

Great Ming 651

Chapter 651 The Clothes Are Ready

For Gao Family Village, defending a city was no longer a problem.

With riflemen armed with Chassepot rifles stationed atop solid walls, even the fiercest army would smash itself to pieces before breaching a city guarded by Gao Family Village.

But—

Gao Family Village was not the imperial court.

The court could shut its gates, cling to its walls, and watch the countryside burn without batting an eye.

Gao Family Village could not.

The moment the messenger finished his report, Xing Honglang never once thought about "defending the city." Her mind leapt straight to the real issue:

the Salt Villages.

Encircling Xie Lake, over a forty-li perimeter, lay Salt Villages belonging to Gao Family Village. Salt artisans lived there year-round, tending vast salt flats. Blue Hat technicians were stationed among them, operating steam pumps that drew brine day and night.

Around the salt region stood factories.

One was a salt refinery, using a so-called divine method to purify coarse salt into clean, snow-white table salt—no bitterness, no grit.

Nearby stood a chemical plant, turning salt into substances like soda and alkali. Xing Honglang didn't understand the formulas, but she knew one thing very clearly: without those chemicals, dyes couldn't be made, and without dyes, the Puzhou Textile Factory would grind to a halt.

By now, the lands around Hedong had been completely reshaped by Gao Family Village.

Everywhere mattered.

Everywhere had to be protected.

The weight settled heavily on Xing Honglang's shoulders.

Orders were issued immediately.

Scouts from Gao Family Village scattered toward Jincheng, eyes peeled, ears open. The bandits' every movement had to be tracked. They could not be allowed anywhere near Hedong's defenses unnoticed.

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Meanwhile...

At Puzhou First Textile Factory, steam looms thundered without pause. Female workers moved deftly among the machines, practiced and confident.

Puzhou had enjoyed a bumper harvest this year. Cotton farmers went home smiling, money heavy in their sleeves. Their cotton flowed into the factory, where steam-powered looms spun it into yarn and wove it into cloth.

In a small office behind the factory—

Gao Yiye sat threading a needle.

After a long while, she straightened, lifted a cotton outfit with both hands, and snapped it smartly through the air, smoothing its folds.

A striking set of martial attire.

"Ta-da!" She tilted her head, smiling brightly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, Dao Xuan Tianzun—look! The clothes I made for you are finally finished!"

Naturally, the design had come from Li Daoxuan himself. Post-modern wuxia style, sleek lines, gold and silver thread worked into the seams—elegant, bold, undeniably flashy.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun puppet, which had been half-asleep across the table, stirred. He rose, smiling faintly.

"Very well," he said. "I'll try them on."

He was about to change—

But Gao Yiye didn't move away. Instead, she stepped closer, hands already lifting the edge of his robe, clearly intending to help.

Li Daoxuan laughed.

"Isn't this... a little improper?"

Gao Yiye bit her lower lip.

"It's nothing! I saw this statue when it was being made—you know it wasn't wearing anything back then."

Li Daoxuan fell silent.

That logic was... disturbingly sound.

When he wasn't co-sensing, the statue was just an object—no different from a mannequin in a shop. Dressing it was perfectly normal.

But once co-sensing began...

The statue felt like him.

And having a young woman undress him suddenly felt far less philosophical.

Still—

To fuss over appearances was attachment to form.

One must not cling to form.

He couldn't let anyone discover he was just an innocent young man with a very ordinary heart.

He raised his arms.

"Go on, then."

Gao Yiye's cheeks flushed. Her heart fluttered strangely.

Truthfully, she felt the same. When the Dao Xuan Tianzun wasn't present, touching the statue meant nothing. But now—now it felt entirely different.

Oh no.

Oh no oh no.

She's bad.

With a blush, she removed the Daoist robe. The smooth silicone body beneath was revealed, uncannily lifelike. As she worked, her hand accidentally slipped, brushing lightly against him.

The sensation was shockingly real.

Too real.

It felt as though she had touched the Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

Something unfamiliar stirred deep inside her—an emotion she couldn't name, one that refused to quiet down.

She bit her lip harder and hurried, quickly dressing him in the new outfit.

Only after stepping back did her heartbeat slow.

She brought over a mirror.

"Please look."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun didn't really need it. Li Daoxuan could simply end co-sensing, float back to his real body, and examine the avatar from every angle.

Still, he humored her.

The outfit looked—

Excellent.

If Gao Yiye had to compare, it was somewhere between Guo Jing and Yang Kang—but far closer to Yang Kang. Stylish. Sharp. Heroic in a dangerous sort of way.

Guo Jing's clothes were too plain.

Li Daoxuan's priority was simple: handsome first, everything else second.

He laughed.

"These clothes are extremely well made. I like them very much."

Gao Yiye beamed.

"As long as the Dao Xuan Tianzun likes them."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"My clothes are ready. What about yours?"

"Mine too!" she said eagerly. "I'll put them on for you to see!"

She pulled another outfit from the wardrobe—a female version—and began changing without hesitation, right in front of him.

Li Daoxuan shook his head slightly.

This girl really doesn't avoid me at all, does she?

Then again...

Since Observation Mode allowed him to see through walls, whether she avoided him or not was irrelevant. At this point, his restraint relied entirely on personal virtue.

Being a gentleman wasn't optional.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, Gao Yiye was already dressed.

The outfit was excellent—lively, agile, reminiscent of Huang Rong, except with the image of the Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidered in gold on the chest.

As for the fact that Yang Kang's outfit and Huang Rong's outfit happened to form a matching pair—

That was purely coincidental. Absolutely not worth discussing.

Gao Yiye spun around happily.

"How is it? Pretty?"

"Beautiful," Li Daoxuan replied honestly.

She clasped her hands.

"We agreed, didn't we? Once the clothes were ready, you'd take me out."

"To Luoyang."

"All right," Li Daoxuan said. "Luoyang it is."

Then he added gently,

"But prepare yourself. Luoyang suffered a great flood in June. Nearly half of the Henan plains were swallowed by yellow waters. The scenery... may not be what you imagine."

Gao Yiye nodded slowly.

"I'm ready," she said softly.

"To witness the suffering of the world with the Dao Xuan Tianzun—

and to save the common people."

Chapter 652 The Saintess Is Also Aboard

The Dao Xuan Tianzun, together with Gao Yiye, boarded the transport ships at Gudu Ferry.

Accompanying them were Gao Yiye's hundred personal guards, two grain transport vessels, and two cargo ships loaded with construction tools and raw materials.

By September, the Yellow River had calmed considerably.

The raging torrents of June and July were gone. The water level had dropped, and the downstream floodwaters were finally receding.

With the river now tame, travel by boat was far easier than before.

The four cargo ships slipped past Fenglingdu, then continued downstream along the Yellow River.

This was Li Daoxuan's first time maintaining long-term co-sensing inside the box—seeing the world continuously from its miniature perspective rather than in brief glimpses.

To the naked eye, both banks of the Yellow River looked bleak and empty. No fishing boats drifted on the water. No government patrol ships passed by.

Gao Yiye frowned slightly.

"I was reading a book a few days ago. It said that grain transport ships were once everywhere around Sanmenxia. How come we haven't seen even one?"

Li Daoxuan genuinely didn't know.

So he quietly switched perspectives, checked the internet, then returned to co-sensing mode. Only then did he speak, wearing the serene confidence of someone who obviously knew everything already.

"That's because Jiangnan rose in importance," he said calmly.

"The empire's grain centers shifted from Guanzhong to Jiangnan. Since the Northern Song, grain transport along the Yellow River declined year by year. Add to that the severe droughts in Shaanxi and Shanxi these past two years, and river transport naturally all but vanished."

Gao Yiye sucked in a breath.

"Oh! I see. So traveling really does teach you things."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"Yiye, knowledge can actually be divided into two kinds: effective knowledge and ineffective knowledge."

Her curiosity was instantly piqued.

"What do you mean?"

"For example," Li Daoxuan said, "what I just told you—that's ineffective knowledge. Knowing it has no immediate use. A person who fills their head with such facts might seem learned, quoting classics, speaking of ancient and modern affairs, appearing omniscient... but in truth, they can't do anything."

Gao Yiye was momentarily stunned.

"Effective knowledge," Li Daoxuan continued, "is different. Take Gao Sanniang. She understands tailoring. She can take plain cloth and turn it into beautiful clothing. That knowledge creates value. She might know only this one thing and seem unsophisticated—but she contributes something real to the world."

Gao Yiye slowly nodded, clearly grasping something deeper.

Li Daoxuan concluded,

"We should cherish people with effective knowledge—and look down on those whose heads are stuffed only with useless learning. That's the only way the world can truly prosper."

As they spoke, mountains drifted past on both sides of the river.

The ships passed Sanmenxia, then entered the Lesser Three Gorges of the Yellow River.

When they finally emerged, the view opened wide.

The river broadened, currents weaving and splitting. Mountains and inlets dotted the landscape, water stretching endlessly to the horizon.

Xiaolangdi.

They had arrived.

The four cargo ships hadn't gone far when suddenly—

A swarm of small boats burst forth from ahead, racing across the water. In the blink of an eye, they surrounded the larger ships.

Gao Yiye gasped.

"Oh no—pirates?"

The guards stiffened slightly. Crews on the other ships tightened their grips.

Then—

A burly man leapt onto the bow of a small boat. On his chest was embroidered the likeness of the Dao Xuan Tianzun. He threw his head back and laughed.

"All heroes of Gao Family Village!" he roared.

"You four little cargo ships—hand over everything at once, or else! Hahahaha!"

A moment of silence.

Then someone on the cargo ship jumped to the bow, laughing angrily.

"Damn you! That joke nearly scared us to death. We really thought pirates had come."

The man on the small boat laughed even harder.

"Just fooling around! Sometimes we like pretending to be wild pirates."

The man on the cargo ship snorted.

"You've gone too far. The Saintess is aboard—and so is the Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The words hit like thunder.

The man's face turned a sickly, liver-like green.

"What?! You're not lying to me, are you?"

Before anyone could answer, the Dao Xuan Tianzun and Gao Yiye appeared side by side at the bow.

Gao Yiye's face was icy.

"How dare you act so recklessly! My guards were moments away from drawing their flintlock rifles and blasting you into the river."

The man shrieked and collapsed flat onto the deck.

"Forgive me, Saintess! I didn't know you were here! I thought it was a routine transport—I was just joking!"

Gao Yiye crossed her arms.

"Such a grave offense cannot go unpunished."

Sweat poured off the man like rain.

Then—

She burst into laughter.

"I'll punish you by making you croak like a frog! Hahahaha!"

Only then did the man realize she'd been joking all along.

Laughter erupted from the cargo ship and the small boats alike.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, please."

"Saintess, please."

The small boats turned and guided the four cargo ships toward a hidden cove beneath Eagle Beak Mountain's Yellow Turban Fortress.

The cove was vast, half-hidden by tall reeds—a natural harbor made for concealment.

Within it lay several electric cargo ships belonging to Gao Family Village, as well as two gunboats.

Stone steps climbed from the docks, winding up the mountainside toward the Yellow Turban Fortress halfway up the slope.

Upon hearing that the Saintess had arrived, Bai Yuan hurried out to greet them, running all the way down the steps.

There were hundreds of steps. An ordinary scholar would be gasping halfway down.

Bai Yuan reached the bottom without so much as a flushed face.

He bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun. Greetings, Saintess."

That he ran all this way simply to perform the rites showed how deeply Bai Yuan valued propriety—one of the six arts of a true gentleman.

Li Daoxuan often observed Xiaolangdi via co-sensing, so nothing here surprised him.

Gao Yiye, however, was wide-eyed.

"Wow... it's already built up so well? There's even a huge fortress halfway up the mountain."

"It's still incomplete," Bai Yuan smiled.

"Saintess, look around the cove."

He handed her a telescope.

Gao Yiye raised it and scanned the shoreline. She saw villages scattered along the bay—east and west alike. Common folk bustled about, constructing buildings.

Bai Yuan explained,

"These people are flood victims from the Henan plains. We relocated them here, gave them work, and had them build these settlements. Once finished, they'll live here and work at our docks and shipyards."

Li Daoxuan silently gave a thumbs-up.

Then Bai Yuan's expression turned serious.

"However... this place is far too close to Luoyang. Although we used unconventional methods to persuade the Mengjin County Magistrate to speak on our behalf, the Prince of Fu's Residence in Luoyang has already noticed what's happening at Xiaolangdi."

Chapter 653 The Rent Was Too Low

Sooner or later, Luoyang was bound to notice Xiaolangdi.

Li Daoxuan had expected that much. After all, Xiaolangdi sat practically at Luoyang's doorstep—too close to hide anything for long. What he hadn't expected was that the first to poke their head out wouldn't be the local prefect...

...but the Prince of Fu's Residence.

Gao Yiye couldn't help blurting it out.

"Isn't that backwards? The prefect who's actually in charge of this place hasn't made a sound, yet the Prince of Fu's people show up first? What kind of logic is that?"

Bai Yuan spread his hands, helpless and amused.

"Because... Xiaolangdi is technically part of the Prince of Fu's fief."

Gao Yiye sucked in a sharp breath.

"What?!"

Li Daoxuan laughed softly.

"Ah. Now that makes sense."

Zhu Changxun—Prince of Fu—had been Emperor Shenzong's favorite son. Back in the Wanli years, Shenzong had nearly named him Crown Prince, triggering the infamous Great Controversy over the Heir Apparent, a fifteen-year-long political knife fight that exhausted half the court.

While the Prince of Fu's Residence couldn't quite match the terrifying weight of the Prince of Qin's household, it still ranked comfortably among the top two or three most powerful princely estates in the empire.

And history added one more delicious irony:

Zhu Changxun's son would later become Zhu Yousong, the Southern Ming emperor.

As Li Daoxuan sifted through these mental footnotes, Bai Yuan continued explaining,

"They sent a few people over under the excuse of sightseeing. No hostility—for now. But they made their position clear: this land belongs to their household. If we intend to operate here long-term... we need to pay rent."

Gao Yiye puffed out her cheeks, visibly indignant.

"When Xiaolangdi was crawling with water bandits, they didn't dare make a peep. Now that we've cleared the bandits, resettled refugees, and started building things, they suddenly remember this place exists?"

She crossed her arms.

"Is this how they bully honest people? Point a knife at your throat once the work's done?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"Relax. If the land truly belongs to them, then paying rent to use it is perfectly reasonable. From ancient times to modern ones, rent has always been part of doing business."

Bai Yuan blinked.

"Oh?"

Gao Yiye tilted her head.

"Huh?"

Neither of them had expected the Dao Xuan Tianzun to side—apparently—with the princely household.

Then Li Daoxuan's tone flipped, smooth as turning a coin.

"However."

He raised a finger.

"Their land was overrun by water bandits. We drove those bandits out. That's a service rendered. Therefore, it's only fair that they pay us a 'bandit-clearing fee.'"

Bai Yuan burst out laughing.

"Exactly!"

Gao Yiye laughed too.

"That's perfectly reasonable business practice!"

Li Daoxuan nodded solemnly.

"Indeed."

He was just about to explain how to handle the next negotiation—

When a militia runner came charging up the steps, panting hard.

"Master Bai! Someone from the Prince of Fu's Residence has arrived! Eunuch Zheng!"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"Speak of the devil."

Moments later, a soft sedan chair appeared at the gates of Yellow Turban Fortress.

Out stepped a pale, plump man with a smooth, beardless face. His nostrils tilted slightly upward, as if the air itself owed him respect. His eyes barely glanced at the people around him—until he spoke, in the sharp, high-pitched tone unmistakable to all eunuchs.

"Master Bai," he said, voice thin and crisp, "I trust you've been well?"

Only then did he notice Bai Yuan wasn't alone.

Standing beside him were a handsome, sword-bearing man and a striking young woman in martial attire. Their bearing was relaxed yet dangerous—clearly not ordinary guards.

If not for their clothes, Eunuch Zheng might have mistaken them for the young master and lady of some powerful household.

Bai Yuan opened his mouth to make introductions—

—but Li Daoxuan stepped forward first.

"Eunuch Zheng, greetings," he said casually.

"My name is Xiao Qiushui. This is my wife, Tang Fang. We've wandered the jianghu for over twenty years, specializing in bandit extermination."

Eunuch Zheng's brow twitched.

No etiquette. No flattery. No deference.

As expected of jianghu trash, he thought disdainfully. No sense of proper address.

He immediately lost interest and turned back to Bai Yuan.

"Regarding the rent we discussed last time—what's your decision?"

Bai Yuan smiled, calm and confident now that he'd been thoroughly coached.

"Eunuch, remind me—how much rent did you propose again?"

Eunuch Zheng lifted his chin.

"Xiaolangdi stretches across nearly a hundred li of waterways. Ordinarily, such land would command an enormous sum. But given that it was long abandoned and barren, my lord has shown generosity."

He paused.

"Three hundred taels of silver per year."

Same price as last time.

And this time, he was determined to get it.

He braced himself for a prolonged war of words.

Instead—

Li Daoxuan gasped loudly.

"What? Only three hundred taels?"

Eunuch Zheng frowned.

"What—do you think that's too much?"

"Too much?" Li Daoxuan shook his head vigorously.

"It's insultingly low."

Eunuch Zheng froze.

Li Daoxuan sighed as if witnessing a tragedy.

"Eunuch, forgive my bluntness, but how can you be so completely out of touch with market prices?"

Eunuch Zheng stared at him, momentarily speechless.

"This is Xiaolangdi!" Li Daoxuan continued, warming up.

"Central Plains. A hundred li of waterways. Direct Yellow River access. Shipping, transport, defense—this is a strategic gem!"

Eunuch Zheng's confidence wavered.

Li Daoxuan leaned in conspiratorially.

"Tell me, Eunuch. You've heard of Macau, haven't you?"

"Of course," Zheng replied reflexively.

"A miserable little fishing village on the southern coast," Li Daoxuan said disdainfully.

"Tiny. Remote. Barely habitable. Do you know how much the Portuguese pay to rent that place?"

Eunuch Zheng hesitated... then leaned closer.

"How much?"

Li Daoxuan raised five fingers.

"Five hundred taels."

Eunuch Zheng's eyes widened.

"Five... hundred?"

"Exactly," Li Daoxuan nodded gravely.

"If a broken seaside village is worth five hundred, how can Xiaolangdi—of all places—be worth only three hundred? That's not thrift. That's ignorance."

Bai Yuan and Gao Yiye watched from the side, thoroughly entertained.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun is at it again, they thought in unison.

Li Daoxuan declared solemnly,

"A location like Xiaolangdi cannot possibly rent for less than Macau. It must be higher."

Eunuch Zheng's face lit up.

"Well said! Well said! Then how much would you suggest?"

Li Daoxuan stroked his chin, thinking carefully.

"At least... one tael more."

"...Huh?"

"Five hundred and one taels."

"Pfft—!"

Gao Yiye burst out laughing.

Eunuch Zheng felt something was deeply wrong—but the price had gone up, not down. He couldn't quite articulate his unease.

Then Li Daoxuan's voice shifted again, casual but sharp.

"Oh, by the way, Eunuch—since Xiaolangdi is so important... why did the Prince of Fu's Residence allow water bandits to occupy it for so many years?"

Eunuch Zheng's face flushed.

"Well... the bandits were many, scattered across countless river forts and mountain dens. The waterways were complex. Suppression campaigns cost enormous sums and achieved little. In the end, the court simply... gave up."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

A smile that carried weight.

"Good," he said softly.

"Then let's talk about the price of not giving up."

Chapter 654 Played for a Fool

The moment Eunuch Zheng spoke, Li Daoxuan nearly laughed.

Not outwardly, of course.

Inside, though, he was thoroughly amused.

So this is how far you've already sunk.

The eunuch's words sounded humble on the surface, but to Li Daoxuan's ears, they rang like a confession hammered onto a bronze bell. Reclaiming Xiaolangdi had cost the Prince of Fu's Estate dearly—silver, men, face, and patience. And now, with the matter unresolved, the bill was still climbing.

Li Daoxuan merely smiled, offering no reply at all.

That silence was enough.

Bai Yuan, standing at his side, caught the cue instantly and stepped forward as if the thought had just occurred to him.

"Eunuch Zheng," he said pleasantly, "the river bandits of Xiaolangdi have plagued the region for years. The imperial court spent enormous sums on military campaigns and still failed to uproot them. Which means—" he paused, smiling, "—that the Prince of Fu's Estate has been unable to reclaim its own fief for quite some time. Wouldn't you agree?"

Eunuch Zheng's heart thudded.

Oh no.

Before he could respond, Bai Yuan continued, his tone light and conversational.

"Our humble forces recently drove out those bandits entirely. That should count as a rather substantial service rendered to the Prince of Fu's Estate, shouldn't it?"

The eunuch's lips twitched.

"Uh... well... naturally..."

Li Daoxuan finally spoke, his grin carrying a hint of mischief.

"If the Prince of Fu's Estate had hired jianghu heroes to suppress those bandits, it wouldn't have been cheap," he said casually. "As someone from the jianghu myself, I'm quite familiar with the going rates. I'll give you a friendly estimate—river bandits of that scale would cost at least two thousand taels of silver as a retainer."

Eunuch Zheng's eyes flew open.

"Two thousand taels?!" he exclaimed. "Lord Li, you must be joking. Are you trying to swindle me?"

Li Daoxuan only smiled.

He didn't deny it.

That silence was far more unsettling than any argument.

Bai Yuan smoothly took over.

"Our expenses were indeed significant," he said. "Boats lost, supplies consumed, men fed. And that's not even counting the relocation of so many commoners to establish a permanent settlement here—one that ensures bandits will never gather again. That alone required no small sum."

He tapped his fan lightly against his palm.

"Collecting a hardship fee for bandit suppression seems only reasonable. Since we're friends of the Prince of Fu's Estate, we'll even offer a discount." He smiled. "One thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine taels. If we offset that against the rent, I'll even return five taels in silver, and we'll call the rent paid for the next four years. How does that sound?"

Eunuch Zheng finally understood.

He had been utterly, completely played for a fool.

His face darkened. "So that's it," he said coldly. "You intend to default on the Prince of Fu's rent."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

Bai Yuan smiled as well.

Their smiles carried not the slightest trace of apology.

Eunuch Zheng's fury boiled over. "This is the Prince of Fu's territory! Occupying it privately is illegal—no different from banditry! The imperial court will apprehend you and hold you accountable!"

Gao Yiye finally joined the fray, unable to restrain herself.

"Now hold on!" she said sharply. "We never said we wouldn't pay rent. We're collecting a hardship fee. It's the Prince of Fu's Estate that refuses to reimburse our expenses. If this were brought before the court, we'd be in the right!"

The eunuch's composure snapped.

Years of arrogance surged forth.

"Reason?" he barked. "When has the Prince of Fu's Estate ever reasoned with petty commoners like you? Either pay the rent obediently, or don't blame us for being impolite."

Bai Yuan snapped open his folding fan with a crisp 啪, revealing the two bold characters—Gentleman.

He chuckled softly. "We succeeded where you failed. That means we're more capable. So tell me—how exactly do you plan to be 'impolite'? Will you raise an army?"

His eyes gleamed.

"Please. I'd love to see what the civil officials at court would say about a prince privately mobilizing troops."

Li Daoxuan immediately leaned in, adopting the hushed, excited tone of a gossiping villager.

"Have you heard?" he whispered. "The Prince of Fu is plotting rebellion!"

Bai Yuan covered his mouth, glancing left and right theatrically. "They say he never forgave the court for denying him the position of Crown Prince. Now he's raising an army to seize the throne!"

Gao Yiye joined in, sounding exactly like an old busybody at a market stall.

"Ten thousand banners marching on the capital! The Prince of Fu is going to depose the old emperor!"

Three voices like this, whispered in public, could destroy a man faster than a blade.

Cold sweat soaked Eunuch Zheng's back.

For a prince, suspicion of rebellion was the deadliest poison of all. Once the emperor doubted you, your fate was sealed. This was an iron law of history.

The Prince of Fu's guards numbered only in the dozens. They couldn't even suppress bandits—how could they face Bai Yuan's forces?

Eunuch Zheng could do nothing.

"You just wait!" he spat. "Illegally occupying a prince's fiefdom is rebellion in all but name. If the Prince of Fu cannot deal with you himself, the imperial army will!"

With that, he flung his sleeves and stormed out, climbing into his sedan chair. His attendants hurried him down the mountain, where a carriage awaited, bound for Luoyang.

Gao Yiye watched through binoculars until he vanished.

"I heard Henan was flooded into a muddy wasteland," she said. "How did his carriage even get here?"

"The waters receded," Bai Yuan replied calmly. "The silt dried and hardened. The roads are passable again."

Gao Yiye smiled. "Good. Then I can go anywhere too."

Bai Yuan turned to Li Daoxuan, his expression turning serious.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun—once that eunuch returns, the Prince of Fu's Estate will surely complain to the Henan Governor. Imperial troops may be dispatched. What should we do?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head, smiling faintly.

"There's no need to worry. The imperial troops won't have time for us."

Bai Yuan frowned. "They won't... have time?"

Understanding struck him like a spark.

"Does Dao Xuan Tianzun mean... Henan is about to descend into chaos?"

Li Daoxuan sighed softly. "You heard about the Shanxi rebels breaking through Zezhou?"

"Yes."

"Zezhou lies just across the Yellow River," Li Daoxuan said, pointing northeast. "Xu Dingchen is marching south from Taiyuan to encircle them. If you were those rebels, what would you do?"

Bai Yuan answered immediately. "Abandon Zezhou. Cross the Yellow River into Henan and escape the encirclement."

"Exactly," Li Daoxuan said. "Henan is about to become very lively."

Gao Yiye paled. "If the rebels enter Henan... will they attack Xiaolangdi?"

"They won't," Li Daoxuan reassured her. "They move to survive—plunder grain, conscript people. Xiaolangdi looks like nothing but a former bandit den. Their real target will be—Mengjin County."

Bai Yuan clenched his fists.

The faces of the people who had once called him Good Samaritan Bai flashed before his eyes.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said firmly. "We must save Mengjin."

"Not just Mengjin," Li Daoxuan replied. "If possible, I want to stop the rebels at the Yellow River itself."

The river wind howled softly in the distance.

"If we succeed," he added quietly, "Henan will be spared the fate of Shaanxi and Shanxi."

The Yellow River flowed on—broad, cold, and patient—awaiting the next move on the board.

Chapter 655 Sharing a Room

Bai Yuan understood immediately.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, I comprehend."

With that, Xiaolangdi entered full combat readiness—effective immediately.

Of course, matters of preparedness, patrol rotations, and troop deployment had nothing to do with Gao Yiye.

Those were Bai Yuan's headaches.

Gao Yiye, on the other hand, was here to enjoy herself.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," she said brightly, eyes sparkling, "I want to go see the Yellow Flooded Area. I want to know what it really looks like now."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "Let's go. We'll pass through Mengjin County first."

The two of them, escorted by their guards, descended Eagle Beak Mountain and headed toward Hengshui Town.

After several months of reconstruction, Hengshui had come back to life.

Displaced people had settled in large numbers, and the sudden population boom made the town lively to the point of noise. The streets were crowded, voices overlapping, footsteps never stopping.

Supplies were plentiful. Stalls lined the road. Someone had even begun selling Hengshui's local specialty—

Hengshui braised meat.

Gao Yiye's eyes locked on it instantly.

Naturally, she bought a piece.

Li Daoxuan stood beside her, staring so hard he nearly drooled.

Damn it...

He could endure hunger, danger, boredom—almost anything.

But these strange, tempting delicacies that kept appearing inside the box?

They were his weakness.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," Gao Yiye asked sweetly, holding the meat up, "would you like a bite?"

Li Daoxuan pointed at his mouth.

A layer of silicone skin wrapped around a steel skull. Inside was cold metal, jointed plates, and gears—more Terminator than human.

How was he supposed to eat like this?

Then—

He froze.

Wait.

He had tested this before.

Through the co-sensing function, he could feel wind, temperature... even pressure.

So why not taste?

He took the braised meat from Gao Yiye's hand and tossed it into his mouth.

Crunch.

Steel teeth pulverized it instantly.

There was no esophagus, no swallowing—but as the meat was crushed, the flavor was transmitted back through the co-sensing link.

Rich. Savory. Slightly sweet.

He tasted it.

Li Daoxuan was ecstatic.

"Hahahaha! I'm unstoppable now!" he burst out laughing. "I'll eat my way across China—no, the whole world! When my field of view reaches Beijing, I'll devour Peking roast duck. In Guangzhou, beef offal stew. In Thailand, curry rice. In Japan—"

He paused.

"...Wait. Sushi probably hasn't been invented yet."

Then what would he eat?

Virtue and artistry teachers?

Gao Yiye's voice snapped him back to reality.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," she said suspiciously, "why are you smiling like that? Did you think of something strange?"

Li Daoxuan immediately spat out the chewed braised meat and coughed lightly. "Nothing. Just... thinking about food. Yes. Delicious food."

They left Hengshui Town and continued eastward, entering the Yellow Flooded Area.

The official road had been dug out by the common people and was barely passable. On both sides, however, thick layers of silt and sand lay piled high.

Twenty to thirty centimeters thick.

A vast yellow crust blanketed the plains, stretching as far as the eye could see.

The sun had baked it dry until it looked solid—almost trustworthy.

Gao Yiye knelt down and dug at the surface with her hands.

It didn't budge.

She stood up slowly, her expression heavy.

"If our Gao Family Village's fields had turned into this..." she murmured, "...I'd cry myself awake every night. How are these people supposed to live?"

She looked up. "Mr. Bai must have arranged work for them, right?"

"He has," Li Daoxuan replied. "Many from Mengjin were resettled in Xiaolangdi. For now, they earn wages building villages, hauling earth, doing manual labor."

Gao Yiye let out a small breath of relief. "Thank goodness... we came."

They continued along the road, walking as if through a shallow earthen trench.

After a long while, Mengjin County finally appeared ahead.

Mengjin now had close ties with Xiaolangdi. When the gate guards saw the emblem of the Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on Gao Yiye's chest, their expressions changed instantly.

They knew.

This couple was from Xiaolangdi—and of high standing.

The gates opened at once. Someone was sent to inform the magistrate.

As they entered, a guard asked respectfully, "May I ask, honored guests—what is your relationship to the benevolent Mr. Bai?"

Li Daoxuan smiled. "My name is Xiao Qiushui. This is my wife, Tang Fang. Mr. Bai and I are old friends."

"Then you are friends of Mengjin County," the guard said without hesitation.

Moments later, Liu Bawan, the magistrate's aide, hurried over and bowed repeatedly, words spilling out in a stream of politeness.

"Young Master Xiao! The Magistrate wished to receive you personally, but half an hour ago a large detachment of soldiers arrived. He is currently entertaining the generals. Please forgive the discourtesy."

Li Daoxuan laughed. "It's nothing."

Then his tone sharpened slightly.

"Soldiers, you say? They're not here for disaster relief, I assume."

Liu Bawan gave a bitter smile. "Sir jests. Since when have soldiers helped with relief? They're likely here because of trouble across the river."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "The Shanxi rebels breached Zezhou."

Liu Bawan sighed. "Exactly. Zezhou is directly across from Mengjin. They could cross at any moment. After a flood... if bandits arrive too..."

His voice trailed off.

At that moment, a column of soldiers rushed past them.

Their armor was crooked, formations loose, morale nonexistent. They looked nothing like the disciplined troops of a great empire—more like armed hooligans.

They seized goods from shops without paying and swaggered down the streets.

The shopkeepers dared not protest.

Li Daoxuan frowned.

Gao Yiye muttered, "The bandit disaster hasn't arrived yet, but the soldier disaster already has."

Liu Bawan sighed deeply. "We only hope they leave soon."

He led them into the magistrate's residence and arranged accommodations.

Because of the number of guards, only Li Daoxuan and Gao Yiye were placed in the guest quarters.

They entered the room.

Small.

Neat.

With a single large bed.

Both of them froze.

"Oh?"

This was their first night away from home. And since they were posing as husband and wife, being given one room was entirely reasonable.

Sleeping separately would raise suspicion.

Li Daoxuan looked at Gao Yiye.

Gao Yiye sat down on the edge of the bed, pretending to be calm. Her posture was composed—too composed.

"I've slept beside the statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun countless times," she said lightly. "I don't mind at all."

Then she added, almost too quickly—

"In fact... I'm quite happy."

The room suddenly felt much smaller.

Chapter 656 A Bit Too Heavy

Night had fully fallen.

The sky outside was pitch-black, and the magistrate's residence gradually quieted.

It was time to sleep.

Li Daoxuan stood where he was, unmoving, watching as Gao Yiye—her cheeks faintly flushed—quickly shrugged off her outer martial robes. In the blink of an eye, she was left in pale, moon-white undergarments.

Then—

Blink.

She dove straight under the covers.

Fast. Too fast.

So fast it completely contradicted her earlier claim of "not minding at all."

Li Daoxuan snorted inwardly.

If you truly didn't mind, why the undergarments? Why the lightning-fast retreat?

If you were really fearless, you'd boldly reveal your inner vest, move slowly, gracefully, and slip beneath the quilt like a heroine in a romance novel.

Hmph.

He very much wanted to tease her.

But Gao Yiye was thin-skinned. If he pushed too far, she might actually combust on the spot from embarrassment.

Better to let it go.

Li Daoxuan began walking toward the bed.

Slowly.

Painfully slowly.

Like a snail.

Each step he took deepened the red on Gao Yiye's cheeks.

If he had taken ten steps, her face would have been crimson enough to drip blood. Unfortunately for her, the guest room was small. From door to bed, it was barely seven steps.

Before her blush could fully bloom—

He was already standing at the bedside.

Under the quilt, Gao Yiye's heart hammered wildly.

She deliberately turned her back toward the edge of the bed, not daring to look. Still, she could clearly feel the presence behind her—solid, heavy, unyielding.

Like a mountain.

In her muddled thoughts, an uncontrollable idea surfaced:

If Dao Xuan Tianzun lies down...

If he pulls me into his arms...

Then we will truly have shared a bed.

And I will truly belong to Dao Xuan Tianzun...

"Thump."

Dao Xuan Tianzun sat down.

Gao Yiye's heart leaped straight into her throat.

And then—

Creeeak.

The wooden bedframe let out a pitiful groan.

A split second later—

CRACK!

The sound was crisp, decisive, merciless.

The bed collapsed.

Completely.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's steel bones and iron frame were simply too much for an ordinary wooden bed to bear. The entire structure gave way, sending both of them crashing to the floor in a chaotic tangle.

Quilt. Sheets. Broken wood.

Everything wrapped together in a single, disastrous heap.

The noise was thunderous.

Naturally, it drew attention.

A young maid from the magistrate's residence rushed over immediately.

"Honored guests! What happened?!"

She pushed open the door—

And froze.

There, amid shattered planks and tangled bedding, lay the county's most distinguished "married couple," wrapped together under a quilt, with only their heads poking out.

The maid's eyes widened until they were nearly round.

"Th-this... what happened here?"

Li Daoxuan sighed calmly. "The bed collapsed."

The maid's face instantly transformed into a masterpiece of silent imagination.

Her expression very clearly said:

Oh.

So this is what young people are like these days.

Just how many positions of the 'Eighteen Martial Arts' did you try to break the bed like that?

Of course, none of this could be said aloud.

She hurriedly lowered her head. "M-my apologies! Our beds are truly not sturdy enough. I'll have people come clean this up immediately. Er—this servant will withdraw for now so you may... get dressed."

In her mind, anyone wrapped in a quilt like that must surely be undressed.

With remarkable speed, she retreated and shut the door firmly behind her.

Inside, silence.

Li Daoxuan finally pushed aside the quilt and sat up, spreading his hands helplessly.

"Oh dear."

Gao Yiye scrambled free as well, hurriedly pulling her martial robes back on.

Just moments ago, her face had been crimson with embarrassment. Now the red had faded, leaving a pale flush that somehow made her look even more delicate.

She hesitated. "...Dao Xuan Tianzun... just now..."

Li Daoxuan laughed softly. "Hahaha. It's nothing. Nothing at all."

He gestured subtly toward the door, lowering his voice. "It seems this body of mine isn't very compatible with ordinary beds."

Gao Yiye's face reddened again. "...Then... maybe next time... we could find... a stone bed?"

Li Daoxuan paused.

"...Let's discuss that next time."

They stepped outside.

Seeing that both guests were fully dressed, the servants quickly moved in to clean the room, carrying away broken boards and bedding. The estate manager hurried over, bowing repeatedly and apologizing, promising to arrange another guest room immediately.

The scene became rather lively.

Just then, a servant rushed over, tugged the manager's sleeve, and whispered something in his ear.

"People from the Prince of Fu's manor have arrived," he said quietly. "They wish to see General Qin. The Magistrate is entertaining them now and cannot come over. He instructed us to ensure the honored guests are well taken care of."

The manager nodded repeatedly.

The speaker meant nothing by it.

The listener, however, did.

Li Daoxuan leaned close to Gao Yiye's ear and whispered, "People from the Prince of Fu's manor... here to see a General Qin. This likely concerns Xiaolangdi."

Gao Yiye nodded.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Looks like I'll need to deploy my miniature avatar."

Gao Yiye chuckled softly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is going to play again."

Li Daoxuan moved to a corner, sat down, and opened the front of his robe.

On his chest was a tiny door.

He opened it.

Out stepped a miniature mechanical Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Entirely steel. Palm-sized. Its joints were crafted using Shanxi puppet techniques—durable, precise, and astonishingly flexible.

CC-01 Reconnaissance Mechanical Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The tiny figure scurried into the flower bushes, slipped through a hole in the wall, and vanished toward the neighboring courtyard.

Soon, it reached a brightly lit guest room. Armed guards stood watch outside—clearly the right place.

The miniature Tianzun hugged the wall, slipped past the guards' boots, and squeezed inside.

Candles flickered.

At the table sat Eunuch Zheng, the Magistrate of Mengjin, and a middle-aged man in armor.

Eunuch Zheng's face was dark.

"General Qin," he said stiffly, "I've come this time to ask you for a small favor."

The armored man replied smoothly, "Anything concerning the Prince of Fu's manor is my responsibility. Please speak freely."

Eunuch Zheng launched into a long, aggrieved account of the events at Xiaolangdi, ending with venom.

"That fellow surnamed Bai is utterly despicable. General Qin, I ask that you help me deal with him."

"Oh?" The Magistrate of Mengjin exclaimed in surprise. "Good Samaritan Bai? He has saved countless people in Mengjin. To the common folk, he's practically a living Buddha. Eunuch Zheng, you mustn't speak nonsense."

Eunuch Zheng snorted. "Nonsense? He is openly occupying the Prince of Fu's fief and refusing to pay rent. He is clearly in the wrong."

The magistrate's face twitched.

Though he said nothing, in his heart he cursed furiously:

When bandits occupied Xiaolangdi, did you ever collect rent?

Now that someone builds villages, resettles refugees, and solves the river bandit problem once and for all—you remember rent?

Do you even have the face to speak of right and wrong?

May your entire lineage choke on silver!

In the shadows, the miniature Dao Xuan Tianzun listened quietly.

And remembered everything.

Chapter 657 The Collaborators

The Mengjin magistrate cursed inwardly, so fiercely his molars nearly cracked—but on the surface, he could only smile stiffly and swallow every word back down his throat.

General Qin frowned slightly. "So... dealing with Bai Yuan—this comes from His Highness the Prince of Fu?"

Eunuch Zheng waved his hand with a laugh. "How could that be? Absolutely not the Prince's concern. It's just a trifling matter—only a few hundred taels of silver a year. How could such a speck of dust trouble His Royal Highness? Naturally, it falls to this servant to resolve it properly before even considering reporting it upward."

Oh.

So it wasn't the Prince's will at all.

Just your bright idea, you damned castrated dog.

The corner of General Qin's mouth twitched, curling into the faintest sneer—quickly suppressed. At the same time, a thread of relief slipped quietly into his chest.

He wasn't a fool.

In the past, he himself had tried to suppress the Xiaolangdi water bandits. He'd failed miserably. That wretched place was a maze of river channels and reed marshes; to launch a full campaign there would burn manpower, silver, and time like dry firewood.

Yet Bai Yuan had swept those bandits away with shocking ease.

That alone told General Qin everything he needed to know.

Provoking such a local power—for what? For a eunuch's wounded pride?

If the Prince of Fu himself had issued the order, then even if it meant grinding his teeth bloody, General Qin would still have led troops to Xiaolangdi. But this?

This was nothing more than a eunuch's private vendetta.

A mere lackey, daring to bark commands at a frontier general?

General Qin's face darkened. "Eunuch Zheng, this humble general is always eager to shoulder burdens for the Prince of Fu. However, at present, I truly cannot spare a single soldier to deal with Xiaolangdi."

Eunuch Zheng frowned. "Why not?"

General Qin raised his hand and pointed north. "Across the Yellow River, roving bandits are growing restless. This general has been ordered to garrison Mengjin County precisely to prevent them from crossing south."

Eunuch Zheng snorted. "Xiaolangdi is only forty li away. Send a few warships, make a quick trip—back within a day. How would that possibly interfere with guarding the river?"

General Qin let out a cold laugh. "Eunuch Zheng, that only proves you understand nothing of warfare. Roving bandits move like wolves—one hundred li in a day is nothing to them. If I shift my gaze for even a

moment, and they seize a crossing point, a flood of bandits could pour straight into Henan. That responsibility—this general cannot bear it. And neither can you."

Eunuch Zheng's face stiffened. "So that means I'm just supposed to swallow the humiliation Bai Yuan dealt me?"

"Of course not." General Qin's tone softened, smooth as oil. "Once the bandit threat across the river is settled, and I have breathing room, I will personally lead troops to Xiaolangdi and have a proper talk with Bai Yuan. With several thousand government soldiers at my back, asking for five hundred taels of silver—do you think he'd dare refuse?"

Eunuch Zheng hesitated, then slowly nodded. "If that's the case... very well."

The Mengjin magistrate, who had listened to every word, could endure no longer. With a polite excuse, he withdrew from the room. Once outside, he let out a long breath and shook his head bitterly before returning to his quarters.

General Qin raised his teacup, signaling the end of the discussion.

Night had already fallen. Eunuch Zheng, unwilling to return to Luoyang so late, simply took another guest room within the residence and settled in.

—

Late at night.

Once Eunuch Zheng's breathing grew deep and even, Li Daoxuan made his move.

The miniature mechanical Dao Xuan Tianzun slipped silently into the room, scaled a pillar, crawled along the roof beam, and positioned itself directly above the bed.

Then—

It dropped.

"THUD!"

In his dream, Eunuch Zheng felt as though a meteor had slammed straight into the center of his forehead.

"AHHH!"

He bolted upright, clutching his brow, eyes wild. He looked left. Right. Behind the bed. Under the table.

Nothing.

The Reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzun had already rolled off the mattress, tucking itself neatly behind a table leg.

Eunuch Zheng staggered to a bronze mirror.

A swollen lump stood proudly on his forehead, red and angry.

"Something hit me... but there's nothing here."

His face drained of color.

"A ghost!"

"G-GHOST—!"

Shrieking, Eunuch Zheng fled the room and clung to his attendants like a drowning man grasping driftwood. He didn't dare sleep again that night, pacing back and forth until dawn, eyes bulging and bloodshot.

—

While a eunuch was being tormented out of his wits...

In a shadowed corner of Mengjin County, three men dressed in coarse sackcloth slipped quietly out of an alley. Their faces carried the worn, hollow look of refugees—but their eyes were sharp.

"Did you confirm it?" one whispered. "Which general is stationed here?"

Another snorted softly. "Qin Renhong. Brigade Commander Qin. He tried to suppress us at Xiaolangdi before—couldn't even find our shadows. Spent half a month flailing around before slinking back."

The others chuckled. "So it's that useless bastard."

"And the troop deployment?"

"Already mapped. Two thousand five hundred men, spread along Dongpo, Wengkou, and Dongmiao Zhuang. I even sketched it out."

The leader's lips curled into a grin. "Perfect. We'll take this straight to Zezhou and present it to Elder Brother—Zijing Liang Wang Ziyong. Once he breaks into Henan, we borrow a few thousand troops and reclaim Xiaolangdi."

The other two clasped their fists. "Elder Brother is wise!"

These men were remnants of the Xiaolangdi water bandits.

The leader's birth name was Xu Liyu—Xu Carp. He'd disliked it since childhood and later changed it to Xu Chenglong.

He hadn't been among the strongest bandit chiefs. When Bai Yuan wiped out the major factions, Xu Chenglong fled early, leading a dozen boats and several dozen sworn brothers across the Yellow River into Shanxi, hiding near Dayu.

He survived—but hatred festered.

Unable to confront Bai Yuan head-on, he traveled to Zezhou and pledged himself to Zijing Liang Wang Ziyong, offering intelligence and guidance across the Yellow River.

Wang Ziyong was delighted. He promised Xu Chenglong command of several thousand men once Henan was breached.

And so, Xu Chenglong returned—slipping once more into Mengjin County.

A native accent. A flood of refugees.

Perfect cover.

In no time at all, he uncovered troop numbers, patrol routes, even the hiding places of imperial warships.

Xu Chenglong grinned. "Everything's ready. Time to head back to Shanxi."

One subordinate hesitated. "Big Brother... I saw people close to Bai Yuan in the county. A man and woman in martial attire. Important figures, I think."

Xu Chenglong laughed softly. "Too clean. Too naive. No real jianghu experience. Even their guards look green. Capture them, take them to Shanxi—hostages are always useful."

His eyes gleamed coldly.

"Let's prepare."

Chapter 658 You Just Wait, You Punk

Li Daoxuan awoke that morning in his true body, outside the diorama box.

After the county magistrate's servants had rearranged a guest room for them the previous night, he had felt distinctly awkward about climbing onto the bed again. His heavy, metallic puppet body simply wasn't built for such fragile furniture. In the end, he sat cross-legged in the corner, shut down the co-sensing connection, returned to his real body beyond the box, and slept comfortably in his own bed.

The bed inside the diorama, he left for Gao Yiye.

Gao Yiye felt a faint sense of loss—but more than that, relief. Dao Xuan Tianzun was a righteous and benevolent deity, not some sinister god of lust or temptation. There was no need to expect anything improper. Just being near him, sharing a roof, was already enough to make her heart feel full.

She was so happy, in fact, that she barely slept at all.

Only when dawn was already breaking did exhaustion finally claim her.

Yet the moment she fell asleep, the world outside began to stir.

Mengjin County was waking up.

The cries of street vendors rang out one after another. Carts rattled over stone roads, horses snorted and stamped, petty officials barked shameless demands in the streets, townsfolk gathered in clusters to gossip, and maids and servants hurried through the magistrate's rear courtyard attending to guests.

In the corner of the guest room, the Puppet Heavenly Lord's eyes snapped open. He rose smoothly to his feet.

Li Daoxuan had already eaten breakfast in the real world and returned to the diorama to play.

Seeing Gao Yiye still sleeping soundly, he smiled faintly and stepped closer. He instinctively started to sit on the edge of the bed—then froze halfway down.

That weight.

If he sat, the bed would probably collapse again.

That would be... awkward.

He immediately changed posture, squatting by the bedside instead.

Her face was right there, close enough to see every detail. Even in sleep, a gentle smile lingered at the corners of her lips. Whatever she was dreaming about, it was clearly something sweet.

Li Daoxuan watched her quietly for a moment, then decided not to wake her.

He turned and left the room.

The guards outside straightened at once, about to greet him, but Li Daoxuan raised a finger to his lips.

"Shh."

The guards instantly sealed their mouths.

He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Yiye is still asleep. Don't wake her. Protect her well. I'm going out for a stroll."

The guards leaned in just as seriously and whispered back, "As you command."

For a fleeting instant, one of them wondered whether they were meant to protect only the Saintess and not Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

He immediately scolded himself inwardly.

What nonsense.

A deity needed no mortal protection.

With that settled, Li Daoxuan walked out of the magistrate's residence alone.

The moment he stepped through the main gate, a noisy group burst out behind him. At their head was Eunuch Zheng of the Prince of Fu's manor, his eyes ringed with dark circles like a panda, his expression frantic and unhinged.

"The sky's finally bright! Run!" he shrieked at his attendants. "This place is haunted! It must be crawling with flood ghosts!"

He ran without looking where he was going.

With a heavy thump, he slammed straight into Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan had seen him coming clearly and could have stepped aside with ease.

He didn't.

Their foreheads collided head-on.

Eunuch Zheng felt as though he had smashed into an iron wall. A sharp clang rang in his skull, pain exploding between his brows.

"Ow! My head!" he howled, clutching his forehead and squatting down, trembling. For a long moment, he couldn't even stand.

Li Daoxuan laughed inwardly, but on the surface he staggered back and cried dramatically, "Ah! Can't you watch where you're going, you hooligan? My head hurts terribly! I'm gravely injured—this will require compensation for medical expenses!"

"What compensation?!" the Prince of Fu's attendants rushed forward, helping Eunuch Zheng up. One of them pointed angrily at Li Daoxuan. "We're from the Prince of Fu's manor! If we hit someone, we hit them! There's no such thing as medical expenses!"

They stared at Li Daoxuan in disbelief.

You don't even look scratched, and you're asking for five hundred taels?

We thought we were shameless—turns out you're worse.

Eunuch Zheng rubbed his forehead, squinting at Li Daoxuan, and recognition finally dawned.

Wasn't this the young man who had stood beside Bai Yuan at Xiaolangdi? The one called Xiao Qiushui, or something like that?

"You!" Eunuch Zheng pointed at him furiously. "You brat! You did this on purpose, didn't you? You're not hurt at all—you must practice some Iron Head technique!"

Li Daoxuan poked his own forehead, deliberately pressing the silicone surface. "Iron? Look how soft this skin is. Delicate and tender. Yet you accuse me of having an iron head. Alas... see how red my scalp is from the impact."

Naturally, the silicone showed no redness whatsoever.

The lie was shameless.

Eunuch Zheng and his entourage were furious but had no leverage. They snorted coldly, flung their sleeves, and hurried away.

Li Daoxuan waved cheerfully after them. "Safe travels! Go find more reinforcements! General Qin won't help you—how pitiful!"

Eunuch Zheng's body stiffened. He paused for half a breath, then fled even faster.

They vanished down the street.

Li Daoxuan didn't pursue them. He continued strolling through Mengjin County at leisure.

Not long after he left, several heads quietly poked out from an alley across the street.

Xu Chenglong was at the front, with more than a dozen former Xiaolangdi water bandits behind him.

He sneered. "I was still wondering how to lure away his guards. Who knew he'd walk out alone?"

"Heh. Brothers, follow him. Find a quiet alley, beat him senseless, tie him up, and take him to Shanxi."

The bandits split into small groups of two or three, disguising themselves as ordinary townsfolk. They drifted through the streets, keeping a careful distance, silently tightening the net around their prey.

Shadowing and kidnapping were skills they had honed for years.

Li Daoxuan walked on, seemingly unaware.

Ahead was a narrow alley. He leaned in to take a look and spotted a ragged old man crouched in the corner.

He stepped inside, took out a small piece of silver, and placed it in the old man's hand. "Old sir, buy yourself something to eat."

The old man was overjoyed. "Thank you! Thank you, young hero!"

Clutching the silver, he hurried back out toward the main street.

Li Daoxuan watched him go, then turned to leave the alley himself.

That was when shadows flickered at the entrance.

Five or six burly men blocked the way.

"Oh?" Li Daoxuan said mildly.

He turned—and found the other end of the alley blocked as well, another five or six men closing in.

The two groups advanced slowly, sealing off every path of escape.

Li Daoxuan looked at them, expression calm.

"Well," he said lightly, "this alley just got lively."

Chapter 659 Alley Ambush

Li Daoxuan felt no panic at all. If anything, the corner of his mouth lifted slightly, as if he were about to laugh.

"Oh?" he said mildly. "An alley ambush. Are you trying to rob me?"

Xu Chenglong sneered. "Rob you? Don't flatter yourself. How much silver could we squeeze out of you? That little purse of yours, does it weigh dozens of jin?"

Li Daoxuan smiled. "Then your ambitions must be much bigger than robbery."

Xu Chenglong's gaze sharpened. "Kid, what's your relationship with Bai Yuan?"

Li Daoxuan immediately understood.

This group was here for Bai Yuan.

At the moment, Bai Yuan had only two real enemies. One was the Prince of Fu's estate. The other was the Xiaolangdi water bandits. He had just crossed paths with the Prince of Fu's people, and those fellows clearly were not in a hurry to tear his face off. That left only one answer.

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "So it really is the Xiaolangdi water bandits. Once you catch me, what do you plan to threaten Bai Yuan with?"

Xu Chenglong snapped angrily, "I'm the one asking questions here!"

Li Daoxuan tilted his head slightly. "No, I think you've got it wrong. I'm the one asking now. And if your answers don't satisfy me, I might have to persuade you."

Xu Chenglong flew into a rage. "This brat is unbearably arrogant. Surrounded by a dozen men in a narrow alley and still acting tough? Don't think wearing a hero's robe makes you a martial arts master. One look at your stance tells me you've never trained a day in your life."

Li Daoxuan shrugged. "Then I apologize for not training. Come on. Come kill me."

The words had barely left his mouth when two bandits rushed forward.

Xu Chenglong barked, "Take him alive. He's only useful if he's conscious."

The two bandits hesitated for a fraction of a second. They had been about to draw their blades, but since they were ordered to take him alive, they charged barehanded instead.

Li Daoxuan truly had no martial arts foundation. Not even a little. Faced with two attackers, his mind went blank. Instinctively, he lifted both arms and tried to block their punches.

The moment he moved, everyone saw it clearly.

This man genuinely could not fight.

Xu Chenglong burst into laughter.

The two bandits grinned as well. With a slight shift of their wrists, their fists slipped past Li Daoxuan's clumsy block.

Thud. Thud.

Both fists landed squarely on Li Daoxuan's chest.

They had struck with full force, intending to smash a few ribs and make him cry out in pain. Yet in the very next instant, both attackers screamed.

"Agh!"

"My hand!"

"The bones in my hand are broken!"

They clutched their fists and doubled over in agony. The harder they had struck, the more vicious the rebound.

At that moment, even someone as hopeless at fighting as Li Daoxuan could not miss.

He swung both fists forward.

Crack. Crack.

Both bandits' facial bones shattered. They flew backward and collapsed, instantly silenced.

The remaining bandits stared in shock.

Xu Chenglong froze as well. This man's movements were stiff, his joints awkward, his posture clumsy. He looked exactly like a weak scholar who could not even truss a chicken.

So how was this happening?

"He's a tough one!"

"Send more men!"

Four bandits rushed forward at the same time.

This time, they coordinated. Two attacked from the front, fists aimed at Li Daoxuan's face. One struck from behind, punching his back. The last was even more vicious, launching a low kick straight at Li Daoxuan's groin.

In a narrow alley, even a skilled martial artist would struggle under such an attack.

Li Daoxuan had nowhere to dodge.

Four dull thuds rang out almost simultaneously.

Immediately, all four attackers screamed.

Hands shattered. Feet fractured.

They howled in pain and collapsed where they stood.

Only then did Li Daoxuan begin to counterattack.

After all, letting your enemies injure themselves first was the best way to ensure every hit landed cleanly.

Thud. Thud.

Two punches sent the pair in front of him flying.

He spun and kicked once, sending the man behind him crashing into the wall.

Finally, he looked down at the bandit clutching his foot and screaming, the one who had dared to kick his groin.

Li Daoxuan shook his head. "You're a little too devious."

He lifted his leg and kicked straight down.

Crack.

The sound was sharp and unmistakable.

Everyone nearby instinctively turned their faces away. No one wanted to witness that scene.

Li Daoxuan turned as well, now facing the remaining six bandits. "Only six left? I just realized there were twelve of you."

Xu Chenglong was terrified. "This man... he's cultivated Golden Bell Shield, Iron Cloth Shirt, the Thirteen Grand Protectors' Horizontal Training..."

Li Daoxuan casually tugged at his hero's robe, the fabric trembling faintly. "Otherwise, why would you think I'm qualified to wear this? Clothes like this are not for ordinary people."

Xu Chenglong roared, his voice shaking with rage. "Draw your blades. Forget taking him alive. Dead is fine!"

Swish. Swish. Swish.

The remaining six men drew their curved waist-knives.

Li Daoxuan patted himself and sighed theatrically. "Oh dear. No weapon."

Two bandits charged head-on, blades slashing toward his neck. Three more attacked from behind, hacking at his back.

All of them thought the same thing.

No matter how tough his Iron Body kungfu was, surely steel blades could still cut flesh.

The fastest blade struck first.

It sliced through the hero's robe, cut through the silicone surface beneath, and then met something unyielding.

Clang.

A crisp metallic sound echoed in the alley.

The bandit froze for a moment, then shouted, "He's wearing iron armguards under his clothes!"

From behind, three more clangs rang out as blades struck Li Daoxuan's back and bounced away.

"He's wearing iron armor!"

In that brief moment of confusion, Li Daoxuan moved.

He lunged forward, seized one bandit's waist-knife, and tore it from his grip with brute force.

The bandit stared in disbelief.

Li Daoxuan's palm had clearly been cut, yet not a single drop of blood flowed. The wound was smooth and clean, and beneath it, faintly visible, was metal bone.

The bandit gasped, about to shout a warning.

Too late.

Li Daoxuan drove the blade straight into his abdomen.

The man collapsed without a sound.

In the same breath, Li Daoxuan spun and kicked another bandit to the ground.

Xu Chenglong took one look at the scene and knew the truth.

This was not a fight they could win.

"Run!" he screamed. "Everyone, run!"

He turned and fled first, abandoning his men without hesitation.

Chapter 660 Flintlocks in Short Supply

Xu Chenglong and the three water bandits who had not yet been injured were already scared out of their wits.

The moment they saw Li Daoxuan straighten his body and turn his gaze toward them, their courage collapsed completely. They did not even dare glance back. They spun around almost simultaneously and bolted down the alley, scrambling and stumbling, afraid that if they were even half a step slower, they would end up like the men lying behind them.

Li Daoxuan did not chase.

There was no need.

He lowered his eyes and calmly surveyed the alley.

The narrow passage was littered with bodies.

Several of the water bandits had suffered direct blows to the face. Their facial bones were shattered, their features caved in so badly they were almost unrecognizable. These men were already at the edge of death. Their chests rose and fell faintly, each breath weaker than the last, as if the effort of inhaling itself was too much.

The others had fared no better.

Those who had taken Li Daoxuan's iron fists squarely to the chest or abdomen were sprawled on the ground, their limbs twitching occasionally. The kicks to their ribs had crushed bone and ruptured organs. Their breathing was shallow and erratic, accompanied by wet, gurgling sounds.

They would not last long.

Only one person was still clearly alive.

The man who had been struck viciously in the crotch.

He was curled into a ball on the ground, clutching his groin with both hands, his face twisted in agony. His body trembled nonstop as hoarse, broken cries escaped his throat.

At this point, calling him a "man" felt inappropriate.

"Eunuch" would have been a more accurate description.

This scene perfectly demonstrated a brutal truth of combat:

A blow to the groin was incomparably painful, enough to make a grown man wish for death—but it was rarely fatal.

A full-force strike to vital organs, however, left no room for survival.

Li Daoxuan stepped forward, seized the injured man by the leg, and dragged him out of the alley.

He dragged him the way one might drag a filthy, waterlogged mop—without ceremony, without mercy.

As they emerged onto the main street, the noise of the town rushed in.

The street was crowded, filled with vendors, passersby, and townsfolk going about their daily lives. When they saw a young man dragging a half-dead person behind him, gasps erupted instantly.

Several people recoiled in fear.

"What's happening?"

"Is someone being killed?"

Panic spread for a brief moment.

Then someone recognized Li Daoxuan.

"Wait... that's Benefactor Bai's friend!"

That single sentence cut through the confusion like a knife.

The atmosphere shifted immediately.

The panic vanished, replaced by curiosity and confidence. People stopped backing away and instead leaned closer, craning their necks to see more clearly.

"If he's Benefactor Bai's friend, then the one being dragged must be a bad person!"

"Look at that man's skin—dark and rough. He's obviously been living outdoors. He must be one of those Xiaolangdi water bandits!"

"The young hero is enforcing justice!"

The murmurs grew louder, more assured.

Some even took it upon themselves to defend Li Daoxuan, explaining to newcomers what was happening.

A few bold onlookers squeezed past the crowd and peered into the alley they had come from.

Inside, nearly ten bodies lay scattered across the ground—some motionless, some barely breathing. None of them looked like ordinary townsfolk. Their clothing, weapons, and hardened appearances told their story clearly enough.

That sight erased any remaining doubt.

By the time Li Daoxuan reached the county yamen, a large crowd had followed behind him, whispering and pointing, eager to see how things would unfold.

Inside the yamen, Li Daoxuan dragged the groaning water bandit straight into the main hall and tossed him onto the floor.

The sound echoed sharply.

The Magistrate of Mengjin County hurried out, startled by the disturbance, followed closely by his aides. Brigadier General Qin Renhong, who was temporarily staying at the magistrate's residence, also stepped out to see what was going on.

The magistrate frowned. "Who is this man?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "He ambushed me in an alley. Fortunately, I was able to subdue him."

The magistrate's expression tightened immediately. "Young Hero Xiao—are you injured?"

"Not at all," Li Daoxuan replied. "I'm perfectly fine."

Only then did the magistrate turn his gaze to the man writhing on the floor. His anger surged instantly.

"You insolent wretch!" he roared. "You dared attack a distinguished guest of Mengjin County? Do you know who he is? He is a friend of Benefactor Bai!"

His voice grew sharper with every sentence.

"Do you have any idea how many families Benefactor Bai has saved? How many lives he has preserved? And you dared lay hands on his friend?"

The magistrate slammed his sleeve. "I should throw you into the marketplace and let the common people tear you apart!"

The injured water bandit's face was already swollen and purple. He could barely breathe, let alone speak. His mouth opened and closed uselessly, no words emerging.

Li Daoxuan spoke again, his tone calm. "This man is very likely a Xiaolangdi water bandit. They wouldn't infiltrate Mengjin County just to deal with me. I believe they had another objective."

The moment those words were spoken, the mood in the hall changed.

The magistrate's face darkened.

Qin Renhong's brows knitted together, and he let out a low, thoughtful grunt.

Neither of them was foolish.

Xiaolangdi water bandits appearing inside the county town—especially at a time when Shanxi rebels might cross the Yellow River at any moment—was far too coincidental.

Qin Renhong's expression turned cold. "Interrogate him," he said sharply. "Use force if necessary."

The magistrate did not hesitate. "Interrogate him!"

The water bandit screamed in terror. "No—don't use force! You haven't even asked me yet! I'll talk! I'll confess everything!"

Words spilled out of him in a panicked rush.

He explained how Xu Chenglong of Xiaolangdi had defected to the Shanxi bandit leader Zijing Liang. He described how they had crossed the river to gather intelligence—troop numbers, deployments, defenses.

Qin Renhong's face flushed with fury. "Damn it all! You told them about my troop strength?"

Li Daoxuan added calmly, "Several of the water bandits who tried to kidnap me escaped. By now, they should already be back on the river."

Qin Renhong shot to his feet.

"Damn it!"

There was no time to waste. He summoned his personal guards and immediately rushed north, leaving Mengjin County at full speed to redeploy his troops along the riverbank.

After he left, the magistrate's composure finally collapsed.

His face turned pale, his voice trembling. "Grand Hero Xiao... what should we do?"

He swallowed hard.

"Even if General Qin changes his deployment, the rebels already know everything. They know he only has twenty-five hundred men. They will force a crossing no matter what."

This was the harsh truth.

Zijing Liang and Wang Ziyong commanded more than two hundred thousand rebels. Even if boats limited how many could cross at once, twenty-five hundred government soldiers could not possibly hold them back forever.

Mengjin County would not be able to defend itself.

No wonder the magistrate was on the verge of panic.

Li Daoxuan said calmly, "Xiaolangdi will come to support you."

The magistrate still looked uneasy. "Benefactor Bai is powerful, yes—but these are not ordinary water bandits anymore. This is a rebel army."

Li Daoxuan did not argue further.

"Keep the people calm," he said simply. "Leave the fighting at the front lines to us."

After leaving the yamen, Li Daoxuan returned to his guest room.

Gao Yiye was still asleep on the bed. Her lips curved slightly upward, and a faint blush colored her cheeks, as though she were dreaming of something pleasant.

Li Daoxuan sat down cross-legged in the corner of the room.

With a soft swoosh, his consciousness shifted.

It flowed into the gold-threaded statue resting against Bai Yuan's chest.

At Xiaolangdi, preparations were already complete.

Because this battle would unfold in front of imperial officials and government troops, Gao Family Village chose not to deploy its cannon-equipped warships.

Only eight armed cargo ships would be used.

More than a thousand elite militia from Gao Family Village boarded them—soldiers who were disciplined, well-trained, and accustomed to combat.

The newly formed local militia of Xiaolangdi was even larger, numbering more than three thousand.

They had only trained for a few months and had never experienced real battle. Their military quality was not yet high. However, their ideological education was—barely—acceptable.

More importantly, their morale was exceptionally high.

This battle was equivalent to defending their own homes.

That alone gave them a fighting spirit far stronger than that of outside troops.

In front of Yellow Turban Fortress, baskets filled with melee weapons were laid out once again.

The local militia commander, Jiang Cheng, picked up a hand crossbow and turned to Bai Yuan.

"Mister Bai," he said seriously, "our militia has trained for several months. Their ideological discipline has passed muster, and they've learned to use muskets. Issuing only melee weapons in real combat—doesn't that seem inappropriate?"

Bai Yuan coughed awkwardly.

"Our muskets are forged by senior craftsmen," he said. "One hammer strike at a time. Skilled technicians are scarce. Production simply can't keep up with the expansion of the army."

Jiang Cheng frowned. "What about reserves?"

Bai Yuan sighed. "Most have already been allocated. Gao Family Village tracks muskets strictly—by unit, by number, by responsibility. Lose one, and someone answers for it. If I suddenly issue three thousand more, I won't be fighting rebels—I'll be fighting my own logistics officers."

The militia accepted their sabers and spears in silence.

Their hands trembled slightly—not from fear, but from anticipation.

Li Daoxuan observed everything quietly.

Then he spoke.

"The shortage of muskets is temporary."

Bai Yuan and Jiang Cheng both turned.

"After this battle," Li Daoxuan continued calmly, "we'll expand the workshops, train apprentices faster, standardize parts. Muskets will stop being precious objects."

"They'll become standard equipment."

His gaze shifted northward, toward the river.

"They think numbers decide everything," he said softly.

"They're wrong."