said cheerfully, "you should catch her and hand her over to the authorities!"

The farmers broke into even colder sweat.

A divine decree... but is this serious or a joke?

Who would dare test it?

And then—

Without warning, a roar split the sky.

Torrential rain came crashing down.

Cries of alarm rose from all directions.

It was early summer, and Gao Yiye wasn't wearing heavy clothing. If she were drenched through, the soaked fabric clinging to her body would be... improper, to say the least.

Startled, she hurried toward the edge of the field.

Her guards surged forward, snapping open oiled-paper umbrellas. In just a few steps, her clothes were spared, though several strands of hair grew damp, clinging lightly to her cheek and lending her an unexpectedly delicate charm.

Several guards ran toward the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun with another umbrella.

He shook his head. "No need. I'm not afraid of getting wet."

They withdrew at once.

Unhurried, the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun walked through the rain and approached Gao Yiye.

She knelt, cupped him gently in her hands, and set him on her shoulder.

Thus, beneath the umbrella, the Saintess and Dao Xuan Tianzun watched together as the rain pounded the earth, drumming steadily across the fields.

"So much rain, right at the start of summer," Gao Yiye murmured. "This year's weather is truly... strange."

The fourth lunar month, corresponding to May or June—early summer.

Heavy rain wasn't unheard of.

But after years of relentless drought, such abundance felt unsettling.

The cotton farmers, however, did not retreat.

Instead, they plunged into the fields.

Li Daoxuan, who lacked deep farming knowledge, watched with curiosity.

What are they doing?

Moments later, he understood.

They were checking the drainage ditches.

For thousands of years, farmers under his dynasty had battled heaven and earth. Their experience was hard-earned. They knew that no matter how fierce the rain, proper drainage meant survival.

If water could flow, the crops would live.

But this time—

Trouble surfaced.

Years of drought had made people complacent. The drainage ditches, dug long ago, were neglected. Many sections were collapsed or clogged. Some were packed solid with dirt and stones, trampled hard as roads.

The farmers' faces turned pale.

"Clear the ditches! Quickly!"

"With rain like this, the fields will flood within an hour!"

"Dig! Call everyone—dig together!"

They dug desperately.

Rain poured down in sheets. Water pooled rapidly between the rows. Yet as the ditches cleared, the water began to flow outward, rushing into larger channels.

Then—

Disaster.

The main drainage canals were clogged as well.

No one had touched them for years.

Water surged into the canals, rising fast, spreading outward.

The farmers' hearts sank.

If the main canals overflowed, there would be no time—no manpower—to fix them.

Just as panic reached its peak, Gao Yiye smiled beneath the umbrella.

"Don't be afraid, everyone," she said softly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is about to act."

The farmers erupted with joy.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is willing to help us?"

At that moment, Li Daoxuan was searching intently.

A shovel wouldn't do—it was too wide. One careless scoop would gouge a river and destroy both sides of the canal.

He needed something narrow.

His gaze swept across his desk and stopped.

A Monkey King figurine.

The Great Sage held a Ruyi Jingu Bang—

Its width was perfect.