

Great Ming 721

Chapter 721 You All Seem So Lively

After issuing his command, Dao Xuan Tianzun immediately shifted his co-sensing to Dragon Gate Ferry.

Shi Jian was stationed there.

In the past, Shi Jian had only been a centurion, restricted to commanding a mere thousand men, with absolutely no room to exceed that number. But after being promoted to commander, his authority expanded greatly. The rigid limits on troop numbers were lifted, replaced by broad discretion to deploy forces according to the situation in each region or settlement.

Dragon Gate Ferry, guarding the Yellow River crossing, held immense strategic importance. Naturally, it could not be left with too few troops.

Gao Family Village assigned one thousand freshly trained recruits to Shi Jian. At the same time, Zheng Gouzi, who had always followed Flat Rabbit around and found himself with little to do in Xi'an, was transferred to Dragon Gate Ferry as deputy commander.

At that moment, Shi Jian and Zheng Gouzi were addressing the thousand greenhorns when the enormous Dao Xuan Tianzun statue standing atop Dragon Gate Ferry slowly lowered its arm and descended from the mountaintop.

"Prepare to deploy troops to Yansui and relieve Yanchang County."

The moment the order was given, Shi Jian and Zheng Gouzi abandoned the orientation on the spot and moved into action.

Zheng Gouzi asked quickly, "Which of us goes?"

Shi Jian replied without hesitation, "The new recruits shouldn't be thrown straight into fighting bandits. They stay behind to guard."

Zheng Gouzi frowned. "We can't leave all of them here. Take some along to let them see real combat."

"Three hundred," Shi Jian decided. "Seven hundred veterans and three hundred new recruits."

The two divided responsibilities at lightning speed. Weapons were issued, rations prepared, and the entire garrison burst into frantic motion.

Meanwhile, deep within Huanglong Mountain.

Bus 86 continued racing alongside the messenger's exhausted warhorse.

Several labor reform prisoners leaned out the window, shouting cheerfully, "Brother, stop riding that horse. Dao Xuan Tianzun ordered you to board our bus. We'll give you a lift."

The messenger hesitated. "I... this is an eight-hundred-li urgent military dispatch..."

"All the more reason to get on," one of them laughed. "We're clearly faster than you."

That was impossible to argue with.

The messenger swallowed. "Then what about my horse?"

"Bring it along," the prisoner said cheerfully. "Look how big this bus is. We can squeeze a horse into the aisle."

The messenger was tempted.

His horse was drenched in sweat and barely able to keep going, while the bus still sped along effortlessly. At last, he clenched his teeth.

"Alright. How much do I pay?"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun gave the order," they said in unison. "Not a single coin."

The bus stopped. The messenger hurried aboard, leading his horse inside and wedging it awkwardly into the aisle between the seats.

The space was tight, and the horse snorted uneasily, but it could stand.

The messenger finally sat down.

The bus immediately started up again, wind rushing past the windows. His heart thumped wildly.

"This vehicle is incredible. So the people of Chengcheng County have been traveling through Huanglong Mountain like this for a long time?"

The labor reform prisoners laughed proudly. "That's right. Impressed?"

He was beyond impressed. He was jealous.

All this time, these people had been living like this, while he had been riding himself half to death on horseback.

The old driver handled the bus with dazzling skill. It sped along, sliding through turns and skimming across drainage channels. After some time, a fork in the road appeared ahead.

At the junction stood another strange roadside building. A sign read: Tongle Village Station.

The driver turned his head.

"Sorry, old brother messenger. I can only take you this far. You're headed for Dragon Gate, so you need to turn east. My Bus 86 route goes south. Routes are fixed. I can't change them at will."

The messenger hurriedly said, "You've already helped me immensely. My horse has rested. I can continue from here."

"No need," the driver replied. "I can't take you further, but another bus can. Wait here at Tongle Village Station. Before long, Bus 87 will arrive. Transfer to it and tell the driver it's Dao Xuan Tianzun's command."

The messenger stood there, dazed.

This was far beyond anything he understood.

Still, he followed the instructions. After getting off Bus 86, he waited in front of the small station building.

Bus 86 waved goodbye as it departed. The labor reform prisoners whistled and shouted,

"Give those upstarts Xue Hongqi, Yizuo Cheng, and One-Character King a proper beating. If you catch them alive, send them over to us for re-education. Don't be fooled by how we look now. We really care about the younger generation."

The messenger stared blankly.

Bus 86 disappeared down the road, leaving him alone at the station, feeling oddly uneasy.

Before long, another strange vehicle arrived. Bus 87 pulled to a stop at Tongle Village Station.

Inside were a driver and several labor reform prisoners, all eyeing him curiously.

"Brother, where are you from? You don't look like one of us. Outsiders actually wait for buses now?"

The messenger quickly replied, "Dao Xuan Tianzun commanded it. I need a ride."

"Oh," the driver said brightly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun's order. Get on."

One of the prisoners muttered, "What if he's pretending?"

The driver laughed. "Good point."

Just as he was about to question further, Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice sounded through subtle co-sensing.

"Take him."

The driver straightened. "As you command."

And so, the messenger transferred to Bus 87.

The labor reform prisoners were singing as the bus rolled on.

"Singing for fun, singing for play. Liu Xuande sold straw sandals, Zhang Fei butchered pigs and sold wine, Yun Chang carried tofu through the streets. Which hero didn't rise from hardship?"

The messenger listened, then said cautiously,

"Brothers, you all seem so lively. Are you villagers from nearby?"

They burst out laughing.

"Villagers? We're not worthy of that title. Only honest commoners dare call themselves villagers."

"Then... artisans?" the messenger guessed.

They shook their heads.

"Artisans earn three taels of silver a month. That's too prestigious for us."

Three taels a month.

The messenger was stunned, but he forced himself not to linger on that thought.

"Then who are you? I met people just like you on Bus 86, and they were lively too."

The prisoners laughed openly.

"We're criminals. Caught for our crimes and undergoing labor reform."

The messenger's eyes nearly popped out.

"What?!"

Who would ever believe prisoners like these?

One of them grinned.

"Brother, you don't look very lively."

The messenger sighed bitterly.

"Poorly clothed, barely fed, working harder than oxen and eating less than chickens. How could I be lively?"

The bus erupted in laughter.

"Then come join us," someone said cheerfully. "You're a commoner, not a convict. If you came here, you'd be rich in less than half a year. Chengcheng County's militia is expanding. Military pay is five taels of silver a month. A fast courier like you would be recruited instantly. You'd be elite from day one, with extra bonuses."

The messenger sucked in a sharp breath.

"Five taels? Elite soldiers get bonuses too?"

His mind was completely shaken.

Chapter 722 How Do We Fight in This Place?

After enduring a chaotic round of persuasion, lecturing, and ideological reeducation from the Gao Family Village labor reform prisoners, the messenger finally reached another crossroads and boarded a new bus.

This time, there were no labor reform prisoners on board.

Instead, the seats were filled with ordinary civilians.

Only then did the messenger realize that he had already reached the edge of Huanglong Mountain. The people now appearing on the bus were those who lived beyond the mountain's boundary.

They looked completely different from the residents of Yansui.

Their clothes were clean and tidy, their faces lively and spirited, their expressions relaxed in a way he had almost forgotten people could be. Compared to the gaunt, hollow eyed refugees of Yansui, these people felt as if they belonged to an entirely different world.

Even their conversations were different.

In Yansui, people talked endlessly about what to eat today, what to eat tomorrow, where to find food, how to stretch a handful of grain, and which stall sold the cheapest provisions.

Here, people chatted about whether they had seen the opera troupe's latest performance, whether a painting would look good on the wall at home, or whether it was time to replace a daughter's torn cotton coat.

The messenger sat stiffly in his seat, listening in disbelief.

When the bus finally rolled to a stop at Han City Station, he almost felt dazed. Knowing that Dragon Gate Ferry was close by, he disembarked, mounted his horse, and spurred it into a gallop toward the river crossing.

As he arrived at Dragon Gate Ferry, his horse slowed on its own.

Before him stood an immense bridge, grand and imposing, spanning the Yellow River in a single majestic sweep. The river thundered beneath it, while the bridge rose like a divine artifact planted into the earth itself.

The messenger stood frozen, staring.

Then he noticed an army crossing the bridge.

They marched beneath a massive banner that read: Hejin Garrison Commander Shi.

Shi Jian.

Joy surged through the messenger's chest. He urged his horse forward and shouted, "Commander Shi, I bear..."

"I know," Shi Jian interrupted without turning his head. "You came to request reinforcements for Yanchang County, didn't you? As you can see, my troops are already on the move. Fall in with us."

The messenger blinked. "But Commander Shi, where did you get..."

Shi Jian did not answer.

He simply raised his hand and barked an order. "Increase the marching speed. We must reach Yanchang County as fast as possible and keep the common people from suffering further."

"Run!"

The Gao Family Village militia broke into a jog.

"One two, one two."

The chant echoed in perfect rhythm.

The messenger stared in shock. Even while running, the army maintained flawless formation. Left legs moved together, then right, every step landing in precise time with the cadence.

He thought to himself, What kind of army is this? Why are they running like this?

But he quickly dismissed the thought. This was no longer his concern.

"Since Commander Shi has already departed," he muttered, "I should return and report to His Excellency the Governor."

He wheeled his horse around, galloped back to Han City, and rested there overnight. At dawn the next day, he resumed his journey, taking one bus after another, transferring repeatedly until at last, Route 86 carried him back to the place where he had first set out.

Standing there, he looked back at the road he had traveled.

It felt unreal, like waking from a dream.

Yanchang County was mountainous land.

The moment Shi Jian's unit entered its territory, an invisible pressure descended upon them. Ravines crisscrossed the land in chaotic patterns, cutting the terrain into countless twisting paths. Every advance required crossing one gully, climbing a slope, descending again, then climbing yet another rise.

Shi Jian had once been a scout himself, among the earliest of the Gao Family Village militia. He understood better than anyone how critical scouting was, especially in terrain like this.

Without hesitation, he dispatched more than a dozen scouts, ordering them to penetrate each ravine ahead.

Zheng Gouzi walked beside him. The two had been comrades since their scouting days, back when they had ventured into Huanglong Mountain together to eliminate Wang Zuogua.

Zheng Gouzi glanced at the surrounding mountains and chuckled. "Brother Shi, remember when we were hunting Wang Zuogua? Flat Rabbit was hiding in the bushes, swinging his so called My Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord Sword, chopping off... well, that thing of theirs?"

Shi Jian burst out laughing. "Hahaha, how could I forget? Back then we were just ordinary soldiers. Now look at us, both commanders already."

Zheng Gouzi smiled, then sighed softly. "That old batch of brothers from back then. Every one of them is at least a centurion now."

Shi Jian's expression gradually turned serious. "Joking aside, this terrain is truly awful. I'm worried about ambushes. Bandits could jump out from anywhere at any moment."

"The scouts are already out," Zheng Gouzi said. "It should be fine."

Shi Jian shook his head. "We only have a dozen experienced scouts. Barely enough to assign one to each ravine. Some places will inevitably be missed..."

He had not even finished speaking when, diagonally ahead at a distance of roughly a hundred meters, a group of people suddenly emerged from a narrow, almost invisible gully.

Their clothes were ragged and filthy. In their hands were swords, spears, halberds, and clubs, a messy assortment with no uniformity at all.

They were clearly not a regular force.

The gully they emerged from was so tight and concealed that the scouts had clearly overlooked it.

The two groups faced each other across the short distance.

The people on the opposite side shouted in alarm, "Government troops! Damn it, government troops!"

Without hesitation, they turned and dove back into the narrow gully, showing no intention of fighting.

Shi Jian hesitated for a brief instant, his fingers twitching as he considered ordering the firearm soldiers to open fire.

But he stopped himself.

Tattered clothes and crude weapons did not necessarily mean bandits. They could have been local militia. Killing people without confirming their identity was not something he could accept.

That moment of hesitation was enough.

By the time his men covered the hundred meters and reached the gully entrance, they found that it curved sharply after just a few dozen steps. The figures inside had already vanished.

"I'll take a few men and chase them," Zheng Gouzi said immediately.

Shi Jian shook his head. "No. Too dangerous. If they're bandits lying in ambush inside the gully, taking a small group in would be suicide. We wouldn't even have time to rescue you."

Zheng Gouzi grimaced. "You're right."

The two men looked around at the countless ravines stretching in every direction and fell silent.

Relying solely on scouts was clearly not enough.

"We need to send men up the slopes to observe from above," Shi Jian said.

Zheng Gouzi shook his head again. "After a few steps, they'll be blocked. They'd have to climb down into the gully, then climb the opposite slope. Our scouts would need to be monkeys."

Both men felt a splitting headache.

Just as they were struggling with the problem, the sound of galloping hooves thundered toward them.

Two scouts rode back at full speed. One sat upright in the saddle, while the other was slumped across his horse's back, clearly wounded.

Shi Jian's heart clenched.

These were scouts he had trained with his own hands.

"What happened?" he demanded.

The upright scout shouted, "There were bandits hiding in a small gully ahead. As soon as we passed, they fired stealth arrows. Old Li was hit!"

"Damn it," Shi Jian cursed. "Medic! Medic!"

The ranks stirred in brief chaos. A medic rushed forward, examined the wound, and applied medicine.

"It's not serious," the medic reported. "He'll recover in a few days."

Only then did Shi Jian finally exhale.

He looked out at the endless ravines ahead, his frustration deepening.

"This won't work," he muttered. "How are we supposed to fight in a place like this?"

Among the soldiers, unease began to spread.

Chapter 723 This Role Suits You

Dao Xuan Tianzun stood inside the Flower World Star Agency in Puzhou City, his posture relaxed yet carrying an unspoken authority. Lao Nanfeng accompanied him at his side, standing straight and attentive, not daring to show the slightest disrespect.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," Lao Nanfeng said with a respectful smile, then suddenly leaned closer, lowering his voice conspiratorially near Li Daoxuan's ear. "What brings you to your servant's humble talent agency today? Have you taken a liking to any of our actresses? If you wish, one could serve you tea and water, make your bed. If Dao Xuan Tianzun desires it, they would all be more than willing."

Li Daoxuan immediately shot him an annoyed glance. "Hey, what nonsense are you thinking about? Do I really look like that sort of person to you?"

Lao Nanfeng jolted in alarm and hurriedly corrected himself. "Ah, your servant misspoke, truly misspoke. Of course Dao Xuan Tianzun would never be such a person."

Even as he spoke, his thoughts ran quietly in his mind. Dao Xuan Tianzun is not human but a god. If that is the case, then what I said earlier was not exactly flattery, was it?

Li Daoxuan cleared his throat and said calmly, "I came today to select twelve actresses."

Lao Nanfeng's mouth fell open. "What?"

In his heart, thunder rolled. My ambitions were far too small. Dao Xuan Tianzun does not want just one. He wants twelve. Twelve! Truly, a god's tastes are beyond mortal understanding, and a god's stamina must be equally unfathomable.

From one look at Lao Nanfeng's expression, Li Daoxuan could tell exactly where his thoughts had wandered. He said irritably, "Lao Nanfeng, in every other regard you are quite capable, but you are hopelessly steeped in those old corrupt indulgences of wine, women, wealth, and power."

Lao Nanfeng nearly jumped on the spot. "Oh? Oh, oh! Your servant will certainly reform, certainly reform."

Li Daoxuan sighed softly, his tone easing. "But forget it. It is precisely these indulgences that make people feel real. Those morally flawless sages are nothing more than stiff, overpolished legends anyway."

As he spoke, he reached into his pocket and pulled out two comic books, *The Legend of Mu Guiying* and *Twelve Widows Conquer the West*, handing them to Lao Nanfeng. "Choose twelve actresses, and also find suitable supporting actors. Turn the stories in these books into a movie. When it is finished, I intend to show it to everyone."

Lao Nanfeng stared blankly at the books. "A movie? What is a movie?"

"A movie is simply telling a story using moving pictures," Li Daoxuan said with a faint smile. "Do you still remember the celestial maiden dances I once showed you from the Immortal Realm?"

"Of course I remember," Lao Nanfeng replied at once. "Dao Xuan Tianzun stored the celestial maiden dances within a divine mirror and bestowed it upon your servant, allowing me to watch them again and again."

Midway through his sentence, enlightenment struck him like a bolt of lightning. "I understand now. Dao Xuan Tianzun means to stage a play, then record it with the divine mirror, so it can be shown repeatedly to everyone."

"Exactly," Li Daoxuan said, nodding in satisfaction. "That is precisely my intention. However, traditional opera is far too theatrical. It lacks realism and does not grip the audience strongly enough. That is why we will make a movie instead. Filmed as realistically as possible, it will have far greater impact and convey the message I wish to deliver."

Lao Nanfeng was no fool. Linking this to recent developments, he immediately grasped the deeper purpose. "The issue of conscription?"

Li Daoxuan patted his shoulder lightly. "Sharp mind. You caught on quickly."

Conscription had become a serious problem throughout the territories under Gao Family Village's control. If the notion that good men should not become soldiers, just as good iron should not be made into nails, was not corrected swiftly, the consequences would be severe.

"Stories of heroes like Mu Guiying must be portrayed by living people," Li Daoxuan continued. "The Twelve Widows Conquer the West, defending their homeland and their people, is deeply moving. We must elevate the image of soldiers."

Lao Nanfeng straightened his back and declared solemnly, "Your servant understands. Dao Xuan Tianzun, rest assured. Leave this matter to me."

"Go and prepare, rehearse properly," Li Daoxuan said. "When the time comes for the official filming, I will personally record it with the divine mirror. Remember, this is not opera. The makeup must not be exaggerated. It should resemble real border soldiers. The battle scenes are not stage dances. They must be fought as if on an actual battlefield. Every scene must carry genuine emotion."

Lao Nanfeng clasped his fists and bowed. "Your servant obeys."

After giving his instructions, Li Daoxuan found a quiet corner and sat down, watching without interference as Lao Nanfeng began making arrangements.

Lao Nanfeng immediately sprang into action, bustling back and forth through the Flower World Star Agency.

Before long, he had selected twelve actresses, inspecting them carefully from head to toe. His most cherished performer, Cai Lin, was naturally chosen to play Mu Guiying.

"Ladies," Lao Nanfeng announced, spreading the comic books of Mu Guiying and Twelve Widows Conquer the West before them, "this is the story you will be performing. Read it carefully and engrave the plot into your minds."

The actresses glanced at the comic books and immediately laughed. "There is no need. We already know these stories by heart."

"But we do not know how to sing opera."

"Yes, opera singing is completely different from what we learned in the pleasure houses."

"Exactly. They are two entirely different styles."

Lao Nanfeng explained patiently, "You are not singing opera. You are acting. We are pursuing realism, not exaggerated stage performance. Therefore, for the next few days, you will follow me to learn some martial arts and spearmanship."

The actresses gasped in unison. "Ah?"

Learn martial arts and spearmanship?

They were completely stunned.

Cai Lin, who had been chosen to portray Mu Guiying, felt immense pressure weighing down on her chest. "I... must we truly become as skilled in combat as Mu Guiying? This humble one fears she cannot achieve that."

Li Daoxuan, watching from the side, laughed heartily. "Hahaha, you do not need real combat skills. Learning some presentable, stylized movements will be enough. If it truly proves too difficult, we can always hire female stunt doubles."

Only then did the young women realize that Dao Xuan Tianzun himself had been sitting there all along.

Understanding dawned instantly. This task had been personally assigned by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Their spirits lifted at once. "We humbly obey your decree."

Soon, a group of actresses began practicing rudimentary martial movements under guidance.

At that moment, Chen Baihu walked in from outside.

Since Lao Nanfeng had been promoted to garrison commander of Puzhou, Chen Baihu had also been promoted to Chen Qianhu, gaining an official court rank. But who truly cared about court positions? Titles were worthless if military pay was delayed. A post in Gao Family Village was far more practical.

Humming a tune, he stepped into the talent agency. "Brother Nanfeng..."

He had been about to invite Lao Nanfeng out for a good meal.

Then he froze.

On the stage, Lao Nanfeng was demonstrating martial movements to a dozen actresses.

"See," Lao Nanfeng said enthusiastically, "this punch should be thrown like this. Hup."

The actresses followed softly, "Yah."

Chen Qianhu sucked in a sharp breath. "What... what is this? Brother Nanfeng, have you gone mad? Why are you teaching them how to fight?"

Lao Nanfeng's eyes lit up, and he burst into laughter. "Old Chen, you came at just the right time. Hahahaha! I have a glorious yet arduous task for you."

A sense of impending doom rose in Chen Qianhu's chest.

Lao Nanfeng continued cheerfully, "General Xiao Tianzuo of the Liao Kingdom. That role suits you perfectly."

Chen Qianhu stammered, "Huh? W... what?"

Chapter 724 Dao Xuan Tianzun's Sky Lantern

Li Daoxuan stood to one side, arms folded, quietly watching the Twelve Widows of Tianbo Mansion rehearse.

The actresses' movements were graceful enough, though lacking real power. Their strikes looked elegant but soft, their footwork pretty but light. Still, this wasn't a serious problem. With a bit of post-production—emphasizing strengths, hiding weaknesses—the footage would be more than acceptable.

After all, audiences of this era had no concept of "professional cinematography." They wouldn't nitpick details the way later generations would. As long as the story moved them, minor flaws would be forgiven—or simply never noticed.

"You continue practicing," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "I'll return when it's time for the official shoot."

With that, he activated Co-sensing, shifting his consciousness away from Puzhou City and into the tiny Dao Xuan Tianzun statue, woven from cotton thread and sewn onto Shi Jian's chest.

At present, this was Gao Family Village's only active field army. He couldn't afford to neglect it.

The moment his consciousness settled in, he sensed that something was wrong.

Shi Jian's expression was heavy with fatigue. Zheng Gouzi, riding beside him, looked grim. The entire unit was advancing slowly, formation tight, movements cautious.

Li Daoxuan's vision swept outward.

They were deep inside a ravine.

The slopes on both sides rose at terrifying angles—well over forty-five degrees—like walls of stone pressing inward. On each slope, Gao Family Village scouts were positioned, clinging to uneven ground.

Many of them were injured.

Bandaged arms. Blood-stained sleeves. Exhausted faces.

The moment Li Daoxuan saw his little people wounded, a surge of anger rose in his chest—sharp and instinctive, like seeing his own pet injured by someone else.

Someone dared hurt them.

Shi Jian and Zheng Gouzi heard his voice and were instantly overjoyed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

"You've arrived!"

Li Daoxuan asked directly, "What's going on?"

Shi Jian answered grimly, "Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun. This region is nothing but ravines. The terrain is extremely complex. Bandits hide in gullies everywhere and launch sudden ambushes."

He clenched his fist. "We've slowed our advance as much as possible, but scouts moving ahead are impossible to fully protect. They keep getting hit by surprise attacks."

Li Daoxuan immediately understood.

This really was a nightmare battlefield.

The area lay outside his expanded Field of View, meaning he couldn't observe from above like before. Nor could he simply lift his little people into the air to scout.

As for the CC-01 Reconnaissance Dao Xuan Tianzun unit—it was too slow. Covering even a few miles took half a day. Completely useless in this terrain.

So how could he help?

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly.

Then—

An idea flashed through his mind.

"Can any of you make a Kongming lantern?" he asked.

Several soldiers answered at once, "Yes! Though we're not professionals."

A few even raised their hands.

Kongming lanterns weren't difficult to make. Many soldiers had made them before, either for festivals or in their hometowns.

"Good," Li Daoxuan said. "Make one."

He continued, giving clear instructions:

"Paint my image on all four sides. Tie a cotton thread to it. Release it into the sky and keep it directly above your formation."

The soldiers didn't understand why—but they understood obedience.

They immediately got to work.

There was no spare bamboo, but that wasn't a real problem. Several soldiers carried bamboo-tube rice; they shaved thin strips from the tubes, light and flexible.

A rectangular frame was assembled.

Paper was pasted onto all four sides.

The final problem was the image itself—

Until someone suddenly shouted, "I've got it!"

He pulled out a dog-eared copy of Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon-Slaying Chronicles, tore out the illustrated page, carefully cut out the Tianzun's likeness, and pasted it onto each side.

Problem solved.

Moments later, the Kongming lantern was finished.

Shi Jian personally lit the oil lamp inside.

The lantern slowly rose into the air, drifting upward, a long cotton thread trailing behind it. Zheng Gouzi held the thread in his hand, as if flying a kite.

Then—

The face painted on the lantern blinked.

It moved.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's gaze descended from the sky.

From the tiny statue on Shi Jian's chest came his calm voice:

"Three hundred meters front-right. See that narrow gully. Behind the large rock at the entrance—about a dozen men hiding. Deal with them."

Shi Jian's eyes lit up.

He immediately waved his hand, issuing a low command.

Two scouts spurred their horses and charged toward the gully.

Inside, fifteen hardened bandits crouched behind the rock, weapons ready.

They grinned.

"They're back."

"Only two this time."

One sneered. "If they enter the gully, rush them. Drag them down. Kill them. Take the horses."

Everything was planned.

The two scouts reached the entrance.

The bandits tightened their grips.

Then—

The scouts lit two small black spheres and casually tossed them behind the rock.

The bandits stared.

"...What the hell are those?"

BOOM!

BOOM!

Two violent explosions tore through the gully.

When the smoke cleared, all fifteen bandits lay motionless on the ground.

From the sky, Dao Xuan Tianzun gave a soft snort.

"Hmph."

Then the statue spoke again:

"That ambush has been cleared. Now—front-left, two hundred meters. Another group was startled. They're fleeing. Pursue immediately."

Shi Jian cracked his whip and surged forward without hesitation. Zheng Gouzi and three scouts followed, all five horses charging at full speed.

In moments, they reached the gully entrance.

Inside, seven or eight bandits were scrambling desperately to escape.

Shi Jian and the others raised their flintlock rifles.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

One by one, the fleeing figures collapsed.

Cheers erupted from the ranks.

"With Dao Xuan Tianzun here, everything's different!"

"We don't have to fear ambushes anymore!"

"All hail Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Li Daoxuan, floating within the lantern, was having an incredible time.

This experience—hovering inside the box, seeing through his people's eyes—was completely different from observing from the outside.

The immersion was absolute.

Watching from outside the box felt like playing with a mouse.

This?

This was like full VR.

Then, Li Daoxuan noticed something else.

To the northwest, a mountain gully stretched for several kilometers, opening into a small valley.

Inside the valley was a force carrying a banner marked with the character "Xue."

Xue Hongqi's men.

Further northwest—

Another army.

The garrison force led by Yansui Governor Chen Qiyu, currently resting at a temple several kilometers away.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun statue spoke calmly:

"Xue Hongqi intends to ambush Chen Qiyu."

Shi Jian hesitated. "This Chen Qiyu... should we save him?"

Li Daoxuan answered without pause.

"Save him."

He had already investigated Chen Qiyu.

An honest official. In half a year, he had fought rebels, opened coal mines, repaired waterworks, and genuinely benefited the people. The common folk of Shaanxi respected him.

Such a man—

Was worth saving..

Chapter 725 Commander Shi Arrives

Chen Qiyu, Governor of Yansui, was currently resting in a half-collapsed temple known as Gadu Monastery.

Several days earlier, he had gathered two thousand local garrison troops, reinforced by the personal guards of his own household, and set out to relieve Yanchang County.

At the beginning, everything had gone smoothly.

They marched along the main road, banners flying, drums beating. Along the way, they encountered scattered groups of bandits.

Bandits, of course, were to be suppressed.

Chen Qiyu ordered pursuit.

That decision was where everything went wrong.

The bandits fled deliberately, drawing the government troops deeper and deeper into the mountainous interior of Yanchang County. Ravines crisscrossed the land like a spider's web—deep cuts in the earth that twisted and branched without pattern.

Before Chen Qiyu realized it, he had fallen into the same nightmare faced by the Gao Family Village militia.

In terrain like this, advancing without scouts was suicide.

But sending out scouts was hardly better.

Once scouts entered the ravines, there was no guarantee they would ever return.

Many never even had the chance to send a warning. They were ambushed, cut down, and left to rot in the mountain gullies.

Some scouts struggled up steep slopes, only to have bandits suddenly appear at the ridge above, heaving massive stones down onto them. A single blow was enough to smash bones and end a life, the body tumbling helplessly back to the ravine floor.

It was a battlefield from hell.

Even in later generations, when the Nationalist forces encountered the Communist Party's Shaanxi–Gansu guerrillas in this same region, they had been beaten so badly they could only weep in frustration.

With technology so limited, how could one overcome terrain like this?

Chen Qiyu's troops were no elite force. They were dispirited garrison soldiers, poorly trained and long accustomed to complacency. Under these conditions, morale collapsed with terrifying speed.

Fear spread like a plague.

Many soldiers now wanted nothing more than to retreat to Yan'an Prefecture, abandoning Yanchang County entirely. They didn't care whether the county lived or died—only that they themselves survived.

"Governor," General Luo Xi urged, "we should withdraw to Yan'an. With our current strength, there's no way we can save Yanchang County."

Chen Qiyu snapped back angrily, "Nonsense! We only need to return to the main road. From there, we can advance directly."

Luo Xi shook his head. "Even the main road cuts through these ravines. Ambushes will continue no matter which path we take. The soldiers have already lost the will to fight. Pressing on like this is no different from marching them into a grave."

Chen Qiyu fell silent, his expression dark.

At that moment—

A shrill scream echoed from a distant hillside.

A scout posted there was struck by an arrow, his body tumbling down the slope like a broken doll.

Another scout lost.

Before the shock faded, a deeper sense of dread set in.

This wasn't just a scout being ambushed.

From a ravine to the north came thunderous shouts as a large bandit force surged out.

The scouts assigned to that ravine had sent no warning at all. They had clearly been wiped out in silence, allowing the bandits to creep forward undetected.

Chen Qiyu sprang to his feet. "Engage!"

But the moment he shouted, his heart sank.

The garrison troops weren't charging forward.

They were scattering—running in the opposite direction.

It's over, Chen Qiyu thought grimly. Morale has completely collapsed.

Luo Xi roared orders, and the Luo family guards surged forward, forming a tight defensive ring around both Luo Xi and Chen Qiyu. The Chen family guards quickly followed suit.

"Master, retreat at once!"

"The garrison troops have broken!"

"Our two families alone cannot hold them!"

Fury burned in Chen Qiyu's chest, but reason prevailed. Under the protection of their guards, the two men retreated southward.

They hadn't gone far when another explosion of shouts erupted from a southern ravine.

Another bandit force appeared.

The fleeing government soldiers panicked, froze for an instant, then turned and fled west—

Only to hear fresh battle cries erupt from that direction as well.

Then the east.

Then behind them.

In the blink of an eye, shouts rose from all four directions.

North. South. East. West.

The tiny, dilapidated Gadu Monastery, which had likely never seen such crowds since its construction, was now completely surrounded.

Inside the temple, a headless Buddha statue sat amid rubble. Its broken face, half-smashed and crooked, seemed almost to be grinning.

Chen Qiyu shouted in disbelief, "Is this some kind of joke? Bandits everywhere, and not a single scout warned us?"

Luo Xi answered bitterly, "Scouts are useless in this terrain. Governor, stop scolding—run! If we pick a ravine with fewer bandits and fight through it, we might still survive."

Despite the collapse of the garrison troops, the personal guards of the Chen and Luo families remained unbroken.

They chose the southeast direction, where bandit numbers appeared thinnest, and charged with desperate ferocity.

Fearless of death, the guards hacked and fought, forcing their way forward inch by inch.

But even in the sparsest ravine, the bandits were numerous, layered thickly through the gully like a living wall.

Progress was painfully slow.

If the bandits ahead weren't cleared quickly, those behind would catch up—forming a deadly pincer.

Certain death.

Panic tightened around both Chen Qiyu and Luo Xi like a noose.

Then—

Gunfire.

Sharp, explosive cracks echoed from the ravine ahead.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Bandits in front screamed and fell into chaos.

Luo Xi's face lit up. "Someone's attacking from the front! Reinforcements! The bandits are caught between two fires!"

Chen Qiyu's spirits soared. "At a time like this... it must be Shi Jian, Commander of Hejin!"

Revived by hope, Luo Xi shouted, "Charge! Break through and link up with them!"

But his guards shouted back urgently, "Master, we can't! The reinforcements are using muskets. If we rush into the bandits now, we'll be hit by friendly fire. We must hold position!"

Luo Xi froze. "...Ah?"

Chen Qiyu said nothing, but inwardly he sighed. This man truly lacks battlefield sense.

The guards formed a tight defensive line within the ravine, holding off enemies from both front and rear.

From the southeast came relentless musket fire—bang, bang, bang—like the beating of a war drum.

The bandits ahead grew frantic.

Behind them were musket-wielding soldiers who could kill with a single shot. Ahead of them were Chen and Luo's guards, blocking their escape.

They had trapped themselves.

Weapons began to drop.

One by one, bandits fell to their knees, pressing themselves against the ravine walls, trembling as they surrendered.

Those who refused to surrender were cut down without mercy.

Before long, Chen Qiyu finally saw the reinforcements clearly.

Just as he expected—

It was the "government troops" led by Shi Jian, Commander of Hejin.

Every single soldier carried a musket.

They advanced like an autumn wind sweeping fallen leaves, clearing bandits from the ravines with terrifying efficiency. Behind them remained only kneeling prisoners and corpses.

Shi Jian rode forward, dismounted, and cupped his hands respectfully.

"Governor," he said clearly, "your subordinate has arrived."

Chen Qiyu felt a wave of relief wash over him. "Commander Shi... you arrived at exactly the right moment. And from this ravine, no less. Had you taken any other path, I fear—"

He didn't finish the sentence.

He didn't need to.

Chapter 726 This Is Our Territory

Shi Jian laughed inwardly.

You think I just blundered into these ravines by luck? Dao Xuan Tianzun himself is guiding my steps.

Of course, that was something he would never say aloud.

On the surface, he merely smiled calmly.

"Indeed, a fortunate coincidence. Still... with luck like this, I'm not entirely confident we can absolutely guarantee the Governor's safety."

Chen Qiyu cut him off sharply.

"This is hardly the time for idle talk! Behind me—"

Shi Jian nodded crisply.

"Governor, please withdraw behind our formation and supervise the surrendered rebels."

Before Chen Qiyu could respond, Vice Commander Luo Xi suddenly surged forward with startling speed. He and his personal guards rushed straight at the kneeling rebels, shouting curses, kicking them over, knocking them flat to the ground in a flurry of boots and abuse.

Chen Qiyu glanced once at Luo Xi... then again at Shi Jian.

One is a fifth-rank garrison commander. The other is a third-rank vice commander.

By all logic, the vice commander should be the pillar of the battlefield... yet this one is useless.

Instead, it's the garrison commander who actually inspires confidence.

Aiya...

Well aware of his own limitations as a civil official unsuited for frontline command, Chen Qiyu very sensibly retreated behind Shi Jian's troops.

Shi Jian's militia immediately surged forward.

"Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!"

Flintlock rifles roared in rapid succession. A broad swath of rebel soldiers in the gully ahead collapsed instantly, bodies piling atop one another.

The rebel leader, Xue Hongqi, cast a sharp glance ahead and roared,

"Government reinforcements! Too many muskets — this is bad! Disperse! Scatter!"

The rebel forces had never formed proper battle lines to begin with, and in the cramped gullies, such formations were impossible anyway.

They turned and fled toward the depths of the valley.

Lacking automatic weapons, Shi Jian's men couldn't maintain uninterrupted fire. Instead, they advanced methodically — reload, fire, advance — pushing forward step by step.

The column wound deeper into the valley, following the gully toward Gadu Monastery.

From the rear, Chen Qiyu called out anxiously,

"Garrison Commander Shi! Be careful of ambushes! This terrain is treacherous — enemies could burst out from any direction at any moment—"

Before he could finish, the embroidered image on Shi Jian's chest stirred.

The miniature Dao Xuan Tianzun, stitched in fine cotton thread, spoke softly:

"Fifty paces ahead. Cliff face. Right side."

Shi Jian's arm shot up.

"Right cliff! Fire!"

"Crack! Crack! Crack!"

Several rebel archers tumbled from the cliff face, bows still clutched in their hands, dying before they even hit the ground.

Chen Qiyu gasped.

"Incredible! Garrison Commander Shi — how did you know they were hiding there?"

The Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke again, unhurried:

"Eighty paces ahead. Gully bend."

Shi Jian roared,

"Eighty paces! Focus on the bend!"

As the troops reached the curve, no one rushed forward recklessly. Instead, several soldiers hurled grenades behind the cluster of rocks.

"BOOM!"

Bodies and shattered stones were blasted skyward.

Chen Qiyu stared, stunned.

"This... this is unbelievable! How can you possibly predict everything so precisely?"

"Gadu Monastery ahead!"

A shout rang out.

The terrain suddenly opened up into the central valley.

Just moments earlier, fierce fighting had taken place here. Corpses of garrison soldiers lay scattered across the ground. The rebels, unwilling to become musket targets, had already withdrawn, dispersing into the countless surrounding gullies.

Shi Jian's troops quickly secured the monastery entrance.

Chen Qiyu followed close behind, dread clawing at his heart.

"Garrison Commander Shi, this place is extremely dangerous. Gullies run in all directions — rebels could erupt at any moment. This official was nearly killed here earlier—"

Shi Jian merely nodded.

"Understood."

What Chen Qiyu didn't know was that at that very moment, Xue Hongqi, having scattered his forces into those same gullies, was issuing orders of his own.

"The government troops are fools," Xue Hongqi sneered.

"Stopping at Gadu Monastery again? That cursed place is perfect for ambush. They haven't even sent scouts. When I give the signal, rotate positions — strike them from all directions."

"Haha! No one knows this terrain better than us!"

"Boss Xue!" someone suddenly shouted. "Look at the sky! Why is there a strange sky lantern floating above us?"

"To hell with lanterns!" Xue Hongqi barked. "What time is this for nonsense? Prepare to attack!"

The rebels crouched low, darting through gullies, shifting positions in moments.

"Charge!"

With a furious roar, a large rebel force burst from a gully.

But Shi Jian was ready.

A line of riflemen lay in wait. The instant the rebels emerged—

"Crack! Crack! Crack!"

They were cut down before even seeing daylight.

The survivors screamed and fled back into the gully.

"Where are our scouts?!" someone shouted.

"We should know their movements better than they know ours!"

"Crack!"

A lone gunshot answered them. A rebel scout fell from a distant cliff, already dead before his body hit the ravine floor.

"So many of our scouts are dead... we're blind now!"

"How do they know every hiding place?"

"They didn't even send scouts!"

"That's impossible!"

A rebel squad tried to reposition, slipping across a narrow gully.

At the bend ahead, government troops were already waiting.

"Crack! Crack! Crack!"

Every rebel fell where they stood.

The terrain the rebels had mastered since childhood now felt alien. Their enemies seemed to know every twist, every turn — better than they did.

Cold sweat slid down Xue Hongqi's back.

"What in the blazes... is going on?"

"Boss..." a subordinate whispered, trembling.

"That sky lantern... it has a human face painted on it. It looks like it's smiling at us."

"Nonsense!" Xue Hongqi roared.

"How can a painted face smile? Scout the surroundings—!"

Before he could finish—

"Crack! Crack! Crack!"

Gunfire erupted behind him. His rear guard collapsed in heaps.

Every hair on Xue Hongqi's body stood on end.

"Are you telling me... they've already circled behind us, and I didn't even notice?"

"Boss! Run!"

Under desperate protection, Xue Hongqi fled.

Just as he thought he'd escaped, riflemen burst from a diagonal gully ahead.

Leading them was Zheng Gouzi, laughing heartily.

"Let's not let Xue Hongqi slip away!"

"Crack! Crack! Crack!"

More bodies fell.

Driven half-mad with rage, Xue Hongqi roared, drew his blade, and charged at Zheng Gouzi.

Zheng Gouzi didn't even blink.

Behind him, a dozen musket barrels extended.

Smoke bloomed.

Xue Hongqi collapsed face-first into the dirt.

Chapter 727 Give Them to Wu Shen — He's Rich

The battle was over.

Xue Hongqi was dead.

More than two thousand five hundred rebel bandits — all young, strong, and battle-hardened — had been captured alive. Two hours later, Shi Jian's men swept a cave several miles away, hauling out the rebels' dependents: old men, women, and children who had been hiding there.

Another three thousand people.

In total, over five thousand five hundred captives.

At Gadu Monastery, Shi Jian's unit regrouped with Governor Chen Qiyu and Vice Commander Luo Xi. The two thousand garrison troops who had earlier scattered in panic gradually slunk back as well, reforming into a combined force of roughly three thousand men.

That said, everyone present understood one thing perfectly clearly:

Those two thousand garrison soldiers were useful for little more than filling headcount.

Shi Jian spoke first.

"In my view, there's no need for those two thousand garrison troops to continue risking their lives. Let them escort the captives back first."

Chen Qiyu's expression turned... complicated.

"Yan'an Prefecture cannot possibly absorb so many surrendered rebels," he said slowly.

"My office lacks both grain and land to settle them."

Shi Jian laughed.

"Governor, there's no need to worry. Before you took office in Yansui, Governor-General Hong Chengchou handled surrendered rebels the same way every time — he handed them all over to Censor Wu Shen. After all, Master Wu has one hundred thousand taels of silver at his disposal."

Chen Qiyu's face twitched.

"Surely... that hundred thousand taels has long since been spent?"

"No problem," Shi Jian replied breezily.

"After that money was used up, the Prince of Qin's Residence, out of noble patriotic sentiment, contributed another fifty thousand taels to Master Wu."

Chen Qiyu silently sneered inwardly.

That fifty thousand taels was only coughed up because the Prince of Qin's heir made a colossal mistake, got scolded bloody by His Majesty, and needed to plug the hole fast.

What 'noble patriotic sentiment'?

He cleared his throat.

"That fifty thousand taels... I'm afraid..."

Shi Jian waved his hand dismissively.

"It's fine, it's fine. Don't worry. He still has money. Just send all the surrendered rebels to him."

Chen Qiyu immediately felt enlightened.

I don't want to deal with these people anyway.

Whether Wu Shen still has silver or not — that's his headache.

And just like that, the matter was resolved harmoniously.

Luo Xi selected a thousand-household commander, instructing him to lead the two thousand garrison troops and escort the five thousand disarmed rebels to Wu Shen's jurisdiction.

What Wu Shen did with them afterward was none of their concern.

With that burning hot potato finally thrown far away, Chen Qiyu relaxed considerably. He cupped his hands toward Shi Jian, face full of admiration.

"Commander Shi's military methods are nothing short of divine — subtle, brilliant, and terrifyingly precise. Today's battle has truly broadened my horizons."

A dignified Provincial Governor, openly praising a fifth-rank military officer.

Vice Commander Luo Xi naturally refused to be outdone.

"Commander Shi inspires awe! Truly a peerless general of our age!"

Shi Jian laughed awkwardly.

"Just average. Just average. You flatter me."

Chen Qiyu asked curiously,

"Commander Shi, how are you so familiar with the terrain here? It's as if you were fighting in your own backyard."

Shi Jian coughed lightly.

"I paid a few local herb gatherers to guide us."

Chen Qiyu froze.

"...What?"

Luo Xi blurted out,

"Uh—!"

Neither of them truly believed this explanation. But since Shi Jian had already said it aloud, neither saw any benefit in exposing the lie.

They accepted it.

Chen Qiyu then said,

"We must still rush to Yanchang County town. Though Xue Hongqi is dead, the rebel forces occupying A City and those led by King One-Character remain nearby. They could attack the county seat at any moment."

Luo Xi immediately added,

"The Governor and I will accompany Commander Shi with our personal guards."

Shi Jian didn't particularly want them along.

With such high-ranking officials present, it would be inconvenient to interact freely with Dao Xuan Tianzun, who disliked revealing himself before outsiders — especially imperial officials.

But...

There was no good reason to refuse.

"Very well," Shi Jian said.

"Let's move together."

As evening fell, the sun dipped below the horizon.

The army returned to the main road. Once darkness settled in, marching became impractical, so camp was quickly established and preparations for the evening meal began.

It was at mealtime that the disparity between units became painfully obvious.

Chen Qiyu and Luo Xi had both brought their personal guards — the true backbone of any imperial official's authority — and naturally, these men enjoyed excellent provisions.

Chen Qiyu's guards produced thick guokui flatbreads, made from fine white flour mixed with minced meat. Each bite released rich fragrance — flour and meat blending perfectly.

Luo Xi's guards fared slightly worse, but still respectable. They had fried dry noodles, similar to the instant noodles of later ages. Mixed with wild vegetables and beans, they were aromatic and filling.

These guards had been forced to follow behind Shi Jian's unit during the fighting, never truly getting to show off. Now, they displayed their food openly, hoping to reclaim some dignity.

Zheng Gouzi sniffed the air with his legendary dog-like nose and grinned.

"Brothers, see that? They're flaunting their rations, trying to make us jealous."

The men laughed.

"So they want to compete?"

"Alright, then — let's play."

"Bring out the canned luncheon meat."

"And the dried chicken and beef jerky."

"I've got dried cod fillets."

"Compressed biscuits? Too plain. Don't bother."

The Gao Family Village Militia's logistics were unmatched under heaven.

In moments, pots were set up. Gourmet dishes were cooked openly, the rich aromas deliberately drifting toward the neighboring camps.

Luo Xi's guards froze.

As if struck by acupuncture points, every one of them turned stiffly toward Shi Jian's unit, eyes filled with silent resentment.

Chen Qiyu's guards also felt their guokui suddenly lose all flavor.

Meat or not — it tasted bland. Utterly bland.

And as for asking—

"Can I have a bite?"

Not a single one of them had the face to say it.

They could only stare.

Luo Xi leaned close to Chen Qiyu and whispered,

"Governor... why is that unit so well supplied? Isn't the entire empire suffering delayed military pay? How do they afford such extravagance?"

Chen Qiyu sighed softly.

"That isn't military pay. Those supplies must come from Commander Shi himself."

"In other words," he continued,

"his army isn't composed of regular garrison soldiers at all — only private guards."

Luo Xi sucked in a sharp breath.

"A thousand private guards...?"

"That man..."

"...he's terrifyingly rich."

Chapter 728 Needs a Yang Zongbao

Chen Qiyu and Luo Xi slowly wandered over toward Shi Jian and Zheng Gouzi.

At the moment, Shi Jian and Zheng Gouzi were blanching thin slices of luncheon meat in a pot. The broth bubbled gently, rich aromas drifting outward.

The instant Zheng Gouzi saw the two approaching, his reflexes kicked in. He hugged his bowl tightly to his chest.

"Even if you're high-ranking officials," he declared firmly, "I'm not sharing my food."

Shi Jian chuckled and waved his hand.

"Come, come. Don't mind him. Sirs, please join us. There's plenty."

Zheng Gouzi leaned over and whispered, astonished,

"You're actually giving them food?"

Shi Jian lowered his voice.

"We're deep behind enemy lines. One must be flexible, not rigid. Necessary expenses must be paid. Dao Xuan Tianzun taught me that."

"Oh," Zheng Gouzi said, instantly enlightened.

"Then that makes sense."

With Shi Jian's invitation, Chen Qiyu and Luo Xi joined them. The four squatted around the same pot, fishing out slices of luncheon meat.

The moment the meat entered their mouths—

Chen Qiyu and Luo Xi's expressions froze.

The flavor exploded.

The meat was rich, salty, fragrant, and unbelievably tender.

During the later World War era, soldiers from countless nations would drool uncontrollably at the sight of American canned luncheon meat — and for very good reason.

Luo Xi looked like a peasant encountering civilization for the first time. His eyes glazed over.

"Mmm... this is incredible... damn, this is really good!"

As a provincial governor, Chen Qiyu had to maintain decorum. He didn't vocalize his amazement, but his lips smacked unconsciously, and he let out a soft hum.

"Commander Shi," he said slowly, "your household troops truly enjoy... excellent logistics."

Shi Jian smiled modestly.

"Just passable."

Chen Qiyu pressed on.

"Your family must be quite wealthy?"

Shi Jian's heart skipped slightly.

Fishing. This was definitely fishing.

Naturally, he couldn't tell the truth. Fortunately, everything had already been prepared in advance — every person involved had rehearsed the story countless times.

Shi Jian smiled faintly.

"My family was originally poor. I was nothing more than a destitute military man. But my paternal uncle happened to make some money and helped support me into official circles."

"Oh?" Chen Qiyu asked.

"And who might your uncle be?"

Shi Jian laughed.

"Shi Laosi. He wrote a book called Gao Piao. It became a bestseller, and that's how he grew wealthy."

Chen Qiyu's eyes lit up instantly.

"Ah! I remember now!"

Back when he encountered Gao Shan's caravan near the Huangqiu Terrace tunnel, he had flipped through several books. Among them was Gao Piao. Compared to titles like Tapo Tianqiong, Quandong Xuankun, or Fanren Xiuzhen Zhuan, Gao Piao had left a much deeper impression on him.

"So Shi Laosi, the author of Gao Piao, is your uncle," Chen Qiyu said thoughtfully.

Everything suddenly made sense.

The Shi clan must have been poor originally, then one member struck gold. Once wealth appeared, power naturally followed. Funding younger relatives into officialdom was entirely normal.

With this explanation, Shi Jian's extravagant military expenses were finally accounted for.

Chen Qiyu sighed.

"Publishing books is truly that profitable? It almost makes me want to publish one myself. But I have no interest in frivolous works like Tapo Tianqiong. I'd want to write something meaningful, like Gao Piao."

Shi Jian smiled inwardly.

Writing is easy. Becoming popular is hard.

You think your taste represents the world, but readers might not even glance at your work.

Your disdain for Tapo Tianqiong alone proves you don't understand what most people enjoy.

If Gao Piao hadn't been favored by Dao Xuan Tianzun and granted special permission for printing, it would have died before anyone noticed.

Even now, it sells only moderately — most copies are funded and distributed for propaganda purposes.

But such thoughts were best kept to himself.

As dawn broke—

The Flower World Star Agency officially began filming preparations.

The actresses still needed more training for action scenes, but dramatic scenes were already well within reach.

Miss Cai Lin donned armor.

Not theatrical stage armor, but a genuine set of female general's armor, borrowed directly from Xing Honglang.

The moment she put it on, Cai Lin nearly staggered.

Dozens of pounds.

Yet actresses of this era were different from those of later generations. A modern celebrity might refuse to act at the slightest discomfort, demanding a stand-in.

But actresses here had low status and iron endurance. Cai Lin clenched her teeth and bore the weight.

Walking slower was fine. Today was for dramatic scenes — conversations within Tianbo Residence. No need for acrobatics.

The full cast assembled.

All Twelve Widows of Tianbo Residence stood in formation.

Outside the box, Li Daoxuan activated every camera, capturing the women from multiple angles.

Comic books required almost no dialogue.

Films, however, demanded it.

The actresses had studied the story of Mu Guiying extensively and even hired a professional storyteller to guide them in improvised dialogue.

At this moment, the storyteller finished explaining a scene and turned to Cai Lin.

"Miss Cai, here you must express longing for your husband, Yang Zongbao. You'll gaze at the sky, speak softly, perhaps ask your late husband's spirit to protect you..."

Cai Lin nodded.

"Understood."

Just then, Dao Xuan Tianzun, watching from the side in test-03 form, suddenly spoke.

"Hold on."

Everyone froze.

"You're filming a movie, not staging a play," Li Daoxuan continued calmly.

"This scene can't rely on Cai Lin alone. Films allow flashbacks. To strengthen the emotion, we should insert a flashback of Mu Guiying and Yang Zongbao together."

The crowd exclaimed in unison,

"Huh?"

"So," Li Daoxuan concluded,

"we need someone to play Yang Zongbao."

The moment the words fell—

Every single gaze turned toward Lao Nanfeng.

Lao Nanfeng pointed at himself.

"Why are you all staring at me?"

Someone muttered,

"Brother Nanfeng would suit Yang Zongbao, wouldn't he?"

"I think so!"

"Isn't he a bit too roguish?"

"...Maybe he can manage?"

Li Daoxuan burst out laughing.

"Excellent. It's decided. Lao Nanfeng, go get dressed as Yang Zongbao and act the flashback with Cai Lin."

When Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke, it was divine will.

Lao Nanfeng had no choice.

Half an hour later—

Lao Nanfeng, fully armored, stood before Cai Lin.

Cai Lin's face flushed pink.

"My husband... I pray your spirit protects this humble wife, that I may return safely from this expedition."

"Cut!"

Li Daoxuan sprang up furiously.

"No! Absolutely not!"

"Mu Guiying is not meek! What's with 'my husband' and 'this humble wife'? Are you trying to anger me?"

He pointed sharply.

"You grab Lao Nanfeng and shout: 'Zongbao! Your old lady is going to war! You stay home and wait obediently for your old lady to return victorious — understand?!'"

Silence fell like thunder.

Cai Lin broke into cold sweat.

"...This lowly one cannot do it."

Chapter 729 The Divine Mirror

Li Daoxuan coached her for a long while.

At first, Cai Xinzhi still carried the habitual softness of a traditional actress—measured steps, lowered gaze, restrained emotion. But under Li Daoxuan's relentless corrections, something gradually changed.

Her posture straightened.

Her eyes sharpened.

Her voice gained weight.

The fragile widow faded away, replaced bit by bit with the imposing aura of a woman who had commanded troops and stared down battlefields.

By the end, even the surrounding actresses instinctively adjusted their stances, as if afraid of being scolded by a real general.

Only then did Li Daoxuan finally nod.

"Good. Now we're filming Mu Guiying, not a grieving concubine."

At last, the shoot could proceed as planned.

Li Daoxuan kept the diorama box's view locked on the Stars Performing Arts Agency, ensuring uninterrupted filming. At the same time, he activated Co-sensing, his consciousness splitting cleanly in two.

In the next instant, his awareness shifted to Shi Jian's unit.

Morning light broke over the land.

Shi Jian's troops resumed their march, steadily advancing toward Yan'an County.

The reconnaissance hot air balloon used the previous day had already been retrieved. After refueling and inspection, it rose once more into the sky, its shadow drifting silently over hills and ravines.

From above, the terrain unfolded like a living map.

Li Daoxuan could switch perspectives at will—sky to ground, ground to sky. Within a dozen miles, enemy movements, road conditions, and ambush points were all laid bare.

After a brief scan confirmed there was no immediate danger, he switched back to the filming site.

The front lines were calm for now.

The actresses' progress, however, was... slow.

Li Daoxuan watched for a while, then suddenly smacked his forehead.

"Right. Almost forgot something important."

He muttered to himself,

"It's time to prepare the venue and equipment for showing movies."

Reaching under his bed, Li Daoxuan pulled out a box.

Inside were neatly stacked miniature tablet computers.

Each tablet was only about half the size of his palm.

Devices this small were no longer mass-produced; he had commissioned them specially in Huaqiangbei days earlier.

Despite their size, the screens were absurdly high-end—4K resolution, ultra-high DPI, sharp enough to make individual pores visible.

The reason was simple.

Once placed inside the diorama box, the screen would be magnified two hundred times. If the resolution weren't obscene to begin with, the image would blur into an unwatchable mess.

Li Daoxuan picked one up and estimated its scale inside the box.

"...Huh."

Within the diorama world, this tiny tablet would be equivalent to an enormous screen—large enough to rival a massive open-air cinema.

"Mm. Just right."

The best place to test such a strange object was Puzhou.

Puzhou had a huge "theater," funded by Lao Nanfeng and built by the skilled craftsmen of Gao Family Village, originally meant for concerts and performances.

At the center stood a wide stage, where actresses usually sang and danced.

Now, that stage had a new purpose.

Li Daoxuan carefully placed the tablet inside the diorama.

He positioned it beside the main stage, unfolded the stand, and adjusted its angle.

Perfect.

With this single placement, Lao Nanfeng's theater had gained a colossal screen—and with it, limitless possibilities.

Li Daoxuan opened the pre-installed app and pulled up a live feed from one of his cameras.

Instantly—

The screen lit up.

Cai Xinzhi, along with the other eleven actresses, appeared larger than life, performing the dramatic scene of the Twelve Widows of Tianbo Residence preparing to march to war.

Raw footage.

Unedited.

Projected directly into the heart of the theater.

Thankfully, the theater was empty. Otherwise, any unsuspecting passerby would have been scared out of their wits.

"Excellent," Li Daoxuan said with satisfaction.

"The test is a success."

He turned to the remaining tablets in the box, eyes gleaming.

"Let's put one in every city."

Then he added thoughtfully,

"Not just theaters. Theater screens will be for paid showings... but we'll also need public screens for propaganda."

Yes.

Li Daoxuan was preparing a full-scale propaganda campaign.

The old saying—'Good men don't become soldiers; good iron isn't used for nails'—had long poisoned the mindset of the people. It discouraged enlistment and weakened the foundation of security across Gao Family Village's expanding territory.

This way of thinking had to be broken.

And nothing reshaped minds faster than repeated, vivid imagery.

At Li Daoxuan's command, the Blue Hats and Yellow Hats in every city mobilized immediately.

In each city's Caishikou—historically the execution ground—a central plaza began to take shape.

Against the northern wall of every plaza, Li Daoxuan reached in and installed a massive tablet screen.

Considering wind and rain, he even thoughtfully added a transparent acrylic cover above each one.

Divine miracles... with waterproofing.

A few days later—

Thanks to Shi Jian's relentless advance, Yan'an County was successfully relieved.

With reconnaissance hot air balloons guiding their movements, terrain ceased to be a meaningful obstacle. Losing such a battle would have been more shocking than winning it.

The three bandit leaders—Xue Hongqi, Yizuo Cheng, and Yizi Wang—were all killed.

Their most vicious subordinates met the same fate.

More than seventeen thousand others were captured alive and handed over to Wu Shen for processing.

And therein lay the problem.

Wu Shen was now utterly broke.

His status had reverted from a heaven-sent "disaster relief angel" to an ordinary Censor-Inspector. With no funds, no supplies, and no manpower, how was he supposed to resettle seventeen thousand people?

There was only one destination left.

Huanglong Mountain Prison, Gao Family Village.

To properly fulfill his duties, Wu Shen decided to personally escort the captives. He invited along his close friend Shi Kefa, the Judicial Commissioner of Xi'an—and also a Jinyiwei hundred-household commander.

Together, they escorted the massive group toward Gao Family Village.

As they entered the village, Wu Shen suddenly exclaimed,

"Oh?"

He pointed toward the outer wall of Li Family Fortress.

"Brother Shi, look at that... strange, enormous mirror."

Shi Kefa followed his gaze and immediately stiffened.

"...Ah."

He swallowed.

"The Divine Mirror."

Wu Shen raised an eyebrow.

"Divine Mirror? What does it do?"

Shi Kefa's expression turned awkward.

Back then, he had sprinted across the Dragon Gate Yellow River Bridge like a panicked madman. The Divine Mirror had recorded everything—and worse, replayed it publicly.

Remembering it now made his scalp tingle.

"Lord Wu," he said quietly, "this Divine Mirror can record events from elsewhere... and replay them at any time."

He lowered his voice further.

"If you do something foolish, and it gets shown to the entire village..."

He clicked his tongue.

"Trust me. You don't want that experience."

Wu Shen snorted.

"Is it really that exaggerated? I don't believe it."

The moment the words left his mouth—

The Divine Mirror lit up.

A face appeared on the screen.

Gao Yiye.

Magnified to an enormous scale, she still looked as radiant as ever, a faint smile curving her lips.

As the mirror activated, villagers gathered at once.

"It's on! It's on!"

"We finally get to see the Divine Mirror again!"

"Look, it's the Saintess!"

Gao Yiye smiled warmly at the crowd outside the screen.

"Testing... testing..."

"Oh? Can everyone see me?"

"We can!" the crowd shouted back in unison.

"Haha, good," Gao Yiye laughed.

Then—

The villagers suddenly heard that same laughter coming from behind them.

They turned around in surprise.

There stood Gao Yiye herself, squeezed among the onlookers—though several guards discreetly formed a circle around her, leaving a clear space.

One Saintess on the screen.

One Saintess in the crowd.

Wu Shen stared.

His mouth slowly fell open.

Chapter 730 Care to Record a Segment?

The crowd stared at the enormous Gao Yiye on the Divine Mirror—

Then turned their heads to look at the Gao Yiye standing right beside them.

For a moment, their brains refused to work.

"Huh?"

"Oh?"

"Wait... Saintess?"

Someone finally found their voice.

"Saintess, we thought you were either inside the mirror... or perhaps standing before another Celestial—
ah—Divine Mirror!"

Gao Yiye covered her mouth and laughed.

"I recorded it in advance at Dao Xuan Tianzun's request," she explained cheerfully. "I came today specifically to see what it looked like when it was played."

The crowd erupted.

"Hahaha—!"

"So that's how it works!"

"No wonder it feels so real!"

Wu Shen, however, was completely lost.

"...Hold on," he said slowly. "What?"

Shi Kefa, on the other hand, remained calm—at least on the surface. He had already endured the ordeal of being recorded once before. Compared to that humiliation, this scene posed absolutely no pressure.

None at all.

On the Divine Mirror, Gao Yiye's expression suddenly turned solemn.

"Last night," she said clearly, "a thief broke into a private residence in Puzhou City. The amount stolen was substantial. After investigation, the culprit was sentenced to three years of labor reform in Huanglong Mountain Prison."

She paused.

"Next, we will show everyone the entire process of this criminal act."

Her image faded.

The Divine Mirror shifted.

Darkness filled the screen.

It was the quiet night streets of Puzhou—silent, empty, and still. Yet despite the pitch-black surroundings, the image was astonishingly clear, as if the mirror itself possessed divine night vision.

A shadow crept into view.

Clad entirely in black, the figure moved like smoke, hugging walls and slipping through alleys. They reached the outer wall of Puzhou Textile Factory No. 1, glanced around cautiously, then began climbing with both hands and feet.

In a blink, they vanished inside.

The perspective shifted again.

Now the scene was inside the factory walls—another angle, another unseen eye, tracking the intruder's every step.

The thief moved through the compound with practiced familiarity, bypassing workshops and storage rooms until reaching the finance office.

A pry bar flashed.

The lock popped open.

Inside—

A heavy sack of silver.

The thief hoisted it onto their shoulder, barely suppressing their excitement, and retraced their path. Just as they climbed the wall to escape—

A beam of golden light suddenly pierced the night sky.

It descended straight from the clouds, enveloping the thief completely.

The thief froze.

They looked up.

Above them was only rolling cloud—and that overwhelming, sacred radiance.

This was no mortal lantern.

This was divine light.

The thief collapsed to their knees with a thud.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun!" they wailed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, I was wrong! I was wrong! Please spare me!"

From the heavens—

A colossal golden hand descended.

The crowd collectively sucked in their breath.

But the hand did not strike.

Instead, it gently pinched the thief between two fingers—like plucking up an insect—and lifted them into the clouds.

The image cut abruptly.

The Divine Mirror lit again.

This time, Gao Yiye was shown sitting at a loom, calmly weaving. She hadn't yet set her work aside when the image resumed.

She blinked in surprise and looked toward the camera.

"Oh?"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, is it my turn to speak again?"

She quickly put down her weaving.

"Ah—alright, alright, I'm coming."

The image shook slightly, blurred, then stabilized.

Once again, Gao Yiye stood dignified and composed, smiling gently.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun did not execute the thief," she said. "While theft is not a capital crime, the amount involved was significant. Therefore, the sentence is three years of labor reform, to cleanse their wrongdoing through honest work."

The plaza exploded with applause.

"So satisfying!"

"Serves him right!"

"Stealing in Dao Xuan Tianzun's territory—does he have a death wish?"

"Only three years? Too light!"

"He should've gotten ten!"

"I say execution!"

Voices overlapped, arguments sparked, emotions surged.

On the screen, Gao Yiye glanced aside.

"Has the test broadcast concluded?"

Before anyone could react—

Another voice echoed from the Divine Mirror.

"Alright, that's enough testing for today."

It was Li Daoxuan.

"Yiye, you can go back to weaving. Don't mind me."

Gao Yiye laughed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, you're not planning to broadcast my weaving too, are you?"

Li Daoxuan replied lazily,

"That's hard to say."

"Hey!" Gao Yiye protested.

"How can you do that?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"Let everyone see how adorable our Saintess is. We're not aloof immortals hiding in the clouds—we share joy with the common folk."

The screen wobbled again.

The image returned to Gao Yiye weaving.

Her voice followed, amused and resigned.

"Alright, alright. I'm not afraid of it being shown. The old villagers already know what I'm like anyway."

The Divine Mirror went dark.

Silence.

Then—

The entire crowd exploded into chatter.

Wu Shen stood frozen.

"...This Divine Mirror," he whispered, "is nothing short of miraculous."

Shi Kefa nodded gravely.

"Now you understand," he said. "If you do something foolish and it gets recorded..."

He paused meaningfully.

"...you're finished."

Wu Shen immediately felt his heart tighten.

He hurriedly searched his memories—every word, every action, every step taken recently.

After a long moment, he suddenly laughed loudly.

"Hahaha!"

"I conduct myself uprightly! My conscience is clear! I have never done anything shameful in my life!"

He slapped his chest.

"A clear conscience fears no midnight knock! Even the Divine Mirror cannot find fault with me!"

Shi Kefa felt a stab of envy.

Minister Wu truly has it good, he thought.

Unlike me...

His mind involuntarily replayed the scene of himself sprinting like a lunatic across Dragon Gate Bridge.

He sighed inwardly.

Wu Shen suddenly changed tone.

"Still," he said seriously, "this Divine Mirror is far superior to our official notices and proclamations. If used properly, it could convey laws and decrees to the common people with astonishing efficiency."

Shi Kefa nodded.

"A pity such a divine artifact belongs only to immortals. We mortals shouldn't even dream of it."

At that moment—

Gao Yiye walked up to them.

"Greetings, honored sirs."

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa hurriedly clasped their hands.

"Greetings, Saintess."

Gao Yiye smiled.

"You've just witnessed the Divine Mirror's ability to disseminate information," she said. "Surely, you've formed some insights?"

Wu Shen nodded.

"Indeed. Its effectiveness is unparalleled."

Gao Yiye inclined her head.

"Good. Then Dao Xuan Tianzun wishes to invite Minister Shi Kefa to assist with a matter."

Shi Kefa froze.

"...Me?"

"You are currently Judicial Commissioner of Xi'an, correct?" Gao Yiye asked.

Shi Kefa straightened immediately.

"By imperial decree, this humble servant oversees criminal cases and legal affairs in Xi'an."

Gao Yiye continued,

"When handling cases, do you often encounter people who violate the law without even realizing their actions are unlawful?"

Shi Kefa sighed deeply.

"Far too many."

"Then," Gao Yiye said warmly, "why not personally record a program titled 'Shi Kefa Explains the Law'?"

She smiled.

"Explain to the people which actions are forbidden, and why. Wouldn't that be a great act of benevolence?"

Shi Kefa's eyes lit up.

"This... this is possible?"

"Of course," Gao Yiye replied. "You've already seen the results."

Shi Kefa was instantly energized.

"This benefits the people and the nation alike! I am more than willing! When do we begin? Immediately? Right now?"

Wu Shen cut in sharply.

"Hey! You're supposed to escort prisoners with me to Huanglong Mountain!"

Shi Kefa waved him off.

"It's not far! Minister Wu can handle it easily!"

He grew solemn.

"But educating the people on the law—this is a matter of national importance!"

Wu Shen opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

He was utterly speechless.