

Great Ming 611

Chapter 611 Emergency Relief

Li Daoxuan reached out and picked up the Great Sage action figure.

He pinched the Ruyi Golden Cudgel between two fingers and calmly pulled it free from the Great Sage's grasp.

The poor Monkey King, entirely unaware that his divine weapon was about to be repurposed as a drainage tool, maintained the same proud, unyielding expression.

Li Daoxuan weighed the staff in his hand and flexed it slightly.

Excellent.

The hardness was exceptional—true alloy construction. The surface gleamed faintly, sturdy, reliable, and clearly capable of enduring abuse far beyond its intended "collectible" purpose.

He extended the staff and lowered it toward the diorama box.

At that very moment, the cotton farmers were staring anxiously at the sky.

After the Saintess had spoken, they had waited with utmost sincerity for Dao Xuan Tianzun's divine intervention.

Ten breaths passed.

Then twenty.

Then several dozen.

Nothing happened.

The rain continued to pour in sheets, and dread crept steadily into their hearts.

And then—

The clouds split apart.

From the heavens descended a massive staff, thick and imposing. Its central body gleamed silver, its ends shone gold, and along its length were clearly engraved four bold characters:

Ruyi Golden Cudgel

The cotton farmers gasped.

"Wow—!"

"The Golden Cudgel!"

"Isn't that the weapon of the Great Sage Equal to Heaven, Sun Wukong?"

"Why would it appear here?"

"Did Dao Xuan Tianzun... borrow the Great Sage's staff?"

Before anyone could ponder further, one end of the Golden Cudgel plunged directly into the main drainage canal.

With a casual sweep—

Boom!

Mud, sand, gravel, and compacted earth were blasted aside in a roaring surge.

The canal was instantly cleared.

Yellow, turbid water thundered forward, rushing into a nearby tributary, then onward into the Yellow River itself.

Standing water in the cotton fields drained away at once.

Cheers erupted.

"Long live Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"The Golden Cudgel is truly divine!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun! Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Just as the shouts reached their peak, Gao Yiye spoke calmly:

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has departed."

Everyone froze.

"...Huh?"

She said solemnly, "Dao Xuan Tianzun has gone to assist farmers in other regions."

Only then did understanding dawn.

Ah—of course.

Such torrential rain wasn't limited to this place alone.

Everyone bowed deeply toward the heavens.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is truly benevolent!"

The storm raged on.

Across the land, farmers were thrown into frantic motion.

Even Gao Family Village was thoroughly soaked by the downpour.

Yet its people remained perfectly calm.

Gao Family Village's infrastructure was exceptional. Not a single drainage channel was blocked. The moment the rain fell, water dispersed smoothly through the network and flowed down the mountain slopes.

However—

A serious problem emerged in the Valley of Exiles, where the people of Qingjian County lived.

Nestled within a basin-like mountain valley, the area had been safe during years of gentle drizzle. It had slumbered peacefully, like an old dog basking in the sun.

But torrential rain was another matter entirely.

Water poured down from every surrounding slope. Small streams appeared seemingly out of nowhere, converging toward the valley floor.

Soon, water reached people's doorsteps.

Just as panic spread—

Help arrived.

A large team of Gao Family Village technicians rushed in, hauling enormous steam-powered water pumps.

They connected long hoses and began drawing water directly from the valley bottom, discharging it into the nearby mountain stream.

At last, the valley residents could breathe again.

In Jishan County—

Mo Xiaopin, draped in a straw rain cape, sprinted through the storm.

As both militia commander and instructor, he carried the weight of countless lives on his shoulders. With rain like this, how could he not be anxious?

He raced along the edge of a field, shouting to his subordinates:

"What's the situation? Can the drainage channels handle it?"

A subordinate answered in panic, "No! They can't! Several fields are already waterlogged!"

"Why not?" Mo Xiaopin roared. "Were you slacking off? Didn't you dig them properly?"

The man shouted back, "It's been dry for over three years! Who would've expected the heavens to turn like this?"

"Damn it!" Mo Xiaopin bellowed. "Call everyone who can move! Hoes, shovels—anything! Move!"

People surged forward.

And then—

The clouds split open.

A gigantic golden hand, clutching the Ruyi Golden Cudgel, reached down from the sky.

The people of Jishan County recognized it instantly.

"It's the immortal friend of the Jiwang Temple—Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"The Jiwang Temple has invited Dao Xuan Tianzun again!"

"The Golden Cudgel!"

The cudgel plunged into the drainage ditch.

One sweep—

Whoosh!

Water surged through, pouring massively into the Fen River.

"It's flowing!"

"It's open!"

Cheers thundered.

Mo Xiaopin laughed in relief, then cursed loudly:

"Don't rely on Dao Xuan Tianzun for everything! This is our Jishan County! After the rain stops, you'd better clean every ditch and channel—don't embarrass the Jiwang Temple!"

On the Yellow River—

A small civilian merchant ship struggled desperately.

This vessel didn't belong to Gao Family Village. It lacked electric propulsion and relied entirely on sails and oars.

It had departed from Mengjin County in Luoyang, bound for Gudu Ferry to purchase salt.

Since Xing Honglang took office as Hedong Military Preparations Commissioner and Salt Administration Commissioner, salt production had soared.

Though official quotas dropped, private salt flooded the civilian market.

Merchants from Henan eagerly seized the opportunity, dispatching ships again and again.

This vessel's owner was named Jiang Cheng.

He had already completed five trips and knew the rules well.

Anyone wearing the embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun on their chest was considered family.

Having experienced the meticulous care shown to fellow believers at Yongji Ferry, Jiang Cheng had joined the Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect himself, sewing a cotton-thread emblem onto his chest.

Business had been smooth—too smooth.

Five shipments had filled his coffers.

But this sixth journey—

Might claim his life.

The storm howled.

The Yellow River churned violently, waves rising and smashing against the hull.

The small cargo ship tossed like a leaf.

Clinging to the mast, Jiang Cheng roared, "To shore! Get us to shore!"

A subordinate screamed back, "Master! We can't control her!"

"...Is this the end?"

Jiang Cheng clasped his hands and prayed desperately:

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, protect me! Though I joined recently, my heart is sincere! Please—save my life!"

The moment his words left his mouth—

The cotton-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest suddenly grinned.

"Everyone," it said cheerfully,

"Hold tight to the masts."

"We're about to take flight."

Chapter 612 It's Going to Be Chaotic Again

This was Jiang Cheng's first time witnessing a statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun move.

He had heard countless people talk about it before—but hearing stories and seeing it with one's own eyes were two completely different things.

Although he had already joined the Dao Xuan Tianzun Daoist Sect, a tiny sliver of doubt had always lingered in his heart. Did Dao Xuan Tianzun truly manifest divine power in the mortal world?

Now, that doubt had nowhere left to hide.

The embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest had not only moved—

It had spoken.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has manifested!" Jiang Cheng burst into tears of joy, shouting hoarsely, "We're saved! We're saved! Everyone, listen carefully—hold on tightly to the nearest pillar!"

The merchant ship was small, with only ten crew members aboard. Panic erupted as everyone scrambled to grab onto something solid.

Then they saw it.

A colossal golden hand descended from the heavens, reaching straight into the raging Yellow River. It gently cradled the ship from below, steady and calm, before lifting the entire vessel into the air.

Jiang Cheng and the crew screamed in unison.

"Ahhh—!"

Excitement and terror collided, terror twisting into exhilaration.

The massive golden hand moved slowly at first.

Then faster.

And faster.

Before long, they were hurtling through the sky at nearly two hundred kilometers per hour.

Flying through wind and rain at such a speed was indescribable.

Jiang Cheng could only gape into the storm, roaring at the top of his lungs, "Whoa—whoa—whoa!"

Moments later, the Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock came into view.

The golden hand gently lowered the ship beside the dock and released it.

The stunned crew snapped back to their senses, rushing to secure ropes and leap onto the dock, tying the ship firmly to the mooring posts.

Jiang Cheng and the others followed, stumbling ashore.

The instant their feet touched solid ground, every ounce of tension drained from their bodies. Some collapsed outright, others sobbed uncontrollably.

Then, as one, they turned toward the sky and bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun, for saving our lives!"

Li Daoxuan, however, had no time to enjoy gratitude.

He was drowning in work.

The larger his territory grew, the more places demanded his attention—and the more lives hung in the balance.

Outside the diorama box, a dense map filled with place names lay before him. He tapped one spot casually, then rapidly pressed the north, south, east, and west controls, sweeping his view across the land to check for danger and flooding.

He used to curse his limited field of vision.

Now, he felt the opposite problem—there was simply too much to see.

To hell with it.

He would save whoever he could.

Those he couldn't... could only blame fate.

At least he was doing his best.

His gaze shifted southward from Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock, tracing the banks of the Yellow River.

Then—

A small ferry crossing came into view.

Fenglingdu.

A famous place.

It was here that Guo Xiang first met Yang Guo, fell in love at first sight, and lost half a lifetime to longing.

Fenglingdu—cross once, miss a lifetime.

The crossing itself was narrow. As the Yellow River's water level rose, this section struggled to handle the flow. The surging current couldn't pass smoothly through the constricted channel, and water began backing up.

Li Daoxuan's expression darkened instantly.

Something was very wrong.

The Yellow River—

It was about to burst its banks.

"Damn it!"

Water had already begun spilling over the river's edge.

If this embankment failed, the flood would sweep straight through Fenglingdu.

Guo Xiang and Yang Guo—

No, wait.

It was the ordinary people of Fenglingdu who would be wiped out.

Li Daoxuan grabbed a washbasin and desperately scooped water from the Yellow River, dumping it away.

Useless.

Even shrunk two hundred times inside the diorama box, the Yellow River still spanned several meters. A washbasin—or even a pump—was laughably inadequate.

Reinforce the embankment!

The thought flashed through his mind.

He sprinted to his balcony, seized a modular wooden flowerpot made of individual slats, and dismantled it with practiced speed, scattering wooden boards across the floor.

Then he rushed back to the diorama box.

Carefully—urgently—he placed the wooden slats one by one against the weakest section of the riverbank.

At the same moment, the villagers of Fenglingdu were fleeing.

They could see it too—the river was about to break. Parents dragged children along, people hastily gathered what little valuables they could carry.

They could run.

Their belongings could be moved.

But their homes?

If the Yellow River burst through, the entire ferry town would vanish beneath the flood. Every house would be destroyed. They would be homeless overnight.

The villagers hesitated, hearts aching.

But they had no choice.

Then someone shouted—

"Look! Up in the sky!"

Everyone looked up.

What they saw became a memory they would carry for the rest of their lives.

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

The block fell into place along the riverbank with a heavy thud, like a giant dam. The golden hand pressed it firmly into the earth.

One block wasn't enough.

Another descended.

Then another.

Massive wooden slabs fell one after another, forming a towering barrier along the vulnerable embankment—like a great wooden fence holding the Yellow River at bay.

The river stabilized.

Only thin gaps between the wooden slats remained.

The golden hand immediately returned, carrying a strange, soft, multicolored mud—beautiful, almost jewel-like—and pressed it into the gaps, sealing them completely.

The danger was gone.

The people of Fenglingdu stood frozen, forgetting even to cheer.

"A divine miracle..."

"That's Dao Xuan Tianzun casting a heavenly spell! I've heard of this in Puzhou City!"

"We're saved... our homes are saved!"

"Fenglingdu is saved!"

Li Daoxuan slumped back, panting.

"Damn it... disaster relief really isn't easy."

But there was no time to rest.

He immediately shifted his view again—Dragon Gate Ferry, Qichuan Ferry...

Across the land, tiny figures stared helplessly at the surging Yellow River. Equipment was dragged to higher ground. Boats along the banks rocked violently.

The entire world inside the diorama box seemed to tremble beneath the river's fury.

Li Daoxuan's heart sank.

"This is bad."

If the upper reaches were already like this, what about the middle and lower sections?

His fears were justified.

In the fifth year of Chongzhen, the Great Ming—having barely survived a catastrophic drought—was struck by massive flooding. The Yellow River burst its banks again and again. Soldiers, civilians, merchants—countless lives were lost.

The displaced wandered everywhere, begging for food.

With nowhere left to go, they gathered.

And rebelled.

A new round of chaos had begun.

Chapter 613 Bullying the Prince of Qin's Mansion

Xi'an Prefecture's most high-end tailor shop once had a very elegant name: Rainbow Cloud Fabric Store.

The name implied that its cloth was as brilliant as layered rainbows, each bolt finer than the last. It catered exclusively to officials and nobility. Even the consorts of the Prince of Qin's Mansion had their dresses custom-made here.

Unfortunately, the shop had recently changed hands.

The new owner's surname was Li.

And ever since then, the shop's "temperament" had taken a sharp and unmistakable turn.

Sure enough, trouble arrived again today.

At the shop entrance stood a young maid in proper attire, her face flushed red with anger.

"This is outrageous!" she snapped. "Our mistress has always ordered her clothes here. How can a newly acquired shop suddenly refuse to serve the Prince of Qin's Mansion?"

Blocking the doorway stood Flat Rabbit, arms folded, grin smug enough to invite a beating.

"I'll do business with anyone," he said lazily, "except the Prince of Qin's Mansion."

The maid bristled. "A shop refusing customers—where is the reason in that?"

Flat Rabbit clenched his fists, each one as big as an alms bowl. "This is my reason. What about it? Angry? Go ahead—bring people to beat me."

"You—!" The maid's face turned crimson. "You barbarian! All you know is violence!"

At that moment, a handsome young man stepped out from inside the shop, holding a birdcage. He looked refined, polite, almost scholarly.

"Flat Rabbit," he said mildly, "we are civilized people. You shouldn't always talk about fighting..."

The maid's heart leapt.

So there were reasonable people here after all!

Her relief lasted less than a breath.

"...Just beating them isn't enough," the young man continued thoughtfully. "Tie their legs with rope, hang them upside down, and dunk them into a water vat. Let them practice holding their breath."

The maid froze.

"You— you people—!"

She had never, in her life, seen anyone show such naked contempt for the Prince of Qin's Mansion.

But she was only an inner-courtyard servant. She knew nothing of the storms raging outside, nothing of recent political shifts, nothing of how thoroughly the Prince of Qin's Mansion had been slapped in the face these past days.

Powerless and furious, she could only puff her cheeks and glare.

With Dao Xuan Tianzun backing them, Flat Rabbit had grown even bolder.

"This hero doesn't hit women," he said generously. "Go on—bring the men from the Prince of Qin's Mansion. I'll be waiting."

Left with no choice, the maid turned and left.

Halfway down the street, she ran straight into a junior steward from the outer hall of the Prince of Qin's Mansion. She grabbed him immediately and poured out her grievances, claiming a fabric shop ahead was bullying them without restraint.

The steward's face darkened.

"How dare they!" He rolled up his sleeves and stormed toward the shop.

Upon reaching the entrance, he roared, "Who dares disrespect the Prince of Qin's Mansion?!"

Flat Rabbit stepped out, waved cheerfully, and said, "Oh? You again? Healed up already? Tsk tsk. The Prince of Qin's doctors are quite skilled."

The steward took one look at Flat Rabbit and deflated instantly, like a punctured wineskin.

"Y-you... it's you... Wu Shen and Shi Kefa's man..."

Flat Rabbit smiled.

The steward didn't wait for a second smile. He turned and ran, dragging the maid along.

"Quick, go! These people are not to be provoked!"

The maid stumbled after him, utterly confused. "Why? Is the Prince of Qin's Mansion really so weak now that we can't even deal with a fabric shop?"

The steward hissed, "You wouldn't understand even if I explained. Just remember—leaving quietly is the right choice. Don't cause more trouble for His Highness the Heir Apparent."

"But... Mistress really likes the clothes from Rainbow Cloud Fabric Store," the maid said weakly.

The steward sighed. "Then she'll have to wear something else."

The maid fell silent.

Make do?

That was easier said than done.

Knowing a scolding awaited her, she returned to the Prince of Qin's Mansion, slipped into the inner quarters, and reported what had happened.

To her surprise, Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's Heir Apparent, was sitting in the room.

The moment he heard the report, his face darkened.

The consort frowned. "Why would that fabric shop dare to defy us?"

Zhu Cunji snorted. "Hmph. That shop is backed by Investigating Censor Wu Shen and Xi'an Judge Shi Kefa. Behind them stands the entire civil official faction. They're deliberately opposing our imperial house."

The consort was puzzled. "Why would they bully our mansion? We haven't done anything wrong, have we?"

Zhu Cunji rolled his eyes.

He had no intention of explaining his "past deeds" to a woman—and in his own mind, he had never done anything wrong anyway. Everything he did was only natural for someone of his status.

Just then, a steward hurried in.

"Your Highness... our chicken supply is running low. Tonight, we may not have enough to serve the consorts in the Eastern Palace."

Zhu Cunji exploded. "Low on chicken? Is chicken gold now? Go buy more! Ten per person!"

The steward said awkwardly, "The farmers who used to supply us no longer raise chickens. Their stock was all acquired by the Li family chicken farm. They claim it's for unified, scientific breeding. Apparently... it's working very well. Chicken supply across the region has surged."

The consort was startled. "If supply has surged, why are we short?"

The steward lowered his head.

Zhu Cunji said coldly, "He refuses to sell to the Prince of Qin's Mansion?"

"Yes," the steward admitted bitterly. "He sells to everyone else. We rely on tenant farmers now, but they can't raise enough. We still have vegetables and grain, at least..."

"Wu Shen! Shi Kefa!" Zhu Cunji roared. "Outrageous! Absolutely outrageous!"

He was furious.

And utterly powerless.

After venting for a long while, Zhu Cunji slowly calmed down. Those at the top learned early how to rein in emotions.

"Prepare my sedan chair," he said finally. "I'm going to meet the Li family patriarch."

The consort was stunned. "Shouldn't you be meeting Wu Shen and Shi Kefa? Why see a mere puppet?"

Zhu Cunji sneered. "Women truly understand nothing. Wu Shen and Shi Kefa are rigid as iron— negotiating with them is pointless. But the Li family patriarch? He's a merchant. Merchants value profit above all else."

He smiled thinly.

"As long as I offer enough benefit, he'll turn around and bite his own masters."

The consort's eyes lit up. "Your Highness is truly wise!"

Zhu Cunji chuckled smugly.

"He may be their puppet today," he said softly, "but soon enough... he'll be mine."

Chapter 614 Let's Have a Talk

Li Daoxuan strolled leisurely through the streets of Xi'an Prefecture, a birdcage swinging gently from his hand.

After an especially aggressive round of acquisitions, he now controlled at least half of Xi'an's businesses. And not just any half—this was the half concentrated squarely in the four great necessities of life:

Clothing. Food. Housing. Transportation.

Grain shops. Carriage services. Fabric stores.

Real estate—ah, no, scratch that. Scratch that.

He took everything.

Once these four pillars were firmly in hand, Gao Family Village immediately launched a sweeping campaign of price reductions. Of course, this wasn't reckless slashing. Every cut was calculated carefully, based on real production capacity and supply–demand balance.

With modern textile machines in operation, how could cloth remain expensive?

With celestial fertilizer doubling grain yields, how could grain prices not fall?

These two reductions alone dramatically lowered the cost of living. The common people finally felt like they could breathe again. Spending revived, workshops reopened, stalls multiplied, and the entire city seemed to wake up overnight.

This was the sight Li Daoxuan liked best.

As he walked, he reflected casually, Xi'an hasn't suffered any major storms lately. I don't need to worry too much here. The real trouble is the Yellow River—rains every few days. If this keeps up, disaster is inevitable. I can only check on Xi'an from time to time. My real attention has to be over there.

Just as that thought passed through his mind, a sedan chair approached from the opposite direction.

It was understated—plain black, no gilding, no banners—yet escorted by a sizable contingent of guards. Anyone with eyes could tell: this was someone important deliberately keeping a low profile.

Li Daoxuan chuckled softly.

"The Prince of Qin's residence?"

The sedan curtain lifted, revealing Zhu Cunji's face.

"Mr. Li," Zhu Cunji said evenly, "care to find a place and talk for a while?"

For the heir of the empire's most prestigious princely estate to stop a mere gentry merchant on the street and initiate conversation—this was already an enormous concession.

If Zhu Cunji had already formally inherited the title of Prince of Qin, he likely wouldn't have been able to swallow such humiliation.

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Of course."

Zhu Cunji pointed toward a brothel up ahead.

"Piaoxiang Yuan. How about we talk inside?"

Before Li Daoxuan could respond, the myna bird in the cage suddenly chirped:

"What's the point of a brothel? Can't even get it up! How much sorrow can a gentleman bear? It's like a bunch of eunuchs visiting a brothel!"

"Pfft—!"

Zhu Cunji nearly choked.

Li Daoxuan burst out laughing, his silicone face twisting into a stiff, eerie grin that somehow made the laughter even more unsettling.

"Fine, fine," he said cheerfully. "Let's talk in the brothel."

That smile sent a chill crawling up Zhu Cunji's spine.

But the arrow was already on the string. It had to be fired.

They arrived at Piaoxiang Yuan.

Under normal circumstances, the madam would have rushed out long ago, smiling like springtime itself. But today, no one came.

Instead, a tall, burly man stepped forward and blocked the sedan chair.

"This establishment is no longer open to the public," he said firmly. "It has been renamed Stars Performing Arts Agency. Please do not trespass."

Zhu Cunji froze.

"Agency? What agency?"

Li Daoxuan walked around the sedan chair, smiling faintly.

"Ah, right. I forgot to mention—this place has already been bought by my people."

The burly man immediately snapped to attention when he saw Li Daoxuan, performed a crisp salute, and stepped aside.

"Please," Li Daoxuan said. "After you."

Zhu Cunji left his guards outside and followed him in, still dazed.

The Piaoxiang Yuan he knew was gone.

No flirtatious laughter. No intoxicating perfume. No painted faces beckoning from behind silk curtains.

Instead, the place looked like an opera troupe's compound.

Costumes were stacked everywhere. Musical instruments lay scattered about. Sheet music littered tables. People hurried back and forth, busy with rehearsals and preparations.

Whenever someone passed Li Daoxuan, they immediately straightened up, saluted respectfully, then hurried on.

On the main stage, several young women dressed plainly were practicing songs and dances. Their movements were lively and youthful—but not seductive in the slightest.

Zhu Cunji's brain stalled halfway.

"What... happened here?"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"It's still under preparation. In half a month, we'll host our first performance. If Your Highness attends then, you'll understand."

"...Alright," Zhu Cunji said blankly.

They went upstairs into a private room and sat down.

No one came to serve them.

No tea. No water. No wine. No girls.

The room was quiet—so quiet it felt more like a scholar's study than a brothel.

Zhu Cunji had never, in his life, been treated with such disregard. A strange mix of irritation and reluctant admiration rose in his chest.

You won't even pour tea for me? Fine. But you don't even prepare tea for your own patron?

Just as that thought formed, Li Daoxuan calmly poured a cup of water.

So he serves personally, Zhu Cunji thought. At least that shows respect.

Then Li Daoxuan turned and held the cup up to the birdcage.

"Good bird," he said. "Drink some water."

Zhu Cunji: "!!!"

The anger gauge began to fill.

Li Daoxuan asked casually, "So—what did Your Highness wish to discuss today?"

Zhu Cunji took a deep breath.

"Mr. Li. The businesses you manage for Wu Shen and Shi Kefa... have been doing rather well."

"Oh," Li Daoxuan said lightly. "Just average. Third best in the world."

Zhu Cunji didn't understand the remark, but he sensed mockery.

The anger gauge jumped two bars.

Suppressing his temper, Zhu Cunji continued, "Wu Shen and Shi Kefa are rigid scholars. Working under them must be... unpleasant at times. For instance, some goods that could command high prices—they insist you sell cheaply to the common folk. That must cost you a great deal."

Li Daoxuan's eyes lit up.

"Ah! Your Highness speaks true wisdom."

Zhu Cunji leaned forward slightly.

"Some things are sold too cheaply," Li Daoxuan went on. "Especially the garments ordered by the Prince of Qin's heir's residence. Far too cheap—I barely broke even. Honestly, each piece should cost at least five thousand taels... no, ten thousand taels. Only then would it reflect the noble dignity of the Princess Consort."

Zhu Cunji: "..."

Anger gauge: +2.

"And food as well," Li Daoxuan continued cheerfully. "Chicken, pork, beef—all scandalously cheap. How can provisions for the Prince of Qin's heir be priced the same as those for common paupers? Every item should be raised to a thousand taels per catty. Only then would Your Highness truly taste aristocratic luxury."

Zhu Cunji: "!!"

Anger gauge: MAXIMUM.

At this point, all Zhu Cunji needed was to rotate the joystick forward, back, and press the A button—

—to unleash his ultimate move.

Chapter 615 Let's Cooperate

Although Zhu Cunji's patience had already been ground down to dust, he ultimately chose not to unleash his accumulated fury.

After a long moment, he forcibly steadied himself and spoke in a low, controlled voice:

"Very well. I won't waste words on nonsense anymore. I'll be direct, Li Daoxuan. Cooperating with those so-called upright literati officials won't earn you much silver. But cooperating with this heir—your coffers will overflow."

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "My coffers are already overflowing. Why would I need to cooperate with Your Highness? Where's the necessity?"

Zhu Cunji:

"..."

The anger gauge twitched upward again.

Suppressing it, Zhu Cunji continued, "I've heard that you've been buying land everywhere, building all sorts of strange factories—mines, chicken farms, cement plants, and the like. But forgive my bluntness: very little land around Xi'an doesn't already belong to my estate. If you want to expand further, you won't get very far without cooperating with this heir."

This time, he finally struck the key point.

And it was precisely the reason Li Daoxuan had tolerated all his posturing until now.

Almost all land surrounding Xi'an belonged to the Prince of Qin's estate; only a small fraction was held by ordinary people. Recently, Li Daoxuan had already spent a fortune acquiring shops related to food, clothing, housing, and transport. But when it came to large-scale construction—coal mines, iron mines, farmland, breeding farms—he couldn't bypass the Prince of Qin's territory.

If Gao Family Village had already broken openly with the Ming court, they could have simply marched in, seized the land, and redistributed it. But at this stage, open conflict was clearly unwise—especially since Li Daoxuan's "field of view" still stopped nearly a hundred li short of Xi'an.

In other words—

Helping the Prince of Qin's estate make money was, in truth, helping the future Gao Family Village make money.

There was nothing to worry about.

Any wealth accumulated by the Prince of Qin's estate would merely sit inside the residence—perhaps buried in cellars, much like the hoarded silver of the Hedong Salt Administration Bureau.

When Gao Family Village eventually swept in, they could dig it all out and turn it into wealth for the people.

That could be done anytime. It depended only on will.

With that in mind, Li Daoxuan deliberately frowned, putting on a troubled, hesitant expression.

The silicone face stiffened unnaturally. That frown, frozen and eerie, made Zhu Cunji's scalp prickle.

Why is this man's expression always so strange? Zhu Cunji thought uneasily.

It doesn't feel... human.

After pretending to deliberate for a long while, Li Daoxuan finally spoke.

"Wu Shen and Shi Kefa have treated me generously. Both promised me half the profits if I help them solve the people's livelihood problems."

Zhu Cunji chuckled.

"If they can give you fifty percent, this heir can give you sixty."

Li Daoxuan widened his eyes.

"Oh?"

Zhu Cunji pressed on. "Build a fertilizer plant on my land. The profits will be split sixty–forty—sixty for you, forty for me. The only condition is that the fertilizer produced must be used on my farmlands."

"Oh, oh, oh, oh!" Li Daoxuan exclaimed dramatically.

"Chicken farms, pig farms, mines—everything can follow the same arrangement," Zhu Cunji said smoothly.

Li Daoxuan lowered his head, appearing deep in thought.

Zhu Cunji secretly sneered.

Merchants chase profit. As long as the numbers are right, how could he refuse? Heh. You won't escape my grasp.

But inside Li Daoxuan's mind, calculations were already racing.

There's a coal mine in Baqiao District of Xi'an, right on the Prince of Qin's land. Mining there would let me supply Xi'an directly—far more convenient than hauling coal from Heyang County.

Baqiao doesn't just have coal. It has iron as well. Coal mining, iron mining, and smelting can all be done on-site.

The vast fertile plains along the Wei River also belong to the Prince of Qin's fief. If I introduce scientific farming and raise yields, the estate won't be able to consume everything. They'll have no choice but to sell.

And they won't be able to jack up grain prices, either. Gao Family Village's grain stores can sell cheaply, forcing the market down. The Prince of Qin's estate will be compelled to follow suit—benefiting the common people.

Moreover...

The Prince of Qin's estate has zero experience running modern factories. They'll have to rely on Gao Family Village's managers. Over time, our people can gradually raise the wages of tenant farmers and long-term laborers, improving their livelihoods across the board.

In short—

As long as the rigid old system loosened even slightly, advanced productivity would seep in like water through cracks, dismantling the old power structure piece by piece.

History had proven this countless times.

After a long show of contemplation, Li Daoxuan raised his head. A terrifying silicone smile spread across his face, making Zhu Cunji instinctively shudder.

"Your Royal Highness," Li Daoxuan said pleasantly, "how about a seventy–thirty split?"

Zhu Cunji shook his head without hesitation.

"No. Sixty–forty. Not a fraction more."

"Fine!" Li Daoxuan laughed. "Sixty–forty it is. A pleasure doing business."

All the fury Zhu Cunji had bottled up for so long vanished instantly.

There was no ultimate move to unleash after all.

Meanwhile—

Daizhou, northern Shanxi.

Chuǎng Wang Gao Yingxiang and Chuǎng Jiang Li Zicheng, leading twenty thousand rebel troops, advanced toward Daizhou's city walls.

By this point, northern Shanxi had become a paradise for bandits. Aside from Taiyuan Prefecture—which remained unassailable—every other city, prefecture, and county had been ravaged. Local officials scrambled to organize militias for survival. Many imperial officers died alongside their cities, and countless captured towns had their walls torn down, left exposed like turtles stripped of their shells.

Chuǎng Wang glanced at Daizhou ahead.

To him, it looked no different from the small cities they usually crushed—fragile, unremarkable, nothing to worry about.

He waved his hand.

"Attack!"

Rebel soldiers surged forward in great waves.

Just then, movement appeared atop Daizhou's walls.

A tall, imposing gentry member stepped forward, flanked by his household retainers and the city militia.

This man was Sun Chuanting—eight feet tall, broad-shouldered, imposing. He had once served as a director in the Ministry of Personnel's Bureau of Merit Evaluation, but had resigned in disgust during Wei Zhongxian's tyranny and returned home, idle for years.

Facing the charging rebels, Sun Chuanting showed not the slightest fear.

He drew his bow, nocked an arrow, and let loose.

Arrows rained down on the attackers. The Sun family retainers moved with discipline, advancing and retreating in perfect order, fighting no worse than seasoned troops.

Chuǎng Wang and Chuǎng Jiang had truly run into bad luck.

They had never expected such a formidable figure to emerge from an obscure prefecture.

After a brutal assault, Daizhou still stood firm—unyielding like Mount Tai.

With no way through, the rebels were forced to withdraw.

Unable to break Daizhou, they could not advance further north.

After a period of hesitation and grim deliberation, the rebel army turned south once more, sweeping toward central and southern Shanxi.

Chapter 616 Yearning for Luoyang

After finishing his arrangements in Xi'an and handing the city's planning and development over to Gao Family Village's administrative department, Li Daoxuan shifted his attention back to the banks of the Yellow River.

The river was rising.

Dragon Gate Ferry, Qichuan Ferry, Gudu Ferry—every major crossing along the upper Yellow River had been affected. Merchant ships no longer dared to sail. Historically, navigating the upper reaches of the Yellow River had always been dangerous; now, with torrential rains, fierce winds, and swollen currents, only those with a death wish—or truly extraordinary skill—would risk it.

Li Daoxuan scanned the river channel within his field of view.

Not a single boat.

Even Gao Family Village's motorized vessels remained tied up at the docks, motionless. No one was willing to gamble against the river itself.

Fortunately, Li Daoxuan had already constructed two massive bridges across the Yellow River: the Longmen Yellow River Bridge and the Linyi Yellow River Bridge. Now, with river transport completely paralyzed, those two bridges revealed their true worth.

All supplies were being rerouted over land.

Gao Family Village's logistics teams moved day and night across the bridges, barely maintaining the flow of goods.

As May of Chongzhen Year Five arrived, the rain did not ease.

If anything, it fell harder.

At this moment, Li Daoxuan sat before the diorama box, calmly enjoying a bowl of sour fish soup.

The box's view was fixed on Gudu Ferry.

Inside the miniature world, rain poured down relentlessly. Most of the little figures stayed indoors, sheltering from the storm, leaving the streets nearly empty. There wasn't much to watch—until a group of figures suddenly emerged from the rain.

They were busy.

One sack after another—salt, tightly wrapped in oilcloth—was being loaded onto carts.

Li Daoxuan gave a soft "Oh?" and activated the focus function.

Upon zooming in, he recognized the man directing the work.

Jiang Cheng.

A salt merchant from Luoyang.

In late April, Jiang Cheng had departed Luoyang by boat, heading toward Gudu Ferry. A violent storm had nearly capsized his ship. Li Daoxuan had intervened, lifting both man and vessel out of the Yellow River and setting them down safely at the dock.

Li Daoxuan hadn't expected that more than ten days later, Jiang Cheng would still be here.

Wearing a straw rain cape, Jiang Cheng shouted hoarsely at his subordinates, "Careful! Don't let the oilcloth tear! If the salt gets wet, it's all ruined!"

The men answered loudly, working with great care. The salt sacks were stacked high on the carts, then covered again and again with oilcloth until not a single seam was exposed.

Only then did Jiang Cheng clap his hands.

"Alright! That's enough. We're leaving!"

He was about to urge the carts forward when—

The golden embroidery on his chest seemed to curl into a smile.

A low chuckle sounded.

"So much rain, and you're still in such a hurry to leave?"

Jiang Cheng froze.

Then he dropped to his knees.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

His subordinates followed instantly, kneeling as well.

The memory of being plucked from the raging Yellow River by a giant hand, lifted through the sky, and placed gently at the dock was still fresh in their minds. From that day on, every one of them had become a devout believer of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Jiang Cheng bowed deeply.

"Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun—this humble one came to Yongji to transport salt. The rain delayed us for many days. I worry for my wife, my children, and the elders at home. My men feel the same. Everyone is anxious."

Li Daoxuan understood.

Who could stay calm after being away from home for so long?

Even with thunder overhead and floodwaters rising, the longing to return home was only human.

"The river is dangerous," Li Daoxuan reminded him gently.

"We know," Jiang Cheng replied at once. "That's why we won't use boats. We plan to haul the salt by cart to Fengling Crossing. When the rain and wind ease, we'll ferry across to Tongguan Road, then travel overland to Luoyang."

"Overland transport," Li Daoxuan said. "That's not a bad plan."

He said nothing more.

After waiting a long time, Jiang Cheng finally dared to lift his head, certain Dao Xuan Tianzun had departed.

He let out a long breath—then broke into an ecstatic grin.

"Did you see that?! Dao Xuan Tianzun manifested on the embroidery on my chest! Hahaha! He's acknowledged me!"

His subordinates stared at him with unconcealed envy.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun would manifest on their chests just once, they'd be able to walk through Gudu Ferry with their heads held high, revered by all.

Morale surged.

With renewed energy, Jiang Cheng's group pushed their carts southward from Gudu Ferry, following the official road toward Fengling Crossing.

Puzhou was now entirely under Gao Family Village's control.

The newly appointed Deputy Commander, Lao Nanfeng, governed the region. Development here was thriving: cement roads crisscrossed the land, and satellite villages and factory towns dotted the countryside.

Along the way, Jiang Cheng and his men passed vast cotton fields, white bolls stretching endlessly into the distance.

Soon, a small town came into view.

Yongle Town.

The famous hometown of Yang Yuhuan—Yang Guifei herself.

They planned to rest briefly, entering the town to drink some hot tea at an inn.

But the moment they stepped inside, Jiang Cheng sucked in a sharp breath.

The inn was full.

Everywhere he looked were soldiers of the Gao Family Village militia—fully armed, alert, and disciplined.

They sat and stood throughout the inn, clearly guarding someone seated in the center.

It was a young woman in her early twenties.

Delicate, graceful, calm.

She sat at a table, quietly sipping tea, as if the storm outside did not exist.

Jiang Cheng's heart leapt.

A legendary figure flashed through his mind.

He hurried forward and bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Saintess!"

He was right.

This was Gao Yiye.

Recently, she had spent much of her time in Puzhou overseeing the cotton fields. Hearing that this was Yang Guifei's hometown, she had come to take a look—but the relentless rain had dampened the outing, leaving her to pass the time with tea and the sound of rainfall.

Seeing Jiang Cheng bow, Gao Yiye smiled softly.

"Master Jiang, I admire your resolve. Transporting salt to Luoyang by land is far harder than by river."

Jiang Cheng was stunned.

How does the Saintess know my name? And that I'm heading to Luoyang by land? I only told Dao Xuan Tianzun...

Then realization struck.

Of course. How could the Saintess not know what Dao Xuan Tianzun knows?

He straightened immediately, becoming even more respectful.

"Thanks to Dao Xuan Tianzun's blessing, and yours, Saintess, this journey will surely be safe."

Gao Yiye smiled.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun says he enjoys traveling far and wide. Seeing you has sparked his interest in visiting Luoyang."

Jiang Cheng bowed again.

"This humble one is honored beyond words."

"You must reach Luoyang safely," Gao Yiye added gently.

"Thank you for your blessing, Saintess."

Jiang Cheng and his men retreated to a corner of the inn, not daring to disturb her further. They ate quickly, drank their tea, rested briefly, and then set off once more toward Luoyang.

Gao Yiye watched their figures disappear into the rain and sighed softly.

"Oh... I wish I could visit Luoyang too. They say it's one of the ancient capitals. It must be magnificent."

The golden embroidery on her chest gave a quiet chuckle.

"No hurry. Let's wait a little longer. Once we confirm Luoyang is safe, you can go and enjoy yourself properly."

Chapter 617 Yellow River Breach

Li Daoxuan truly wanted to see Luoyang.

But he wasn't in a hurry.

Jiang Cheng would need time to get there anyway. Each day, Li Daoxuan only needed to briefly switch his co-sensing to the cotton-threaded image of Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidered on Jiang Cheng's chest for a quick look. Once Jiang Cheng actually reached Luoyang, then Li Daoxuan could settle in for a proper, unhurried "tour."

A day later, Jiang Cheng finally caught a brief lull.

The wind weakened. The rain lightened. The Yellow River's surface calmed—just enough.

Seizing the opportunity, Jiang Cheng boarded a ferry at Fengling Crossing. He and his men hauled on the iron chains, inch by inch, pulling themselves across the river. After great effort, they finally reached the Tongguan Path on the south bank.

From there, they turned east and set out along the official road.

From Tongguan to Luoyang was more than four hundred li.

The journey was brutal.

Gales and torrential rain came and went without warning. Mud sucked at their feet. Carts bogged down. Men slipped, fell, and dragged themselves back up again.

Several times, Li Daoxuan checked in through co-sensing, only to see Jiang Cheng struggling forward through sheets of rain, soaked to the bone.

Li Daoxuan couldn't help sighing.

So this was how ancient merchants lived—risking life and fortune alike, every time they set out to earn a living.

After several days of hardship, the four-hundred-li journey finally neared its end.

Jiang Cheng wiped rain from his face and smiled weakly at his exhausted subordinates.

"We're almost there," he said hoarsely. "Just ahead is Mengjin Crossing. Luoyang is close now... Whew. I'm done in."

At that exact moment, Li Daoxuan co-sensed into the scene.

Hearing Jiang Cheng's words, a quiet excitement stirred in his heart.

Excellent. Finally, Luoyang.

When he used to play Romance of the Three Kingdoms, he loved nothing more than seizing Luoyang and "holding the emperor to command the lords." Now, seeing the real ancient capital with his own eyes—how could that not be satisfying?

His anticipation lasted less than five seconds.

A terrified shout rang out.

"Master! Look—look over there!"

Jiang Cheng snapped his head around.

So did Li Daoxuan.

The pointing finger aimed northward—toward the Yellow River dike at Mengjin Crossing.

In the very instant their eyes landed on it—

The dike broke.

With a deafening roar, the embankment split open. Yellow river water burst through the crack. At first, it seeped and sprayed, but in the blink of an eye, the breach widened.

Then the embankment collapsed entirely.

A vast section gave way, and the Yellow River surged out like a furious beast finally unleashed.

Jiang Cheng shouted, "Damn it!"

Li Daoxuan's pupils shrank.

!!!

Jiang Cheng's subordinates cried out in panic.

"This is bad!"

"We're finished!"

"Run!" Jiang Cheng reacted instantly. "Run to high ground! Now! Run!"

"What about the salt carts?!" someone shouted.

"Forget them!" Jiang Cheng roared. "Leave them! Run!"

They abandoned the carts without hesitation and sprinted for their lives toward the nearest rise.

Behind them, the Yellow River spilled across the plains outside Luoyang.

Screams erupted everywhere.

Common folk fled in blind terror, scattering like ants. The yellow waters chased them relentlessly—but how could human legs outrun a flood?

People slipped.

People fell.

People were swallowed whole.

Jiang Cheng and his group had been farther from the dike, buying them a sliver of time. Ahead stood a small hill—not very tall, but high enough.

Its name was High Slope.

Hundreds of people had already scrambled onto it.

Jiang Cheng and his men clawed their way upward, lungs burning, legs trembling.

From the summit, they turned back.

The floodwaters had already reached the place where the salt carts had been abandoned. In an instant, carts, sacks, and ropes vanished beneath the yellow torrent, erased as if they had never existed.

All the suffering of the journey from Gudu Ferry—gone in a heartbeat.

Yet the loss of salt was nothing compared to the sight below.

People—living people—were being overtaken, dragged under, one after another.

Some lucky ones reached the base of High Slope and struggled upward desperately. But those already on top dared not descend. They could only shout themselves hoarse:

"Faster!"

"Hurry up!"

"Climb! Climb!"

CRASH!

The flood surged halfway up the slope.

Those who had already reached the middle barely survived. Those who hadn't... were swept away.

Li Daoxuan watched through co-sensing, his chest tightening painfully.

But this place lay beyond his field of view.

He couldn't reach in.

He couldn't help.

He could only watch—and sigh.

Eventually, the chaos slowed.

The river no longer rushed forward in fury. Instead, it spread out, pooling across the plains, flowing sluggishly like a vast yellow sea.

Several hundred survivors stood crowded atop High Slope, surrounded on all sides by floodwater.

Straining their eyes, they saw other hills in the distance—east and west—each crowded with hundreds more people.

Small islands.

Islands in a sea of yellow mud.

They had escaped death—for now.

But new terror followed immediately.

No food.

No clean water.

No shelter.

Many had fled empty-handed. Cold rain continued to soak them. River winds cut through their clothes.

How long could anyone survive like this?

Jiang Cheng surveyed the surroundings and spoke quietly to his men.

"I'm afraid... we won't make it home this time. Even if we didn't drown, trapped here like this... we won't last more than a few days."

One subordinate murmured, "We still have some dried rations. Maybe we can hold on? The water should recede in a few days, right?"

Jiang Cheng shook his head.

"Hard to say. The Yellow River changes course often. This place could become a permanent riverbed. If that happens... we'll die here."

Silence fell.

"And even if the water does recede," Jiang Cheng continued, "the silt will be deadly."

Everyone knew it was true.

Thick Yellow River silt could trap a person's legs like a vise. Once stuck, escape was nearly impossible.

Despair spread.

Then—

The cotton-thread image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Jiang Cheng's chest spoke:

"Hold on. Gao Family Village's rescue teams have already set out."

Jiang Cheng's heart exploded with joy.

He bowed instinctively—but Dao Xuan Tianzun said no more, falling silent once again.

It was enough.

Hope ignited like a firebrand.

Jiang Cheng leapt to his feet and shouted to the stranded crowd:

"Everyone, gather together! Huddle close! Share warmth! If you have anything that can block the rain, hold it up and share it! Save your strength!"

The crowd stared back with hollow eyes.

"Sir," someone said weakly, "who would come to save people like us? The government wouldn't care if we live or die."

"Exactly," another muttered. "We're just common folk."

Jiang Cheng raised his voice, fierce and unwavering.

"Don't be afraid! Rescue will come! There is an Immortal called Dao Xuan Tianzun—he watches over the common people! He will come to save everyone!"

He spread his arms wide.

"Come! Gather together! Hold on! I'll tell you stories—stories of Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Chapter 618 The Rescue Team Departs

The Gao Family Village Emergency Rescue Team assembled at Qichuan Ferry, ready to set out at a moment's notice.

At the core of the team was the militia—naturally led by Bai Yuan.

The rain was still pouring down relentlessly. Bai Yuan held an oil-paper umbrella, but it was little more than a formality. Half of his white robe was already soaked through. The umbrella was practically useless, yet he stubbornly refused to don a straw rain cape, insisting on wearing his pristine white robes as usual.

It was... very Bai Yuan of him.

Strangely enough, no one laughed.

Standing atop the fortress wall at Qichuan Ferry, Bai Yuan raised his voice and declared:

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has spoken. The Yellow River has burst its banks at Mengjin. Countless commoners have suffered calamity—many are trapped on hills by the floodwaters. They have no food, no shelter. They are starving, soaked by rain, and surrounded by death."

"We must go and rescue them!"

The militia roared in unison, their voices shaking the rain-soaked air.

"We must save them!"

Bai Yuan's gaze swept across them.

"A true gentleman places righteousness above all else! If I, Bai Yuan, die in the Yellow River on this mission, I will have no regrets whatsoever. Do you share this resolve?"

The reply came as one thunderous shout:

"We are soldiers of the common people! When the people suffer, we must be the first to step forward!"

Bai Yuan laughed loudly.

"Excellent! That's the spirit!"

"Depart!"

With solemn expressions, everyone began boarding the boats.

The rain showed no sign of stopping. Fierce river winds lashed across the ferry, and the Yellow River surged violently, its currents swift and treacherous.

Ordinary ancient ships—whether sailboats or oar-powered vessels—would never dare venture onto the Yellow River under such conditions. Doing so would be courting death. One misstep, and they would become fish feed within moments.

But Gao Family Village's electric boats were different.

These electric cargo boats had no sails. Their hulls were low and flat, lacking any tall superstructures, minimizing wind resistance. Their decks were simple and practical—built for stability rather than show.

More importantly, they were driven by motors.

The power produced by these motors far surpassed what human oars could achieve. Even against the Yellow River's fierce current, they could barely—but reliably—hold their course.

It was dangerous.

But not impossible.

They had a chance.

Bai Yuan stood at the bow of the lead rescue boat, his posture straight and dignified. Wind howled. Rain lashed against him. Yet he remained unmoved, pointing downstream as he shouted:

"Depart!"

His family retainer leaned in close and whispered urgently, "Master, please don't stand at the bow striking poses in this weather. Go inside the cabin. If you shout from here, the helmsman won't even hear you."

Bai Yuan frowned. "If I go inside, I won't look nearly as dashing. What kind of gentleman fears mere wind and rain?"

The retainer whispered back desperately, "A gentleman does not stand beneath a collapsing wall, Master. Entering the cabin won't tarnish your dignity."

Bai Yuan paused.

"Oh?"

"...You have a point."

"Very well. I'll go in."

The retainer finally let out a long breath of relief. He had truly feared his master might be swept into the river.

This generation's masters were... exhausting.

Several boats soon departed downstream.

Mengjin.

The rain had finally stopped. The wind softened.

The Yellow River gradually calmed—but the damage had already been done.

More than half of Mengjin had transformed into a vast yellow sea.

The floodwaters showed no sign of receding anytime soon.

On a nearby high slope, Jiang Cheng led his subordinates down toward the water's edge. He pulled out a long pole and carefully probed beneath the surface.

A moment later, he withdrew it.

His face darkened.

It hadn't touched bottom.

"The water is still extremely deep," he said gravely.

The common folk gathered atop the slope turned pale.

Just then, someone shouted, "Boats! Boats are coming!"

A ripple of excitement spread instantly.

In the distance, a small fleet appeared—more than a dozen wooden boats, each carrying five or six people.

The crowd rejoiced.

"There are boats!"

"We still have valuables—if we pay them, they'll take us to safety!"

Even Jiang Cheng felt a momentary sense of relief.

But as he studied the boats more closely, his expression changed sharply.

"...No."

His voice dropped.

"Those are river bandits."

The words sent a chill through the crowd.

They watched as the boats reached a distant isolated hill, surrounded by floodwaters, and stopped. The people aboard drew knives—not to rescue, but to threaten.

They shouted and forced the stranded villagers to hand over everything they had.

Anyone who resisted even slightly was stabbed and thrown straight into the water.

Natural disaster had already struck them.

Now came human disaster.

The villagers on that island could only surrender their belongings, crying silently as the bandits laughed uproariously.

Then the boats turned—and headed toward the next island.

Jiang Cheng roared, "Everyone! Find weapons!"

This high slope was the largest nearby, its summit dotted with trees. The common folk rushed to break off branches. Some were too thick to snap alone, so several men jumped up together, hanging from the limbs until they cracked free.

Before long, every able-bodied man held a sturdy wooden stick.

Jiang Cheng's ten subordinates—all merchants—drew the sabers they carried at their waists. Once unsheathed, they looked far more reliable than moments before.

Instinctively, the villagers gathered behind Jiang Cheng and his men.

Soon, the bandit boats reached the base of the high slope.

The bandit leader stood at the bow, pointing his saber upward and laughing loudly.

"Well, well! Quite a crowd up there—several hundred of you, eh? Hand over your valuables, and your grandpa here might spare your lives!"

Jiang Cheng spat. "Robbing innocent people in the midst of a disaster—are you even human?"

The bandit leader glanced sideways at him. "Oh? So you're the leader?"

"What if I am?" Jiang Cheng shot back.

The bandit leader scanned the sabers, then the hundreds of villagers gripping sticks. A sneer tugged at his lips.

"Putting on a brave show? You're courting death."

Jiang Cheng snorted. "You've got a dozen boats and maybe fifty or sixty men. If you've got the guts, come up and try."

The bandit leader burst into laughter, pretending indifference—but his eyes flickered with calculation.

Fewer than sixty men... several hundred on that slope... ten with sabers, the rest with sticks.

Even if we win, the losses would be ugly.

He made his decision.

Pointing at Jiang Cheng, he sneered. "Listen carefully, brat. I won't attack you today."

"I'll let you starve for three or five days first."

"Then I'll come back."

"Let's see if you can still lift a saber by then."

Jiang Cheng said nothing.

"Go!"

The bandit boats turned and left.

Not long after, distant screams echoed across the floodwaters. On another island, an entire family was slaughtered. Only a young girl was spared—dragged onto a bandit boat.

In broad daylight, she was violated openly.

Those watching clenched their fists, nails digging into their palms, helpless with rage.

Jiang Cheng's teeth ground together.

But the bandit's words echoed in his mind.

They were trapped.

There was no food here. In a few days, their meager rations would be gone. Starvation would sap their strength until even holding a saber became impossible.

What then?

Lowering his head, Jiang Cheng clutched the cotton-thread amulet at his chest.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun... protect us."

He could only pray silently.

Chapter 619 Hold On a Little Longer

Northern Shanxi.

Li Zicheng—still nursing the humiliation of being beaten by Sun Chuanting's personal guards in Daizhou—was now leading his men south, intent on returning to the Jinzhong region.

"Report!"

A scout galloped up at full speed, barely stopping before shouting:

"Government forces are converging on us in large numbers! Zhang Zongheng, Supreme Commander of Xuanfu and Datong, is personally leading eight thousand troops, accompanied by generals Bai An, Hu Dawei, Li Bei, He Renlong, and Zuo Liangyu!"

"The newly appointed Governor of Shanxi, Xu Dingchen, has also mobilized seven thousand soldiers, led by Zhang Yingchang, Gou Fuwei, Shi Ji, Po Ximu, and Ai Wannian!"

"The government army has formed a massive encirclement and is closing in fast!"

Li Zicheng frowned but did not speak immediately.

Li Guo leaned closer and whispered, "Uncle... what should we do?"

Li Zicheng lowered his head slightly, brows knit. Ten seconds passed—just enough for a plan to crystallize.

"Send word to Zijing Liang and Gao Yingxiang," he said calmly. "Tell them to move east and converge with us."

"We'll act as the vanguard and push straight into the Taihang Mountains."

"Once we enter the mountains, the government troops won't be able to find us."

Li Guo hesitated. "Uncle... the Taihang Mountains are mostly uninhabited. What will we eat once we're in there?"

Li Zicheng replied evenly, "We won't stay long."

"Once inside, we head south along the mountain range, fighting our way through step by step."

"Our real target is Henan."

"We aim to reach it by the end of this year—or early next year at the latest."

"Henan?" Li Guo blinked. "Why Henan?"

Li Zicheng let out a dry laugh and pulled an intercepted imperial gazette from his robes.

"Look."

"The Yellow River has burst its banks at Mengjin. Floods for thousands of li. The people are ruined—homeless, starving, turning to banditry just to survive."

"Heh."

"This chaos... is perfect for us."

"When we reach Henan, recruits will come flooding in."

Li Guo's eyes lit up.

He understood.

"Up ahead is the Yellow River Three Gorges!"

On the river, Bai Yuan stood tall at the bow of the lead vessel, shouting above the rush of water.

"Not far from Mengjin! Everyone stay alert—we're almost there!"

"Boatmen familiar with the currents, take the lead!"

"Hold the helm steady!"

The Gao Family Village rescue fleet was threading its way through the Yellow River Three Gorges.

The scenery here was majestic—sheer cliffs, roaring currents, towering stone walls—no less magnificent than the Yangtze's famed gorges.

But no one had the leisure to admire it.

Every man strained to his limits.

Heaven, at last, showed mercy.

The rain had stopped.

The wind had calmed.

The summer sun climbed high into the sky.

A rare window of opportunity.

Bai Yuan raised his arm. "Unfold the solar panels! Maintain full speed while charging!"

The awnings atop the boats were pulled back, revealing dark solar panels beneath.

As the fleet surged forward, electricity flowed back into the batteries.

The rescue team cut through the gorges like an arrow loosed from the bow.

On the high slope.

The floodwaters had not receded.

The villagers trapped atop the slope were at the edge of collapse.

Days of unending rain.

No food.

No large pot to boil water.

They drank rainwater when they could—muddy river water when they had no choice.

Hunger hollowed their faces. Dizziness clouded their thoughts.

Jiang Cheng and his ten subordinates fared slightly better. As merchants, they had brought dried rations with them—but even that was pitifully insufficient.

Hundreds of mouths. Almost nothing to eat.

After several days, most of the people lay sprawled on the ground, barely conscious.

Only Jiang Cheng and his ten men could still stand.

And Jiang Cheng feared one thing above all else—

The water bandits.

As if summoned by fear itself, they returned.

The same dozen boats.

The same fifty or sixty bandits.

They rowed brazenly to the foot of the slope and stopped.

They didn't shout.

They didn't threaten.

They simply stared upward.

Jiang Cheng's heart sank.

Just as despair closed its grip around him, the cotton-thread amulet at his chest suddenly spoke:

"Do not be afraid."

"Hold on a little longer."

"Just a little longer."

Jiang Cheng's eyes widened. "Dao Xuan Tianzun?! You've returned!"

A calm chuckle sounded in his ears. "I have."

"And rescue is already here."

"Unleash everything you have left."

"Just hold them off for one wave."

Hope exploded in Jiang Cheng's chest.

He reached into his robes, pulled out his last mouthful of dried rations, and stuffed it into his mouth.

Chewing hard, he roared down the slope:

"Come on! Attack if you dare!"

"Anyone who still has strength—pick up a stick!"

"Just hold on a little longer!"

His voice cracked with desperation and fire.

"Just a little longer! We can crawl back from the eighteen layers of hell into the human world!"

"Get up! All of you—get up!"

The starving villagers swayed, staggered... then slowly rose.

Hands trembling, they gripped their wooden sticks.

Cruel smiles spread across the bandits' faces.

"Brothers!" the bandit leader howled. "Prepare to charge!"

"Once we're up there, kill all the men—feed them to the fish!"

"We'll take our time with the women!"

"Hahahahaha!"

The boats slammed against the slope.

The bandits scrambled upward.

The incline wasn't steep—not even forty-five degrees.

The villagers hurled stones weakly. They bounced uselessly.

A wave of howling bandits surged up the slope.

The villagers' sticks shook, bent, and wavered.

Useless.

Jiang Cheng had no choice.

He relied on his ten subordinates.

Steel flashed.

His saber clashed twice with the leading bandit's blade—clang, clang!—but his arms were weak from hunger. The weapon nearly flew from his grasp.

He held on by sheer will.

Then—

A sharp, alien sound ripped through the air.

"Bang!"

Deafening.

A bandit collapsed face-first into the slope.

The villagers froze.

Another sound followed.

The unmistakable report of a firearm.

They turned.

Out on the water, a medium-sized flatboat sped toward them.

No sails.

No oars.

Yet it moved with terrifying speed.

At the bow stood a middle-aged man in flowing white robes.

In his hands—a firearm, smoke still curling from the muzzle.

With practiced ease, he flicked out the wadding, reloaded, raised the barrel—

"Bang!"

Another bandit fell.

Jiang Cheng threw back his head and laughed wildly.

"Hahahaha!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun's rescue has arrived!"

"Rescue is here! Rescue is here!"

For days, the villagers had listened to Jiang Cheng's stories of Dao Xuan Tianzun, half-believing, half-doubting.

Now—

Seeing this divine, impossible arrival—

Even the doubters believed.

From the depths of starvation and despair, the villagers drew out the last remnants of human potential.

They surged forward.

Wooden sticks swung wildly.

The bandits, stunned and panicked, were driven back step by step.

They had come to harvest despair—

And instead met salvation.

Chapter 620 Rescue Arrives

"Bang!"

"Bang!"

Gunshots cracked through the damp air, sharp and decisive.

From the distance, Bai Yuan's musket fire rang out in steady rhythm. His marksmanship was terrifyingly precise—each shot claimed a life. Even at long range, he dared to fire, forcing the water bandits to lift their heads no higher than their knees.

Behind him, Bai Yuan's subordinates were far less confident.

Their aim wasn't nearly as refined, and with civilians mixed into the battlefield, they feared accidental injury. They held their fire, choosing instead to close the distance.

Fortunately—

The electric boat was frighteningly fast.

One hundred meters vanished in the blink of an eye.

As soon as the boats entered effective range, the subordinates raised their weapons.

"Bang! Bang!"

The sound of gunfire overlapped, echoing across the floodwaters. One water bandit after another fell, tumbling down the slope or collapsing into the mud.

The bandit leader's scalp went numb.

He glanced back at the approaching vessels, his first instinct screaming:

Imperial troops!

But the man standing at the bow—

White robes. Calm posture. No banners. No armor.

This doesn't look like government soldiers...

Forget it.

Escape first!

"Clear out!" the bandit chief roared. "Retreat—now!"

The remaining forty-odd water bandits turned and fled without hesitation.

The high slope was hard to attack—but retreating was easy.

They slid straight down, splashing into the water, leaping onto their boats, flipping their oars, and rowing for their lives.

"Bang!"

Bai Yuan fired one last shot, dropping another bandit mid-run.

He raised his arm. "Pursue—"

Before the order could be completed, a voice spoke through the golden thread bound to his chest:

"Rescue the people first."

It was Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Bai Yuan froze—then immediately came back to his senses.

Of course.

The common people on the high slope had been starving and freezing for days. Many were already half-dead. Chasing a handful of water bandits could wait.

He lowered his arm sharply. "Stop pursuit! Dock at the slope!"

The large cargo ship eased forward and stopped at the base of the high slope.

Hundreds of disaster victims looked down at the vessel as if gazing upon salvation itself.

Tears streamed freely.

Bai Yuan waved his hand. "Form an orderly line! Board one by one—no pushing, no panic."

"We have multiple ships. More are arriving shortly."

"As long as everyone cooperates, every single person will be rescued."

That was the final straw.

The people on the slope broke down completely.

Loud sobbing erupted, echoing across the water.

More Gao Family Village flat-bottomed boats arrived, one after another, spreading out across the flooded Mengjin region.

The waters had not receded.

Isolated patches of land dotted the yellow expanse like islands in a filthy sea.

On each island—

Starving people.

Hollow-eyed survivors.

Many had already been robbed clean by water bandits.

Their homes were submerged.

Their farmland destroyed.

Their valuables stolen.

Lifetimes of effort—gone overnight.

Some stared blankly at the sky, silently asking themselves:

What's the point of living anymore?

Seeing this, even the hardened militia felt a stabbing pain in their chests.

"If we hadn't come..." Bai Yuan sighed deeply, "none of these people would survive."

"Droughts, then floods. Disaster after disaster." He clenched his fists. "Is life really meant to be lived like this?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice answered softly through the golden thread:

"Natural disasters reveal not heaven's cruelty—but the failure of those who rule."

Bai Yuan's expression hardened. "Exactly!"

"This place lies on the outskirts of Luoyang. Logically, government rescue ships should've arrived days ago."

"But not one boat came."

"These people were abandoned."

His voice dropped, heavy with suppressed fury. "Such a government... deserves to fall. It's time for someone else to sit on the throne."

Li Daoxuan heard this and chuckled inwardly.

Bai Yuan still thinks in dynasties.

If it were Young Master Bai... he'd already be thinking about something else entirely.

Self-governance.

Local autonomy.

People ruling themselves.

Too early.

Much too early.

The rescue operation continued without pause.

Gao Family Village's cargo ships patrolled the floodwaters day and night, ferrying people from island to island, delivering them upstream to dry ground outside Hengshui Town.

The refugees arrived numb, confused, convinced survival was meaningless.

Then they saw it.

Rows upon rows of rain shelters.

Huge cauldrons, steaming.

Hot food.

As soon as someone disembarked, they were handed a bowl.

Not thin grass porridge—but thick, nourishing gruel.

One sip—

Warmth spread through the belly.

Life flowed back into the limbs.

Steamed buns followed.

Bite after bite, fear melted away.

People began to cry again—but this time, it was from relief.

"Old Master Bai—you're our second parents!"

"You saved our lives!"

People knelt, kowtowed, pressed their foreheads into the mud.

Bai Yuan hurriedly waved his hands. "No, no! Don't thank me."

"The one who saved you is Dao Xuan Tianzun."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

The militia sighed.

And began explaining... again.

The rescue never stopped.

Day into night.

Night into day.

Supplies ran low—but Gao Family Village's second supply fleet arrived just in time, exploiting a brief lull in the wind and rain.

The refugee camp outside Hengshui Town soon swelled to over ten thousand people.

As evening fell, another cargo ship returned, carrying thirty-odd victims so weak they collapsed the moment they disembarked.

They were saved only because Jiang Cheng, now organizing volunteer refugees, rushed over.

He helped them under shelter, scooped up gruel, fed them spoon by spoon.

Only then did their breathing steady.

Bai Yuan entered the shelter, rain dripping from his sleeves, and patted Jiang Cheng's shoulder.

"Brother Jiang—how are they?"

Jiang Cheng looked up, exhaustion clear on his face—but relief too.

"They'll live."

Bai Yuan nodded.

At that moment, a Bai Family guard ran over.

"Master! Imperial officials have arrived."

Bai Yuan frowned. "So... they finally noticed?"

Jiang Cheng spat coldly. "They didn't come to help."

"They saw ten thousand refugees gathered here and decided it looked 'unsafe.'"

"Now they want answers."

Bai Yuan snorted.

He didn't want to deal with them.

But he had to.

He motioned to Jiang Cheng. "Come."

Together, they walked toward the camp's edge.

There, a small contingent of Ming soldiers approached, armor polished, posture arrogant.

They stopped at the entrance.

One officer barked loudly, chin raised:

"What's going on here?!"

"Why are so many people gathered in one place?!"