

## Great Ming 711

### Chapter 711 Promote These Individuals

In the twelfth month of the fifth year of Chongzhen's reign, the forces of Gao Family Village finally withdrew back to their garrisons.

That same month, the winds of chaos shifted once again.

Li Zicheng, accompanied by his Eight Diamond Warriors and Guo Tianxing, suddenly burst out of the Taihang Mountains. On the night of the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth month, just before dawn, they launched a surprise assault and successfully breached Liaozhou—modern-day Zuoquan County.

The Supreme Commander of Xuanfu and Datong, Zhang Zongheng, and the Shanxi Provincial Commander, You Shilù, were caught completely off guard.

In panic, You Shilù hastily submitted a memorial to the throne:

"The bandits under my pursuit were Zijing Liang and his accomplices, while the so-called Dashing General and his group belonged to the Xihe bandits. I do not understand why they were permitted to move east unimpeded, bringing calamity upon Liaozhou. Fearing the collapse of the entire suppression effort, I had no choice but to abandon my current pursuit and rush to Liaozhou to preserve the territory."

On the twenty-eighth day, You Shilù arrived outside Liaozhou with his troops. After two days of fierce fighting, Li Zicheng abandoned over one thousand three hundred corpses and withdrew once more into the Taihang Mountains.

In the first month of the sixth year of Chongzhen's reign, within the Imperial Study of the capital—

The Chongzhen Emperor flipped through the memorials, his brows knotting tighter with each page.

"Six years," he said bitterly. "Six entire years of bandit suppression, and the realm is still in utter chaos."

The chief eunuch Cao Huachun, standing at his side, hurriedly spoke up.

"This is by no means Your Majesty's fault. Your Majesty governs diligently for the people, striving day and night—truly a wise ruler seldom seen through the ages. It is merely that the officials below fail to carry out their duties."

Such words never failed to soothe the emperor.

He casually opened another memorial—this one submitted by Lao Nanfeng, the garrison commander of Puzhou, detailing the Battle of Houjia Village.

Naturally, this was the version Cheng Xu had carefully polished.

Enemy forces numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Arrows fell like rain from all directions.

Rebel leaders dropped one after another with every volley.

The Chongzhen Emperor's spirits soared.

"This battle was fought magnificently," he murmured. "Could it be... an embellished report meant to amuse Us?"

With suspicion in his heart, he opened yet another memorial—this one from Zhang Fengyi of the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers.

It contained only a brief statement:

"The contents are acceptable."

Zhang Fengyi had not refuted a single word.

The Chongzhen Emperor's mood shot upward as if propelled skyward.

"Merit in suppressing bandits must be rewarded!" he declared happily. "This Puzhou garrison commander deserves promotion. Old Cao—what rank should he receive?"

Cao Huachun pondered.

"He is currently a fifth-rank garrison commander. Given such great merit, a promotion of one rank would be appropriate. He could be made a fourth-rank Mobile Division Commander, tasked with future bandit suppression. With such authority, his pursuit of scattered rebels across regions would be far more legitimate."

"Approved!" the emperor said decisively. "Draft the edict."

He then pointed at two names.

"And these two—Wang Xiaohua and Shi Jian. They too have rendered distinguished service."

Cao Huachun replied, "Coincidentally, the Prefect of Pinelyang Prefecture has submitted a memorial stating that the region lacks garrison troops. He requests that Wang Xiaohua be assigned there."

The Chongzhen Emperor nodded. "Very well. Promote Wang Xiaohua to Pinelyang Garrison Commander. And Shi Jian?"

"Hejin Garrison Commander," Cao Huachun suggested.

"Approved."

The emperor's gaze then fell upon another name.

"Xing Honglang," he said slowly. "Is this person not a surrendered rebel? How did she come to hold the position of Military Preparations Commissioner? That is clearly a civil post."

Cao Huachun lowered his voice.

"The Military Preparations Commissioner also oversees military affairs. Hedong Circuit has just endured a great battle—no ordinary civil official would dare go there. The Shanxi Governor therefore appointed a surrendered rebel to manage the salt administration. Xing Honglang was formerly a salt smuggler, skilled in finance and administration. He likely valued her abilities."

The Chongzhen Emperor snorted coldly.

"Absurd! Allowing a rebel and a salt smuggler to oversee the salt administration— isn't that like appointing a rat to guard the granary?"

Cao Huachun hesitated. "Your Majesty..."

"She has already risen far enough," the emperor said sharply. "She is not to be promoted further. Order her to garrison Hedong Circuit instead. As for the salt administration—we must appoint someone else."

Cao Huachun whispered cautiously, "Shanxi is in chaos. Civil officials are unwilling to go."

"We would not be at ease even if one did," the emperor replied. "Send one of Our own—a loyal eunuch who has served Us since childhood—to oversee the salt administration in Hedong."

Cao Huachun secretly rejoiced.

The salt administration was a fat post. Anyone seated there would inevitably grow wealthy.

Believing he had resolved yet another major issue, the Chongzhen Emperor picked up the next memorial.

And then—

His expression changed.

Yan Zhenghu had taken Jiaocheng and advanced on Taiyuan. Failing to breach it, he turned and seized Xizhou.

Shang Tianlong captured Wucheng, advanced on Fenzhou, failed again, and instead took Yangcheng County.

Most shocking of all—

Li Zicheng, after being driven from Liaozhou, had crossed the Taihang Mountains entirely and entered the Capital Region, appearing in the prefectures of Shunde (modern Xingtai) and Zhending (modern Zhengding).

The Chongzhen Emperor stared at the memorial submitted by Censor Meng Guozuo:

"The southern Capital Region is a vital strategic corridor. Shunde is an open plain stretching a thousand li straight to the capital, with no rivers or mountains to block the way."

The emperor's heart plunged as if on a collapsing tower.

"Are you joking?" he exclaimed. "The rebels are nearly at the gates of the capital?!"

Rage consumed him.

"Is Xu Dingchen merely drawing a salary? A Shanxi Provincial Governor commanding an entire province, yet repeatedly allowing rebels to slip through—now they've reached the Capital Region! Preposterous!"

"Your Majesty, please calm yourself," Cao Huachun urged.

"I cannot!" the emperor shouted. "Dismiss him! Dismiss Xu Dingchen at once! We never want to see this man again!"

Cao Huachun hesitated.

"Xu Dingchen has only held office for just over a year. If he is dismissed now..."

"We do not care!" the emperor snapped.

"But... the officials are unwilling..."

Factional infighting could stall appointments for years—but a provincial governorship could not remain vacant.

The Chongzhen Emperor fell silent, then suddenly said, "Ah—Dai Jun'en. Send Dai Jun'en to be Shanxi Provincial Governor."

Dai Jun'en.

A famed poet and writer, known by his sobriquet—the Madman of Lanjiang.

In his desperation, the emperor had seized a literary man and thrust him into the fires of frontier governance.

Whether it would work—he no longer cared.

His concern now lay solely with the rebels nearing the capital.

He urgently ordered:

Two thousand troops from Tongzhou

Two thousand from Changping

Eight thousand from General Liang Fu of Baoding

These forces were to cooperate with Lu Xiangheng, Military Preparations Commissioner of Daming, and the Shanxi government troops.

Thus, one of the late Ming dynasty's fiercest generals—

Lu Xiangheng, leading his Tianxiong Army—

Stepped fully onto the stage of history.

Chapter 712 Recruitment

"Conscription! Conscription!"

Across every territory controlled by Gao Family Village, the news spread like wildfire.

Fresh recruitment notices were plastered everywhere—on walls, markets, village gates, and ferry crossings—each one clearly listing the treatment and benefits offered by the Gao Family Village Militia.

Recruitment Notice

- Applicants need only pass a physical examination and a political review
- No education requirements
- Immediate provision of food and lodging upon enlistment
- Monthly military stipend: five taels of silver
- Additional welfare benefits included
- No wives issued! Absolutely none!

With Lao Nanfeng, Shi Jian, and Bai Mao all having received formal promotions, they now possessed legitimate authority to command larger formations and operate across wider regions. Naturally, Gao Family Village needed a new wave of soldiers to fill those ranks.

More importantly, the aborted pursuit of Zijing Liang had sounded an alarm.

The moment threats emerged near their own territory, Gao Family Village had been forced to recall troops immediately. This made one fact painfully clear to the upper leadership—

Their current military strength was far from sufficient.

More soldiers were urgently needed.

However, the "old revolutionaries" soon discovered a new and very real problem.

Within Gao Family Village's territory, recruitment was unexpectedly cold.

Even with the stipend raised to five taels of silver per month, volunteers trickled in at a pitiful rate.

The reason was simple.

I eat well.

I dress warmly.

Why would I risk my life?

There was an old saying deeply rooted in people's bones:

"A good man does not become a soldier, just as good iron is not used for nails."

From a modern perspective, this belief was absurd.

But in the Ming Dynasty, it was practically common sense.

Soldiers belonged to military households, a status scarcely better than that of artisan households. Profits were never theirs to share—but when blood was needed, they were always first in line.

Generation after generation had endured discrimination, scorn, and neglect.

Now, under the protection of Dao Xuan Tianzun, the common folk within Gao Family Village lived peaceful, stable lives. Who would willingly abandon such comfort to don armor and march toward death?

Compared to the early days of Gao Family Village—when hunger and chaos forced men to gamble their lives—recruitment had become vastly more difficult.

The richer and more stable they became, the harder it would be to recruit soldiers in the future.

For a time, recruitment efforts stalled completely.

Inside the main keep of Gao Family Fortress, Cheng Xu sat across from San Shier, his brow tightly furrowed.

"Steward San," Cheng Xu said bluntly, "did you not distribute enough recruitment flyers? We've been at this for nearly a month, and you've brought me only a thousand men. What use is that?"

San Shier spread his hands helplessly.

"I've distributed them until my legs nearly fell off. The benefits are already generous beyond comparison. But if people refuse to fight, what can I do? This is what one calls... willing but unable to help."

Cheng Xu raised an eyebrow.

"Then what do you propose?"

San Shier sighed deeply.

"If we want soldiers, we may have to turn to the prisons. Only the prisons can serve as our reserve camp. This is what one calls... finding a new path."

Cheng Xu frowned.

"The prisons are full of the old, the weak, the sick, and the disabled. How many of them could even hold a spear properly?"

San Shier shook his head.

"There is a batch of young, able-bodied men who have been incarcerated for quite some time. They may still be usable. Roughly five thousand of them. This is what one calls... sending charcoal in snowy weather."

Cheng Xu cursed.

"Damn it. I've known you for six or seven years, and I still can't stand the way you talk. Every time I see you, I feel like punching you."

San Shier continued calmly, unfazed.

"Do you remember when the rebels in Yan'an Prefecture surrendered to Hong Chengchou? He executed several hundred ringleaders and handed over three thousand surrendered rebels to He Renlong for escort into Prison Valley. Of those, fifteen hundred were young and strong. They've already served nearly two years and should be sufficiently reformed."

He paused, then added,

"And after Wang Jiayin died, Xing Honglang impersonated a rebel leader and brought back five thousand rebels from the mountains. All of them were able-bodied fighters and have undergone more than a year of labor reform."

San Shier concluded,

"That makes roughly seven thousand men. You'll have to screen them carefully. This is what one calls... meticulous selection."

Cheng Xu exhaled slowly.

"It seems we have no other choice."

Not long after, Cheng Xu once again headed toward Huanglong Mountain Prison.

As he entered the mountain region, his eyes swept across the surroundings—and he couldn't help but let out a surprised sound.

He had been away for too long.

Cement roads crisscrossed the mountains, winding upward like countless gray serpents. Buildings dotted the slopes in orderly clusters.

To his left stood a group of over thirty houses enclosed by a tall wall. If not for the large slogan painted across it—

"Labor Reform Is Most Glorious"

—he might have mistaken it for a fortified village rather than a prison.

Relying on vague memories, Cheng Xu navigated through the unfamiliar landscape until he reached the prison's central office.

There, he finally met Zhong Gaoliang.

Cheng Xu did not waste words.

"Zhong Gaoliang, I'm here to recruit soldiers from the prison."

Zhong Gaoliang froze.

"What? Again? Are you planning to take away all my young, able-bodied laborers?"

Cheng Xu laughed helplessly.

"Oh? You value them now?"

"How could I not?" Zhong Gaoliang retorted. "We're in the middle of massive construction."

He pulled out an enormous blueprint.

"This is the planning map Dao Xuan Tianzun personally handed to me."

The map depicted the entirety of Huanglong Mountain.

More than half of it already lay within Li Daoxuan's field of vision—but the plan extended far beyond that. This was pre-planning.

Li Daoxuan knew that one day, his field of vision would cover the entire mountain.

Every usable flat area was marked—farmland, factories, residential zones—linked by cement roads.

A main road cut straight through Huanglong Mountain, leading directly toward Yan'an Prefecture.

That road was already more than halfway complete.

Only a short section remained.

Cheng Xu stared at the map, his expression turning solemn.

"It's nearly connected to Yan'an... Hong Chengchou, the Supreme Commander of three border regions, is stationed there. That man is ruthless. If he suspects Gao Family Village of rebellious intent—"

"Relax," Zhong Gaoliang said calmly. "Hong Chengchou isn't there."

"What?"

"Mongol tribes attacked the Yansui border camps, then raided Lingzhou, Hengcheng, Yansui, and Xichuan. Hong Chengchou has gone to Guyuan to take command."

Cheng Xu finally breathed easier.

"Then who's overseeing Yan'an now?"

"Chen Qiyu, Governor of Yansui," Zhong Gaoliang replied. "He's capable, but nowhere near as sharp as Hong Chengchou. He hasn't suspected us at all. In fact, he praised our road construction, saying that building roads and bridges accumulates boundless merit, and welcomed local gentry funding such projects to assist the court."

Cheng Xu nodded slowly.

The net of history was tightening.

And Gao Family Village needed soldiers—now more than ever.

Chapter 713 Let's Dig a Tunnel

Li Daoxuan's vision now covered nearly the entirety of Huanglong Mountain. Only a small remaining stretch stood between it and Yan'an Prefecture.

At the same time, the cement road extending from Gao Family Village was also approaching its final destination. Once completed, it would run uninterrupted all the way to Yan'an.

Huanglong Mountain had become a frenzy of construction.

Despite Zhong Gaoliang commanding well over a hundred thousand labor reform prisoners, truly strong and able-bodied workers were still in short supply. Developing a mountain range of this scale was no trivial matter. Even in a later age, this would have been classified as a super-project. In the current era—where nearly everything relied on bare hands and simple tools—the workload was nothing short of monstrous.

Cheng Xu folded his arms and said coldly, "I don't care if your manpower is stretched thin. Conscription must happen. If our forces are inadequate and the rebel bandits break through, the people will suffer catastrophic losses. By then, all these houses you're building will be completely meaningless."

His words struck home.

Zhong Gaoliang hesitated for a moment, then finally nodded. "Very well. The group you want to recruit is currently working on the final mountain pass leading to Yan'an Prefecture. I'll take you there so you can see it yourself."

The two climbed into a Solar Car and drove along the newly paved cement road that wound through Huanglong Mountain, heading straight for Yan'an.

The road stretched far and long, twisting endlessly through forests and valleys. After more than a hundred li, Cheng Xu was growing impatient—until the cement road suddenly came to an abrupt halt.

Ahead lay nothing but a dirt track of yellow earth.

At the end of the road, thousands of labor reform prisoners were hard at work, pushing the construction line deeper into the mountains.

Cheng Xu's spirits instantly lifted.

He jumped out of the Solar Car and shouted across the worksite, "Labor reform prisoners! Gather here! I have an announcement!"

The workers stopped what they were doing and converged rapidly. Seven thousand men gathered together, shoulder to shoulder, forming a dense crowd. Yet there was not the slightest noise—no chatter, no disorder. Years of incarceration had hammered discipline deep into their bones.

Cheng Xu cleared his throat and announced the conscription order.

As expected, the reaction was completely different from that of ordinary civilians.

These men had once been rebel bandits. They had wielded blades, spilled blood, and fought with their lives on the line. They weren't plagued by the same exhaustion and fear of war that haunted common folk.

The moment they heard about the generous treatment and benefits afforded to militia soldiers, the crowd erupted.

"I'll join!"

"Count me in!"

"I'm willing!"

Voices overlapped as everyone scrambled to volunteer.

Cheng Xu was overjoyed. At last—real manpower.

Just as he was basking in success, a man stepped forward from the crowd. His appearance was honest and unremarkable.

"Instructor He," the man said respectfully, "I wish to enlist immediately as well. However... this cement road before us—the Huang–Yan Highway—is almost finished. Only the final mountain remains. Once we break through it, the road will reach Yan'an Prefecture."

He paused, then continued slowly, "I've worked on this road since the very first shovel struck the ground. From beginning to end. If I leave now, without seeing it completed... I fear that regret will follow me for the rest of my life."

At his words, the surrounding prisoners all fell silent.

One by one, their gazes shifted—from the speaker... to the towering final mountain ahead.

That mountain was Dadunliang Mountain.

It stood as the last barrier before Yan'an Prefecture. Once it was dealt with, Huanglong Mountain and Yan'an would be fully connected by road.

As the prisoners stared at it, complicated emotions flickered in their eyes.

Cheng Xu understood immediately.

Every single one of them felt the same way.

They had carved this road out with their own hands and feet. With so little remaining, leaving now would gnaw at them forever.

After a moment's thought, Cheng Xu said, "Very well. Finish this last stretch first. Once it's done, you may enlist."

Zhong Gaoliang leaned in and whispered awkwardly, "It sounds simple, but in reality... this will take a very long time. A highway can't go straight up a mountain and down the other side. It has to coil upward, winding like an earthworm."

He gestured toward Dadunliang Mountain. "And this peak is far steeper than ordinary mountains. Building a proper mountain road here is extremely difficult."

After hesitating, he added, "This final section alone... could take another six months."

"Six months?!" Cheng Xu nearly jumped. "Absolutely not! The world is already in chaos, rebel bandits are everywhere. Even after conscription, soldiers need six months to a year of training before they're combat-ready. If we wait another half year just to recruit, it'll be far too late!"

Zhong Gaoliang frowned. "Then what should we do?"

Cheng Xu let out a long sigh. "This is a real problem..."

At that moment, a calm voice suddenly spoke from Cheng Xu's chest.

"Leave this matter to me."

Cheng Xu froze, then immediately bowed. "Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Zhong Gaoliang followed suit, bowing deeply.

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled softly. "The highway must cross Dadunliang Mountain, correct?"

"That's right," Zhong Gaoliang replied hurriedly. "But this mountain—"

"I see it."

Dao Xuan Tianzun examined the peak carefully, briefly considering whether to simply reach in with a shovel and remove it entirely.

But after a closer look, he dismissed the idea.

Dadunliang Mountain was part of the Huanglong Mountain range, its core composed almost entirely of solid stone. It was tightly connected to the surrounding ridges, forming one massive, unified structure.

A small shovel wouldn't even make it budge.

What about using a metal scraper to carve a path?

That wouldn't work either.

The mountain was steep, jagged, and riddled with deep V-shaped ravines. Even if a path could be carved, it would still twist endlessly up and down. Paving such a route with cement would remain an enormous burden, consuming vast amounts of time.

Given all this—

There was only one solution.

Li Daoxuan laughed softly. "Then let's dig a tunnel."

Cheng Xu blinked. "A... tunnel?"

Zhong Gaoliang echoed in confusion, "What is a tunnel?"

Li Daoxuan explained calmly, "The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. At the base of Dadunliang Mountain, we'll bore directly through it—from one side to the other. This passage will be called a tunnel."

He continued, "There will be no need for winding mountain roads. The highway will be shorter, and construction time will be drastically reduced."

"Through the mountain?!" Cheng Xu was stunned.

Zhong Gaoliang stammered, "But... how could such a thing be done?"

He stopped mid-sentence, suddenly remembering who he was speaking to, and hastily covered his mouth.

While humans might find it impossible—

A Dao Xuan Tianzun certainly would not.

Cheng Xu, for his part, had never doubted it.

Zhong Gaoliang did not know that when Cheng Xu had first been rescued and brought to Gao Family Village, Li Daoxuan had triggered a landslide that buried an entire small mountain, faking Cheng Xu's death and deceiving the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

Cheng Xu knew very well just how terrifying this being truly was.

Dao Xuan Tianzun said, "Wait a moment. I need to prepare the appropriate tools."

With that, his voice fell silent.

Cheng Xu exclaimed excitedly, "Dao Xuan Tianzun has gone to prepare his divine artifacts!"

Zhong Gaoliang's eyes lit up. "A divine artifact capable of piercing a mountain... astonishing!"

Their excited voices spread through the crowd.

The seven thousand labor reform prisoners erupted.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun is personally going to break through the mountain?"

"We have to see this!"

"This is history in the making!"

They quickly gathered on a nearby hillside facing Dadunliang Mountain, sitting neatly in rows. Dried rations and water skins came out as they ate and drank, eyes fixed on the mountain, eagerly awaiting the moment when divine power would descend.

Chapter 714 The Celestial Artifact — The Mighty Power Drill

Li Daoxuan was looking for a tool.

Chopsticks?

Don't be ridiculous.

Even if Dadunliang Mountain were shrunk two hundred times in every direction, it would still be a solid mountain of stone. No amount of chopsticks—divine or otherwise—was going to pierce that.

If you wanted to drill through rock, there was only one answer.

An electric drill.

Li Daoxuan hurried out of his apartment and headed straight for the property management office. Smiling politely, he said to the young woman on duty, "I need to drill a hole at home. Could I borrow an electric drill?"

The property manager smiled back and handed him a compact, one-handed drill. Then she added a box filled with drill bits—long ones, short ones, thick, thin, everything imaginable.

Li Daoxuan thanked her and returned home.

He plugged the drill in and gave it a test run.

"Whiiiz—!"

The sudden noise made him flinch. His hand shook, and he nearly dropped it.

"...Yeah," he muttered. "Definitely not a beginner-friendly tool."

No matter. He'd improvise.

He adjusted the diorama box, sliding Dadunliang Mountain toward the edge until it was well within reach. With his left hand, he steadied the mountain. With his right, he slowly lowered the drill.

"Here it comes!" Cheng Xu shouted.

"Look! Look!" Zhong Gaoliang pointed wildly. "The celestial artifact!"

Seven thousand labor reform prisoners sucked in a collective breath.

Before their eyes, an incomparably strange and colossal object descended from the heavens. It looked vaguely like a short musket, except its front ended not in a barrel, but in a bizarre, spiraled iron spike.

Cheng Xu blinked.

"...Doesn't that look like Jin Gang Zuan?"

The same nickname as the bandit chief they had captured and executed days ago.

The massive drill bit extended downward, stopping at the base of Dadunliang Mountain. It hovered, shifted slightly left and right, as if choosing a spot.

Then—

"Whirrrrr!"

The switch was pressed.

The drill bit spun at terrifying speed.

The labor reform prisoners cried out in shock, "It's spinning! So fast! It's unbelievable!"

"CRASH!"

The drill slammed into the mountain wall.

Stone shattered instantly. Debris exploded outward. Dust billowed like a storm cloud. In the blink of an eye, a massive hole had been gouged straight into the rock face.

The entire crowd fell silent.

Then—

"What if that drilled into us?" someone whispered in terror.

Cold shivers ran through the prisoners.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun had used such a thing when we were still doing evil... would any of us have survived?

We're lucky. Truly lucky.

The Tianzun spared our worthless lives.

The celestial artifact showed no mercy.

The drill bored deeper and deeper, Dadunliang Mountain offering no resistance at all. Within moments, the mountain was pierced halfway through, revealing a dark, yawning cavern within.

The artifact rose into the sky.

Then it returned—this time bearing an even longer drill bit.

It plunged back into the tunnel and continued.

Cheng Xu and Zhong Gaoliang watched in a daze.

Such power... could only belong to Dao Xuan Tianzun.

They silently thanked him for allowing mortals like themselves to witness such divine might.

"CRASH!"

The mountain was pierced through.

Li Daoxuan leaned down and peered into the diorama box, looking through the hole from one end to the other.

"Good," he said. "Straight through."

He gently shook Dadunliang Mountain to test the tunnel's stability.

To him, it was a light nudge.

To Cheng Xu, it was an apocalyptic event.

The entire mountain swayed violently, as if an earth dragon were twisting beneath it. Cheng Xu nearly lost his footing, his scalp tingling with fear.

After a moment, there were no cave-ins.

No collapsing stone.

Li Daoxuan nodded in satisfaction. To be safe, he inserted a thick PVC pipe straight through the tunnel, reinforcing it.

Then—

Whoosh.

His consciousness shifted via co-sensing, descending into the golden-thread statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Cheng Xu's chest.

"It's done," the statue said calmly. "Have the labor reform prisoners clear it out. Then pave a cement road straight through to Yan'an Prefecture."

"It's... done?" Cheng Xu exploded with joy.

He sprang up and bolted toward the tunnel without saying a word to anyone, waving his arms wildly.

The golden-thread statue asked, "What are you doing?"

Cheng Xu laughed uncontrollably. "I want to be the first inside! I want to touch the tunnel carved by the celestial artifact!"

The statue fell silent.

Cheng Xu rushed in. Inside the tunnel, the smooth cylindrical pipe left him momentarily stunned. He touched the walls, then roared at the top of his lungs, "I'm here!"

His voice echoed endlessly.

"Hahaha! Hahaha! I'm the first! I'm the first!"

Li Daoxuan sighed.

Forget it. I'm too lazy to deal with this lunatic.

Whoosh.

His consciousness shifted again, landing on Zhong Gaoliang's chest.

"Organize them," the statue said. "Start building the road."

Zhong Gaoliang finally snapped out of his daze.

"Everyone!" he shouted. "Get to work! Flatten the floor—it's too round. Lay cement all the way to Yan'an Prefecture!"

"When the road is finished, this project ends—and you'll all be released from labor reform and join the army!"

Seven thousand voices erupted at once.

"Good!"

"Long live Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"The celestial artifact is incredible!"

"My last days of labor reform!"

"Hahaha! Finally free!"

They surged into the tunnel like a flood.

Zhong Gaoliang watched, chuckling, then suddenly paused.

"This tunnel should have a name," he mused. "How about... the Dao Xuan Tianzun Tunnel?"

From the statue came an immediate response.

"No. That's terrible."

Zhong Gaoliang blinked. "But Tianzun dug it! That name sounds perfect."

"Still terrible."

"...Then the Red Sorghum Tunnel?"

Li Daoxuan was silent for a moment. Then: "Go amuse yourself. I'll name it."

After some thought, he said, "It will be called the Huangqiu Terrace Tunnel."

Zhong Gaoliang was confused. "Does that name have some profound meaning?"

"No," Li Daoxuan replied.

It was simply the name that appeared on future maps of his own dynasty, at this exact location.

He was merely borrowing it.

Inside the tunnel, the labor reform prisoners immediately got to work.

A Blue Hat, without waiting for orders, began barking instructions at the Yellow Hats:

"Bring soil! Level the floor first!"

"Compact it, then lay cement!"

"And drainage ditches—both sides! If this floods, we're all dead!"

The tunnel rang with noise, sweat, and hope.

A mountain had fallen.

A road was being born.

Chapter 715 The Eunuch Arrives Hedong City.

Xing Honglang stood at the eastern city gate with a group of her subordinates, posture straight, expression composed, waiting for the arriving guests.

She hated this sort of thing.

Being an official of the imperial court came with endless, meaningless formalities—bowing, flattering, posturing, reciting hollow praises. She despised all of it. Unfortunately, for the task entrusted to her by Dao Xuan Tianzun, she had no choice but to endure.

Beside her stood Li Daoxuan, wearing a faint smile.

"Don't overthink it," he said lightly. "Just treat it as watching a troupe of clowns perform. If you adjust your mindset, it can even be entertaining."

Xing Honglang exhaled slowly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun speaks wisely. I'll consider it... playing along with officials."

As they spoke, a grand procession slowly approached the city gate.

A large carriage rolled forward, surrounded by attendants and guards. When it stopped, an elderly man stepped down, his bearing refined, his robe spotless, his entire demeanor radiating the air of a cultured scholar.

This was Dai Jun'en, the newly appointed Governor of Shanxi.

A poet. A writer. A man whose reputation for talent far exceeded his reputation for governance.

The moment Dai Jun'en saw Xing Honglang, his eyes lit up. He clasped his hands and exclaimed with genuine excitement,

"A female general! Truly a female general! How magnificent, how awe-inspiring! I've long heard that General Xing swept away bandit forces, stabilized Hedong Circuit, and not long ago even encircled Zijing Liang at Houjia Village. A heroine who rivals any man—no, surpasses most of them!"

Xing Honglang disliked such effusive praise. She merely clasped her fists in a brief salute, deliberately adopting the demeanor of a blunt, taciturn soldier, hoping to end the exchange quickly.

Dai Jun'en clapped his hands in delight.

"Wonderful! Seeing such a lady general, inspiration strikes me like lightning! Forgive me—I must write a poem at once!"

Two house guards immediately stepped forward, presenting brush, ink, paper, and inkstone with both hands.

Dai Jun'en bent over the paper and scribbled rapidly. But as soon as he finished, his brows furrowed. With a sigh, he crumpled the page into a ball and tossed it aside.

"Oh dear," he said sheepishly. "Old age, old age. When inspiration comes, I must write immediately, or it slips away. I often neglect my guests because of this... Now then, where were we?"

Xing Honglang forced a polite smile.

Li Daoxuan chuckled and interjected, "Elder, we haven't said a single word yet. You've been speaking the whole time."

Dai Jun'en turned to look at him—and froze.

"What a splendid young knight!" he exclaimed. "Handsome, refined, calm as still water. Just looking at you fills this old man with poetic impulse!"

The house guards moved again without waiting for orders.

Dai Jun'en seized the brush and wrote swiftly. Li Daoxuan leaned slightly to peek, but Dai Jun'en's body blocked most of the view. He could only make out the latter lines:

Green mountains and clear waters, tales of a thousand years;  
Green mountains and clear waters, tales of a thousand years;

Bright moon and ancient pines, a path carried by the wind.

Dai Jun'en frowned, dissatisfied once more, and crumpled the paper.

"Ah, no, no, still not right," he muttered, tossing it away. Then he looked up again. "Now then... where were we?"

Everyone present exchanged glances.

This man... is the Governor of Shanxi?

Li Daoxuan decided to save time. "Elder, let's be direct. What brings you to Hedong Circuit this time?"

"Oh! Right, right, the matter at hand." Dai Jun'en nodded repeatedly. "This old man is here to introduce someone."

He gestured behind him. "This gentleman is the eunuch dispatched by His Majesty to supervise the salt administration. His name is... ah... what was it again?"

A middle-aged eunuch stepped forward.

He was pale-faced, beardless, slightly plump, dressed in the official robes of palace eunuchs. He forced a thin, unpleasant smile.

"My surname is Lan," he said. "My given name is Xingyang. In the palace, I am simply called Eunuch Lan."

Only then did Dai Jun'en turn back to Xing Honglang.

"This is Eunuch Lan. From now on, he will remain in Hedong Circuit to oversee the salt administration."

No further explanation was needed.

Everyone understood.

Emperor Zhu Youjian did not trust Xing Honglang. So he sent a eunuch.

They had their schemes.

Gao Family Village had its preparations.

Whatever came, they would meet it.

Eunuch Lan stepped forward, his chin raised, eyes filled with disdain, as if all before him were ants beneath his feet.

"This humble servant has arrived by imperial decree to supervise the salt administration. There's no need for idle formalities. First—take me to see the situation at Xie Lake."

Xing Honglang glanced at Li Daoxuan.

He nodded calmly.

Let him see.

They had been ready for this for a long time.

"Very well," Xing Honglang said. "I will personally escort Your Eminence to Xie Lake."

"Lead the way," Eunuch Lan ordered.

Dai Jun'en added cheerfully, "This old man shall also accompany you. I would like to have a look."

The group departed Hedong City and headed for Xie Lake.

Xie Lake was vast—over forty li long and several li wide.

Gao Family Village's arrangements were already in place.

All the newly constructed, highly productive salt villages had been deliberately positioned in the southeastern corner of the lake. Meanwhile, the villages closest to Hedong City had been intentionally left to appear old, ruined, and miserable.

When the group arrived at the lakeside, the first thing they saw was a half-burnt, desolate village.

Xing Honglang gestured calmly.

"This was originally Donghu Village. During the last bandit uprising, when Hedong Circuit fell, this village was burned to the ground. Every salt maker here was slaughtered."

Eunuch Lan sucked in a sharp breath.

"Oh!"

He had come expecting an easy post—profits, bribes, leisure.

Instead, what he saw was death.

Only then did he remember: Shanxi was crawling with bandits. Here, danger was never far away.

Dai Jun'en could only shake his head and sigh. "Alas..."

They continued along the lakeshore, moving northeast.

One ruined village followed another. Burnt huts. Empty ground. Not a single living salt maker.

Finally, they reached a village where people still worked.

Salt makers were carefully sun-drying salt using the most ancient methods.

This, too, was deliberate.

Gao Family Village had entire teams dedicated to handling inspections.

Where later generations staged prosperity, Gao Family Village staged misery.

Eunuch Lan's scalp prickled.

"Are... are all the salt villages of Xie Lake in such a state?"

Xing Honglang shrugged.

"What can be done? This is Shanxi. If I hadn't been stationed here to suppress bandits, even these few salt makers wouldn't be alive. Eunuch Lan, visit other counties and you'll understand what 'nine out of ten houses empty' truly means."

Eunuch Lan paled.

"Then... then can enough salt really be delivered?"

"Of course," Xing Honglang said, her smile turning cold. "We'll simply force the remaining salt makers to work harder. Anyone who slacks off will be whipped. If they still refuse, I'll skin them, tear out their sinews, and render their fat for lamps. As long as one is ruthless enough, salt can always be produced."

Cold sweat streamed down Eunuch Lan's back.

Too fierce... far too fierce!

I only wanted silver. This woman is ready to take lives.

A former salt smuggler, a pacified bandit—truly terrifying.

He swallowed hard.

And from that moment on, he decided one thing:

Do not provoke Xing Honglang.

Chapter 716 Governor Dai Jun'en of Shanxi

A faint chill crept up Eunuch Lan's spine.

Only now did he truly understand that salt smugglers were nothing like the ordinary officials he dealt with in the capital. Before coming to Shanxi, he had only heard vague rumors. Now that he was standing

on this harsh land himself, he finally grasped the brutal truth. Without real ability, without real nerve, no one could survive here.

Even though he had brought along a group of his own trusted enforcers, the numbers were laughably small. If Xing Honglang truly decided to deal with him, it would be effortless. He would not even have time to cry out.

Eunuch Lan cleared his throat, his voice turning cautious and strained. "Ahem... well... there's really no need to inspect the salt villages, is there? They're all more or less the same anyway."

Xing Honglang raised an eyebrow, her gaze sharp. "Oh? Not going to see them? Then you'll be missing the worst of it. In the last salt village, there were piles of bleached bones. After the rebels slaughtered the people, the corpses were left right there. Now, when dusk falls, the whole village glimmers with eerie will o' the wisps."

Eunuch Lan's face went pale. He coughed twice in panic. "Cough, cough. It's enough for this official to hear about such things. There's no need for me to see them in person."

Thus, the group returned to the Hedong Circuit.

Xing Honglang produced a ledger, one specially prepared in advance by the middle school graduates of Gao Family Village, students whose strongest subject was mathematics. Every entry, from inventory to shipments, was recorded with astonishing clarity and precision, far cleaner and more detailed than the original ledgers kept by the court.

It looked impeccable.

Unfortunately, it was entirely fake.

With Eunuch Lan's limited learning and shallow understanding of administration, he could not detect any flaw at all. After scrutinizing it for a long time, he found only one problem. The salt output from Xie Lake had dropped sharply.

Compared to its peak years, production had almost been cut in half.

Eunuch Lan let out a long sigh. "The Emperor is short on funds. The war against the Manchus demands enormous military expenditure, yet the salt output of Xie Lake has fallen so badly. What are we to do?"

Xing Honglang answered calmly, "The only solution is to recruit a large number of salt artisans. But Shanxi is engulfed in war and chaos. Where would we find the people to recruit?"

Eunuch Lan fell silent.

Xing Honglang extended her hand and quietly placed a piece of exquisite jade into his palm.

Eunuch Lan weighed it once, instantly sensing its value. His expression changed at once, as if the clouds had parted. "Since that is the case, then there is truly nothing to be done. The salt tax from Xie Lake will have to remain as it is for now. This official will report the matter to the Emperor and consider suitable measures."

Eunuch Lan was easily dealt with.

Xing Honglang returned to the main hall, only to find Dai Jun'en still seated there, showing no intention of leaving.

It seemed the poet governor still had something on his mind.

She stepped forward. "Does Your Excellency the Governor have further instructions?"

Dai Jun'en let out a long, weary sigh. "General Xing, this old man did not come today merely to escort a eunuch. There are also military matters I wish to discuss with you."

Xing Honglang replied, "Discuss with me? Shouldn't Your Excellency be speaking with General You Shilu, the Regional Commander of Shanxi?"

Dai Jun'en shook his head slowly. "The imperial troops... they are difficult to speak with."

Xing Honglang raised her brows slightly.

Dai Jun'en continued, his voice heavy. "Those men slaughter innocent civilians to claim merit and fabricate battle reports. It has become commonplace. Every one of them is a rogue soldier. This old man cannot command them at all. The previous Governor of Shanxi, Xu Dingchen, was dragged down precisely because of these same rogue troops."

For a moment, Xing Honglang did not know what to say.

"Come," Dai Jun'en said. "Let me show you some secret reports this old man has received."

He took out a thick stack of letters.

Xing Honglang opened them and read. One report accused Deng Qi, the Regional Commander of Sichuan, of allowing his troops to plunder and rape civilians in Hebei. Another described how Zuo Liangyu killed innocent people to claim merit, submitting the severed heads of commoners as bandits. A third letter detailed how Zhang Zongheng, the Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da, framed Xu Dingchen, shifting all blame for the failed suppression of bandits onto him.

Among the officials of Shanxi, scarcely two could be called clean.

She reached the final two letters.

One praised the White Pole Soldiers for their strict discipline, stating that they never harmed a single civilian.

The other reported that Xing Honglang led her troops with exceptional conduct, maintaining harmony between soldiers and civilians, helping the common people resolve their difficulties, and distributing grain to relieve suffering, surpassing even the White Pole Soldiers.

Xing Honglang frowned. "So Your Excellency already knows everything."

Dai Jun'en nodded. "Yes. This old man even knows about your little performance just now, using fake salt villages to deceive Eunuch Lan. To the southwest of Xie Lake, new salt villages have appeared, their output several times higher than before. Such tricks can fool a simpleton fresh out of the palace, but they cannot fool an official who truly wishes to govern."

Xing Honglang's hand instinctively moved to the hilt of her saber.

Dai Jun'en sighed softly. "But this old man did not expose you. You have aided the people of Puzhou, and again the people of the Hedong Circuit. The silver spent on relief is no small amount. If you had not diverted some of the salt revenue, how could you have done all this?"

Xing Honglang's grip slowly relaxed.

"These salt funds," Dai Jun'en continued, "were used on the common people. If Eunuch Lan had gotten hold of them, they would have ended up entirely in his private coffers. Ah. This old man is old and forgetful. Many things I have just seen, I will forget in a moment. I only know how to write poetry now. I cannot suppress bandits either. Sitting in the position of Governor of Shanxi, I am probably only meant to wander around, leave behind a few verses, and then be dismissed in a year or two."

With that, Dai Jun'en stood up. "General Xing, take good care of the people. This old man will be leaving."

He staggered out.

Just then, Eunuch Lan walked back in. "Your Excellency the Governor, what were you discussing with General Xing just now?"

Dai Jun'en exclaimed, "Oh. I've suddenly thought of a poem."

His household guard immediately stepped forward and presented writing tools.

Dai Jun'en scribbled a few lines rapidly, then crumpled the paper and tossed it aside. "No, no. Terrible writing."

He turned back to Eunuch Lan. "Where were we in our conversation?"

Eunuch Lan replied hesitantly, "We... weren't discussing anything just now."

Dai Jun'en nodded thoughtfully. "Ah, yes, of course. Speaking of which, this old man has just taken up the post of Governor of Shanxi. What am I supposed to be doing now? The Emperor instructed this old man to... to do what, exactly?"

Eunuch Lan's voice shot up several octaves. "He instructed you to suppress bandits!"

Dai Jun'en blinked. "Oh? So it was bandit suppression."

He turned to Xing Honglang, who had followed them out. "General Xing, this old man has no idea how to suppress bandits. I only know how to write poetry. So this heavy responsibility, I will entrust it to you."

Xing Honglang clasped her fists. "Your Excellency the Governor, rest assured. Leave it to your humble subordinate."

Dai Jun'en shakily climbed into his carriage. His guards surrounded it, and they set off toward the city gates. From within the carriage came his aged voice, calmly reciting,

"Amid blossoming halls, autumn light still gleams,

West wind sways, a Daoist heart at ease.

Since ancient souls have slipped from sight,

How many Double Ninth days knew cold mist and rain?"

A guard asked softly, "Master, that poem was wonderful. Shall I bring your writing tools?"

"No need," Dai Jun'en replied. "That poem is this old man's masterpiece. I won't forget it. Oh, right. What was I just discussing with Eunuch Lan? I've forgotten again."

The guard whispered, "Eunuch Lan said he would go on an outing with you another day to compose poetry."

Dai Jun'en chuckled. "Good. Very good."

The governor's carriage slowly headed north, toward Taiyuan, where the governor's yamen stood, a place the rebels would casually besiege from time to time.

Chapter 717 Follow Your Curriculum

The first month of Chongzhen's sixth year arrived.

Spring returned to the land, bringing with it the season of plowing and sowing.

Outside Puzhou City, a scene unfolded that would have astonished any Ming official bold—or unlucky—enough to witness it.

A thousand White Pole Soldiers from Sichuan stood neatly along the field ridges, hands clasped behind their backs, gazes focused with battlefield-level intensity.

And standing before them—

was a scholar.

Zhao Sheng.

Sleeves rolled up, trousers splashed with mud, he stood knee-deep in farmland, gesturing animatedly as he explained the mysteries of what he called scientific farming.

"Look carefully," Zhao Sheng said, holding up a small sack. "This is urea. Used properly, it will greatly increase crop yields. But remember—too much will burn the roots. Fertilizer is nourishment, not poison."

As he spoke, he demonstrated each step himself: how to dilute it, how to spread it, how far from the roots it should be applied.

The White Pole Soldiers watched without blinking.

Watching alone was not enough.

Soon, the thousand soldiers dispersed into nearby fields, rolling up their sleeves and following Zhao Sheng's instructions step by step.

This made perfect sense.

The Tujia people of Shizhu followed the ancient system of "soldiers in wartime, farmers in peacetime." These men who charged fearlessly into arrow fire became, once back in Wan Shou Mountain, the backbone of their villages' agriculture.

They were not unfamiliar with soil.

They were simply learning how to master it.

This instruction had been personally ordered by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

After finishing a round of explanation, Zhao Sheng straightened up and suddenly noticed someone strolling along the field ridge with an easy, relaxed gait.

"Ah—Dao Xuan Tianzun," Zhao Sheng said with a grin. "General Zhang is over there."

Zhang Fengyi, who had been observing quietly, turned her head.

"So Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived."

After spending time within Gao Family Village's territory, Zhang Fengyi had long since realized the truth.

Mr. Xiao, Mr. Li—those were merely mortal disguises.

This being was no ordinary man.

Li Daoxuan smiled lightly.

"How's it going? Are they learning well?"

Zhang Fengyi nodded.

"Thanks to Dao Xuan Tianzun's careful arrangements, they're learning quickly. My only worry is Wan Shou Mountain itself. The land there is rocky, the soil thin... I fear—"

Li Daoxuan waved his hand.

"No need to worry. I have three crops to recommend. They're perfectly suited for Wan Shou Mountain."

Zhang Fengyi's eyes lit up.

"Oh? Which three?"

Li Daoxuan extended his hand.

A potato.

A sweet potato.

An ear of corn.

Simple. Unremarkable.

Yet these three crops were precisely what future generations of the Tujia people would rely upon to survive and thrive in Wan Shou Mountain's harsh terrain.

Even centuries later, travelers would taste local specialties—potato rice, corn rice, sweet potato rice—and praise the resilience of the land and its people.

These crops were born for the White Pole Soldiers.

Zhang Fengyi studied them carefully.

"I've heard of these... but I have no experience planting them."

"No problem," Li Daoxuan said, turning his head. "Mr. Zhao."

Zhao Sheng stepped forward immediately.

"You'll need to teach them how to cultivate corn, sweet potatoes, and potatoes as well."

Zhao Sheng laughed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, I was already planning to. We simply haven't reached that part of the curriculum yet."

Li Daoxuan laughed heartily.

"Good, good. Follow your curriculum. Don't let me interfere. I wouldn't want an amateur guiding an expert."

Zhao Sheng burst into laughter.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, you're being modest again. You know five centuries past, five centuries future, and five centuries in between. What could you possibly not know?"

"Hey," Li Daoxuan said, pretending to scold him, "you're learning bad habits. That's shameless flattery. Back to teaching."

Zhao Sheng bowed his head obediently and resumed his lesson.

The White Pole Soldiers listened with absolute seriousness—

as if this were battlefield orders rather than farming techniques.

Li Daoxuan turned to Zhang Fengyi.

"General Zhang, bandit armies are stirring in Hebei. For the time being, don't pursue them. Return to Wan Shou Mountain first. Implement these new farming methods immediately. Ensure your people are fed."

He paused.

"Food comes before war."

Zhang Fengyi clasped her fists deeply.

"That was my intention as well. The bandits grow stronger by the day. With only a thousand men, it's difficult to contend with them. I'll summon my husband to join me."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Good."

Three days later, after completing their studies and loading several carts of fertilizer as samples, the thousand White Pole Soldiers began their return to Sichuan.

Gao Family Village had provided grain, fertilizer, technology—and seeds for potatoes, corn, and sweet potatoes.

Zhang Fengyi could barely find words for such generosity. In the end, she could only say:

"I will repay this kindness."

Then she led her troops away.

Second month of Chongzhen's sixth year.

The bandit armies exploded across Hebei.

Zhaozhou fell.

Xishan fell.

Shunde fell.

Zhending fell.

They descended from the western slopes of Motianling into Wu'an, where they routed Zuo Liangyu's army. Garrison commander Cao Ming and registrar Wu Yingke were killed.

The bandits' momentum surged.

Then—

they collided with a wall.

Lu Xiangheng's Tianxiong Army appeared.

First, they smashed the bandits at Xishan.

Then, selecting elite troops from Huaxian, Lu Xiangheng set an ambush in dense forest terrain. When the bandits arrived, they were struck head-on.

Next came Linming County, then Motianling again.

Each battle was a hammer blow.

Finally, the bandits fled back to Xishan and besieged guerrilla commander Dong Weikun at Lengshui Village.

Lu Xiangheng ambushed them at southern Shicheng—another crushing defeat.

He pursued them to Qinglonggang, routing them once more and driving them back toward Wu'an.

Wu'an lay outside his jurisdiction.

Only then did the bandits barely escape with their lives.

Their situation became dire.

To the southwest of Shanxi stood Xing Honglang, Lao Nanfeng, Shi Jian, and Wang Xiaohua.

To the north of Hebei loomed Lu Xiangheng, a monster in human form.

To the northeast of Henan stood Bai Yuan and Chen Yuanbo.

The bandits' space to survive had been compressed to the extreme.

Those still in Shanxi fled north, crossed the Yellow River, and returned to Shaanxi.

Those already in Hebei gathered in Wu'an, arguing over their future.

"Brother Zijing Liang," someone asked, "what do we do now?"

Zijing Liang had no answer.

He looked around.

One by one, his subordinates lowered their heads.

Until—

his gaze landed on Chuǎng Wang.

Chuǎng Wang met his eyes without flinching. His gaze burned.

"Brother," Chuǎng Wang said, "I have a plan."

Zijing Liang straightened.

"Oh? Speak."

Chuǎng Wang said calmly,

"We have only one path left. We cross the Yellow River—south."

Zijing Liang shook his head.

"We can't cross there. Bai Yuan—"

"No," Chuǎng Wang interrupted. "Last time, we crossed at Mengjin and ran straight into Xiaolangdi. That's why Bai Yuan intercepted us."

He continued,

"But now we're in Hebei. We cross near Kaifeng Prefecture. Far from Xiaolangdi. Bai Yuan won't make it in time."

Zijing Liang's eyes narrowed.

"And after crossing?"

"We bypass Luoyang," Chuǎng Wang said. "Move southeast."

Then he smiled.

"We enter Huguang."

Chapter 718 Luckily, I'm Uncultured

Yan'an Prefecture, Shaanxi.

Chen Qiyu, Governor of Yansui, was currently stationed in Yan'an Prefecture.

Strictly speaking, he hadn't been here long.

He had only taken office in the sixth month of Chongzhen's fifth year, meaning he had governed Yan'an for barely half a year.

And what a half year it had been.

He had inherited chaos.

Although the main body of the rebel armies had already crossed the Yellow River and stormed through Shanxi, several powerful rebel factions still lingered stubbornly within Shaanxi.

Among them, three names caused the most headaches:

Xue Hongqi.

Yizuo Cheng.

Yizi Wang.

In just six months, Chen Qiyu had battled shortages of silver, grain, and troops, all while trying to suppress three major rebel groups simultaneously.

Who wouldn't lose sleep over that?

It was enough to split one's skull.

The only small comfort was this—

Huanglong Mountain, once the most infamous bandit lair in Shaanxi, was no longer a den of thieves.

Thanks to the "combined efforts" of Shaanxi Governor Wang Shunxing, Supervising Censor Wu Shen, and Chengcheng County Magistrate Liang Shixian, Huanglong Mountain had been pacified.

At least one tumor had been cut away.

That evening, Chen Qiyu sat beneath lamplight, reviewing reports from various counties as he did every night.

Suddenly—

A subordinate rushed in, barely able to contain his excitement.

"Governor! Good news! A large grain transport convoy from Chengcheng County has successfully passed through Huanglong Mountain and arrived in Yan'an!"

At first, Chen Qiyu barely reacted.

A grain convoy?

So what?

But then—

two phrases slammed into his mind like thunder.

Large grain convoy.

Passed through Huanglong Mountain.

He looked up sharply.

"A large convoy means many carts and horses," Chen Qiyu said. "They should have come via the official road from Xi'an to Yan'an. Why would they go through Huanglong Mountain?"

He frowned.

"That place is treacherous terrain. Bandits only just left it. How could a large convoy pass safely?"

The subordinate grinned from ear to ear.

"Magistrate Liang Shixian of Chengcheng County built a road! A truly astonishing one! It's called the Huang-Yan Highway. It cuts straight through Huanglong Mountain and leads directly to the southwestern outskirts of Yan'an Prefecture."

Chen Qiyu lost his composure.

"What?!"

He stood abruptly.

"That's impossible. I remember clearly—there's a mountain in the southwest wilderness, Dadunliang Mountain, standing like a natural barrier. How did they cross that?"

The subordinate hesitated, his expression turning strange—like someone recounting a myth he himself barely believed.

"They... they drilled a hole through it."

"A hole?" Chen Qiyu repeated.

"Yes. A massive one. Straight through the heart of Dadunliang Mountain. The road passes directly through the mountain."

Clatter!

Chen Qiyu's writing brush fell from his hand.

"Nonsense!" he roared. "Outrageous nonsense! You dare fabricate such absurd lies?"

The subordinate dropped to one knee immediately.

"Your subordinate wouldn't dare! Governor, you can see it yourself from the outskirts of the city. Such a lie would be exposed in an instant—how could I risk my life speaking nonsense?"

Chen Qiyu froze.

That... was true.

He took a deep breath.

"Prepare the horses," he said grimly. "I'm going to see it myself."

More than two hours later, Chen Qiyu and a sizable retinue arrived at the foot of Dadunliang Mountain.

One wouldn't know without seeing it.

The world truly was absurd.

The towering, sheer Dadunliang Mountain now had a gigantic hole punched straight through its belly.

From within that hole—

a grey concrete road extended outward.

Above the tunnel entrance hung a plaque, perfectly level, bearing four large characters in dignified Song-style script:

Huangqiu Terrace Tunnel

Chen Qiyu stood frozen.

Mouth open.

Eyes wide.

Soul absent.

He looked so stunned that his jaw nearly dislocated.

Luckily—

he wasn't the type to drool uncontrollably.

Chen Qiyu staggered forward and peered into the tunnel.

It stretched more than three li—long, dark, and deep. The opposite exit was barely visible, just a faint speck of light.

"Light the torches!"

Torches flared to life.

The group entered cautiously.

Inside the tunnel, it was dark—but astonishingly neat.

The ground was smooth concrete.

The walls were rounded and reinforced with some unknown material.

No loose stones. No danger of collapse.

It felt unreal.

As if walking through a dream.

Eventually, they emerged from the southern exit.

Before them, Huanglong Mountain spread endlessly, majestic and continuous. The concrete road flowed out from beneath their feet, winding through the mountains like a path carved by the gods.

Chen Qiyu opened his mouth.

"This... this..."

Nothing came out.

His subordinates, however, were far more eloquent.

"Damn!"

"Luckily I'm uncultured—one 'damn' is enough to conquer the world!"

See?

The cultured Governor couldn't say a word.

At moments like this, the uncultured truly reigned supreme.

Chen Qiyu stood there, petrified.

Then—

a merchant caravan appeared in the distance, rumbling along the road.

That finally snapped him back to reality.

"Oh?" Chen Qiyu's eyes brightened. "Another caravan? What are they transporting this time?"

Books.

Carts full of books.

Gao Family Village comic books.

With the opening of the Huang–Yan Highway, Gao Family Village naturally began extending its influence into Yan'an Prefecture.

First came grain.

Then came culture.

Material and spiritual nourishment—both were essential.

The caravan halted when it reached the Governor's entourage.

A young man, no more than seventeen or eighteen, stepped forward from the rear. Dressed in merchant attire, he wore a confident smile.

"Governor," he said respectfully, "please speak freely. My surname is Gao, my given name Shan. I am responsible for this convoy."

Gao Shan.

Seventeen years old.

Son of Gao Laba, owner of a rice noodle shop, and one of the original forty-two youths of Gao Family Village.

Educated at the village school—

then dropped out halfway through middle school.

A complete academic slacker.

He tried inheriting his father's rice noodle business, but it didn't suit his half-baked intellectual temperament.

So he pivoted.

Culture.

Comic books.

Yan'an.

Though academically lazy, he was undeniably rich.

As a result, the Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidery on his chest was stitched with gold thread, gleaming shamelessly.

Chen Qiyu studied him carefully.

Well-mannered.

Clear-eyed.

No pedantic scholar's stink.

A promising young man.

He nodded slightly, inwardly impressed.

"You sell books?" Chen Qiyu asked. "Where do you come from?"

Chapter 719 Your Books Are Excellent

Gao Shan smiled brightly.

"That's right. I'm with a book-selling caravan, and we're from Chengcheng County."

Chen Qiyu nodded slowly.

"So... from Chengcheng County all the way here, the entire route is paved with roads like this?"

"Yes!" Gao Shan laughed. "That's the Huang–Yan Highway. It was only just completed. If not for this road, I wouldn't dare do business here at all. Transport would be far too troublesome."

Chen Qiyu stroked his beard.

"And this Huang–Yan Highway... was it entirely built by people from Chengcheng County?"

At this, Gao Shan's chest puffed up slightly.

"Indeed it was! We poured enormous manpower and resources into it."

Chen Qiyu clicked his tongue in admiration.

"What a display of wealth."

Then his gaze drifted toward the tunnel entrance behind them.

"And what about this Huangqiu Terrace Tunnel? Was that also dug by people from Chengcheng County?"

He expected more bragging.

Instead—

Gao Shan's expression turned solemn. He straightened and spoke with utmost sincerity.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare claim that. This tunnel was created personally by Dao Xuan Tianzun, who used celestial treasures and boundless divine power to accomplish this miracle."

Chen Qiyu choked.

"What? What—what did you say?!"

Seeing the Governor's utterly baffled expression, Gao Shan chuckled. He walked over to the book cart and pulled out a slim comic book.

Its title read:

Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon-Slaying Chronicles — Volume Eleven

"This is a brand-new release," Gao Shan said proudly. "The print run is still small. I only managed to secure a limited batch. Allow me to present one copy to Your Excellency."

Chen Qiyu took it, puzzled.

The moment he opened it, his expression froze.

On the first page—

A colossal figure descended from the heavens, one hand gripping an entire mountain, the other wielding a strange device that drilled straight through rock and stone.

Turning the page—

The tunnel pierced clean through the mountain.

On the next—

Countless tiny figures cheered wildly at the tunnel entrance. One of them held a brush and paper, carefully writing the words "Huangqiu Terrace Tunnel," which were then mounted above the entrance.

Chen Qiyu stiffly turned his head and looked behind him.

Sure enough—

Above the real tunnel entrance hung a plaque bearing those exact four characters.

His face twitched.

"You're telling me," Chen Qiyu said slowly, "that this tunnel was dug by... that immortal?"

"Yes!" Gao Shan nodded enthusiastically. "That immortal is called Dao Xuan Tianzun. Look—his image is even embroidered on my chest."

Chen Qiyu glanced sideways.

I'd believe in ghosts before I believe this.

With even the slightest common sense, one could tell that such a massive engineering feat must have been carved out by countless laborers over a long period of time.

Yet here it was, brazenly attributed to some so-called immortal.

Charlatanry, plain and simple.

Chen Qiyu lost interest instantly and tossed the comic book back.

"Your entire caravan isn't filled with books like this, is it?"

"Of course not!" Gao Shan hurriedly replied. "My selection is very diverse, Your Excellency. Look—this is a chivalric epic, *Breaking Through the Firmament*, written by the famous author Gao Sanwa. And this one—*Fist Shakes the Cosmos*—both tell stories of downtrodden men who master divine martial arts to seek revenge and justice."

Chen Qiyu's eyelid twitched.

"This..."

"Oh! And here's Gao Sanwa's latest work," Gao Shan added eagerly. "*Chronicles of a Mortal Cultivator*."

Chen Qiyu flipped through a few pages—then covered his face.

"What on earth are these absurd books?"

Gao Shan immediately understood.

"Ah! I see. Your Excellency doesn't enjoy tales of fighting and killing. Then how about this—Shi Laosi's renowned work, Gao Piao?"

Chen Qiyu flipped through it absentmindedly.

"Hm?" His eyes lit up slightly. "This Gao Piao isn't bad. It has an earthy, grounded feel—very much about real life."

"And there's more," Gao Shan said, producing another book. "This one should suit Your Excellency perfectly."

The title read:

Cultivation Methods for Common Crops

Chen Qiyu glanced at the author's name: Zhao Sheng.

That name sounds vaguely familiar...

He shook his head. There were countless people named Zhao Sheng. It meant nothing.

Then he opened the book.

One page.

Two pages.

Three pages—

His eyes widened.

"This book...!"

He clutched it tightly, voice rising.

"This is a divine text! A divine text!"

Moments ago, Chen Qiyu had regarded Gao Shan's caravan as little more than a traveling pile of useless books, especially that ridiculous Dao Xuan Tianzun comic.

He hadn't taken the young merchant seriously at all.

But now—

This single book overturned everything.

"This book is excellent!" Chen Qiyu exclaimed, gripping Gao Shan's hand and shaking it vigorously. "It explains farming methods using pictures, with only a few simple words at key points. Even an illiterate farmer could understand it! If widely promoted, the benefits would be immeasurable!"

Gao Shan smiled.

"That would be wonderful indeed."

"How many copies have you brought?" Chen Qiyu asked urgently. "And what price are you selling them for? If they're too expensive, the common folk won't be able to afford them."

"Not expensive at all," Gao Shan replied. "Five copper coins per copy. Almost free."

Chen Qiyu's hands trembled.

"Such a priceless book... for five copper coins? Are you not losing money?"

Gao Shan chuckled.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun once said—some ventures are for profit, some can bear a small loss. Not every endeavor must earn silver. Sometimes, earning goodwill and reputation is even more valuable, as it paves the way for the future."

Chen Qiyu sighed softly.

"Wise words indeed..."

Only then did he remember that just moments ago, he had dismissed Dao Xuan Tianzun as nonsense.

...How awkward.

Best not to mention that again.

"In any case," Chen Qiyu said firmly, "your caravan is commendable. Proceed to Yan'an at once. I won't delay you."

He paused, then added, "Oh—and I'll write something for you."

He took out paper and brush and quickly penned a note, stating:

This merchant's books benefit the people. He is permitted to sell freely. None are to obstruct him.

He signed his name and handed it over.

"Many thanks!" Gao Shan said gratefully.

The caravan resumed its journey, swaying gently as it passed through the Huangqiu Terrace Tunnel toward Yan'an Prefecture.

Chen Qiyu stood there, staring at the long, wondrous passage, emotions tangled in his chest.

"With this," he murmured, "a natural barrier has truly become a thoroughfare. The common people of Chengcheng County... remarkable indeed."

Just then—

A subordinate rushed over, face pale.

"Governor! Something terrible has happened!"

"What is it?" Chen Qiyu demanded.

"The three great bandit leaders—Xue Hongqi, Yizuo Cheng, and Yizi Wang—have split their forces into three columns and attacked Yanchang County! The magistrate is holding the county seat for now, but the bandits haven't launched a full assault yet. He urgently requests reinforcements from Yan'an!"

Chen Qiyu sucked in a sharp breath.

"Damn it!" he cursed. "Grand General Wang Cheng'en has taken the troops north to resist the Mongols. Where am I supposed to find soldiers now?!"

Chapter 720 "86" Takes the Heights

Chen Qiyu was not entirely without troops.

The former Yansui Commander, Wu Zimian, that notoriously corrupt official who had once sold horses to Gao Family Village, fell ill and died shortly after Hong Chengchou took office. He passed away before the court could even move against him.

As a result, the court transferred Wang Cheng'en, originally the Shaanxi Commander, to serve as the new Yansui Commander.

After Wang Cheng'en took up his post, Chen Qiyu worked closely with him to suppress the bandits, and for a time, the situation remained barely manageable.

But not long ago, Mongolian tribes from the Hetao region suddenly launched a westward invasion. They struck Yansui's border forts and plundered Lingzhou, Hengcheng, Yansui, Xichuan, and several other areas. Supreme Commander Hong Chengchou personally led troops to resist the Mongolians and took Wang Cheng'en with him.

With Wang Cheng'en gone, Chen Qiyu was left with nothing but his personal guards and a mixed assortment of garrison troops.

In the early years of the Chongzhen Emperor's reign, at the start of the peasant uprisings, such garrison troops could still suppress bandits with some success.

But now it was already the sixth year of Chongzhen.

The bandits' combat strength had improved by leaps and bounds, while the garrison troops had long since decayed. The gap between the two sides was obvious.

Chen Qiyu was completely panicked, his mind momentarily blank.

At that moment, a subordinate stepped forward.

"Governor, we still have one person we can rely on."

Chen Qiyu asked urgently,

"Who?"

The subordinate replied,

"Commander Shi Jian, one of Wang Cheng'en's trusted generals. He is stationed at Dragon Gate Ferry on the Yellow River under orders from the Ministry of War. I heard he achieved great merit and was appointed Hejin Garrison Commander by the court. If we lead the garrison troops to stall the bandits and send a messenger to Commander Shi, he may be able to rush over in time to reinforce Yanchuan County."

"He belongs to the Shaanxi army," Chen Qiyu objected. "How can he come to Yansui?"

The subordinate explained patiently,

"Supreme Commander Hong Chengchou is on our side. His authority covers Shaanxi, Gansu, Yansui, and Ningxia. Shaanxi troops fall under his command. As long as he states afterward that this was his direct order, there will be no problem."

Chen Qiyu's thoughts raced.

Hong Chengchou would certainly be willing, and indeed obligated, to back this decision, since Yansui was also within his jurisdiction.

"Very well," Chen Qiyu said decisively.

"Send someone immediately to summon Commander Shi."

A messenger was dispatched at once, galloping toward Dragon Gate Ferry to request reinforcements.

From where he started, the shortest route to Dragon Gate Ferry was straight through Huanglong Mountain.

The messenger looked up at the towering mountain range, and a sense of unease rose in his chest. But when he noticed the long, winding gray mountain road, his confidence strangely returned.

With such a fine road, crossing Huanglong Mountain should not take too long.

The only issue was that the hard surface looked rough on the horse's hooves.

Then he noticed something unexpected.

Beside the cement road, a dirt path had been carefully preserved. It was clearly meant for horses.

Delighted, the messenger spurred his horse and galloped along the dirt path parallel to the cement road.

In the blink of an eye, he had already covered more than ten li.

Ahead, a peculiar little building appeared by the roadside. Three characters were written on it: Yangou Station.

The messenger had never seen such a strange building standing alone on a mountain road. He could not understand it at all. What puzzled him even more was the odd vehicle parked in front of it, with two characters painted on the side: Eighty-Six.

Inside the vehicle sat a driver and several passengers, all staring at the galloping horse with curious expressions.

Both sides found the other equally strange.

But the messenger had no intention of stopping. With a whoosh, he sped past the vehicle and continued racing forward.

The driver exclaimed,

"Whoa, brothers, that horse looks like it's challenging us."

The passengers were labor reform prisoners who often rode this route while working on the roads. They were very familiar with the driver and burst out laughing.

"He's looking down on you, isn't he? Saying your Eighty-Six solar bus can't outrun a horse. That's why he just flew past you, leaving you eating dust."

The driver was hot tempered and hated being looked down on. He slammed the steering wheel.

"Damn it. Fine, fine. Let's see just how fast he really is."

These days, Gao Family Village's solar buses were designed for single person operation. The driver pulled a switch with his left hand, and the sunshades instantly retracted, pushing the solar panels to maximum output.

He released the brake, turned the wheel, and the Eighty-Six bus surged forward in pursuit of the warhorse.

The labor reform prisoners were thrilled. They were not worried about crashing at all. Instead, they cheered wildly.

"Eighty-Six takes the heights!"

The driver shot a cold glance at the water cup on his dashboard and snorted inwardly.

Charge.

The familiar racing anthem blasted out.

"Déjà vu, I've just been in this place before..."

The race began.

Hearing the strange shouts of "Eighty-Six takes the heights" behind him, the messenger turned his head. His heart jumped.

That bizarre metal beast was catching up fast.

"Looking down on me, are you?" the messenger fumed.

"I am a super courier who can travel eight hundred li a day, changing horses but never riders. When have I ever been overtaken by some strange contraption?"

"Hyah!" he shouted.

"Faster, faster!"

Horse and vehicle began a frantic chase.

At first, the warhorse held a clear advantage.

A horse's sprint speed was no joke, while the Eighty-Six bus had to slow down slightly at turns to avoid tipping over, making it impossible to unleash its full speed.

But that advantage did not last long.

A warhorse would inevitably tire.

And once Déjà vu started playing, the Eighty-Six had never lost.

The horse slowed, and the bus caught up.

The mischievous driver deliberately eased off, running side by side with the horse. One stayed on the cement road, the other on the dirt path.

A labor reform prisoner leaned out the window and mocked him.

"Well, well, rider, running out of steam? Weren't you so fast just now? How dare you race an immortal vehicle? Do you even know who bestowed this car upon us? Let me tell you. This is the Solar Divine Vehicle, a gift from Dao Xuan Tianzun himself. Showing off in front of it is disrespecting Dao Xuan Tianzun."

"Damn it..." the messenger panted heavily.

"I carry... an urgent mission... no time... to argue with you people..."

The labor reform prisoner blinked.

"An urgent mission? Tell us about it."

The messenger gasped out the news.

"Xue Hongqi, Yizuo Cheng, and Yizi Wang. Three bandit forces are attacking Yanchuan County. I must reach Dragon Gate Ferry to request reinforcements from Commander Shi Jian."

"Huh?"

The labor reform prisoners exchanged puzzled looks.

"Who are these nobodies?"

"We never heard of them back when we were bandits."

"Looks like the new really does replace the old."

The messenger froze.

"???"

At that moment, the small Dao Xuan Tianzun figurine hanging on the driver's chest suddenly spoke.

"Trouble again, right next to our territory?"

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun has spoken!" the driver exclaimed.

The labor reform prisoners instantly straightened up, their casual attitude vanishing at once.

The messenger, still on horseback beside the bus, could not see what was happening inside. He did not know who had spoken, only that the voice carried undeniable authority.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun issued a calm command.

"Invite the messenger onto the bus. Drive him for a stretch."