

Great Ming 781

Chapter 781 So Clueless About People

Hearing this, Lu Xiangheng couldn't help blurting out, "Ah!"

So they were planning to build an ironworks here.

The value of an ironworks was obvious. It could forge weapons, manufacture firearms, and even cast cannons.

In other words, Shangnan County was directly carrying out the "military preparedness" clause of his Ten Proposals and Eight Regulations.

What was there left to say?

This was simply too efficient.

Lu Xiangheng was so delighted that his spirits soared. In all the territories under his authority—five circuits, eight prefectures, nine provinces—he had never once encountered local officials who implemented his policies with such enthusiasm and initiative.

He hurried like a gust of wind into the county yamen.

The moment he entered, he saw Luo Xi and Zheng Gouzi bent over a table...

Eating.

Li Daoxuan, however, was not at the table.

He sat alone on a chair nearby, motionless, rigid, his eyes wide open and unblinking, like a carved wooden statue. It was deeply unsettling.

Lu Xiangheng was utterly baffled.

"You two are eating," he thought, aghast, "and you didn't invite Li Daoxuan to join you? How can you be this casual? Look at him—staring without blinking. And you can still eat under that gaze?"

"These military men really are crude," he sighed inwardly. "No understanding of human feelings or social etiquette whatsoever."

He cleared his throat deliberately.

The two men eating looked up. Luo Xi's eyes lit up with joy.

"Ah! Governor Lu!" he exclaimed. "You're here? Why didn't you send word ahead? This subordinate would have gone out to welcome you! Come, come—sit down and eat with us."

Lu Xiangheng's eyelid twitched.

"So now you suddenly understand etiquette?" he thought. "You remember to invite me, but it never occurred to you to invite Li Daoxuan?"

He turned his head toward Li Daoxuan and asked carefully, "Li Daoxuan, why are you sitting over there? Have you eaten? Would you like to join us?"

Li Daoxuan did not respond.

He didn't move.

He didn't blink.

His gaze remained fixed, unwavering, like a frozen lake.

A chill ran through Lu Xiangheng's spine.

"Has he... been angered to the point of madness?" Lu Xiangheng wondered uneasily.

With that thought, even though he was a bit hungry, he suddenly felt far too awkward to sit down and eat. He could endure hunger, at least for now.

"This official already ate on the march," he said stiffly.

"Oh?" Luo Xi replied. "That's a shame. Li Daoxuan's logistics team just delivered a fresh batch of supplies. Look—newly arrived lunch meat. Smells amazing."

Lu Xiangheng instantly broke out in a cold sweat internally.

"You're eating food sent by Li Daoxuan," he screamed in his heart, "and you didn't invite him to eat even once? Is that how you treat people?"

Terrifying.

Absolutely terrifying.

"Ahem!" Lu Xiangheng hurriedly changed the topic. "Shangnan County is developing quite well."

Luo Xi chuckled. "Yes, it's going very smoothly. All thanks to Li Daoxuan—he contributes both money and manpower."

Lu Xiangheng nearly collapsed internally.

"Stop mentioning him," he begged silently. "He's sitting right there, staring without blinking! If eyes could dry out, his would already be dust."

Aloud, he continued, "Shangnan County is doing splendidly. These methods can be extended to Wuguan Pass, Shanyang County, and Shangzhou City. This official will instruct their officials to come here and learn. I only wonder... does Li Daoxuan still have sufficient resources?"

"He does!" Zheng Gouzi immediately answered with enthusiasm. "As long as Governor Lu gives the order, our people can go over right away to help them develop."

Lu Xiangheng pressed his lips together.

"Li Daoxuan is clearly so angry he can't even speak," he thought, "and you, his subordinate, can't read the room at all. Charging in with answers like this—utterly tactless."

Forget it.

The atmosphere here was suffocating. Staying any longer would shorten his lifespan.

"Indeed," Lu Xiangheng said hurriedly. "Keep up the good work."

With that, he turned and practically fled the yamen. He truly could not endure someone staring at him so intently, wide-eyed and motionless. It was deeply unnerving.

He hadn't gone far when a messenger rushed up again.

"Report! Rebels are heading toward Miejia Gully and Shiquan Dam!"

"Send reinforcements immediately!" Lu Xiangheng ordered.

"Report! Rebels are ravaging Kangningping and Lion Mountain!"

"Divide the troops and reinforce them!"

"Report! Rebels are advancing simultaneously on Taiping River, Zhumu Bian, and Jingkou!"

"!...!"

Lu Xiangheng suddenly remembered something. He spun around and ran straight back into the county yamen.

He grabbed Luo Xi, who was still chewing lunch meat.

"Dispatch troops at once! This official will handle Miejia Gully, Shiquan Dam, Kangningping, and Lion Mountain. You handle Taiping River, Zhumu Bian, and Jingkou!"

"Hey, hey, hey—!" Luo Xi protested. "This subordinate hasn't finished his meat yet... it just arrived, a fresh delivery..."

Lu Xiangheng exploded.

"Li Daoxuan sent this food, and he hasn't taken a single bite! And you're happily stuffing your mouth with it? You're not eating anymore. Prepare for battle immediately!"

Luo Xi was struck speechless.

Zheng Gouzi followed them out, laughing loudly as he dragged Luo Xi away.

"Alright, alright," he said cheerfully. "You'll still have lunch meat to eat on the march!"

As he spoke, he flicked his wrist and tossed a bamboo box toward Lu Xiangheng.

Lu Xiangheng caught it and opened the lid. Inside was a perfectly square, brick-like block of meat.

"...This is the lunch meat Luo Xi was talking about?" he asked.

"Just heat it up and eat," Zheng Gouzi replied. "It's truly delicious."

With that, he had already pulled Luo Xi off toward the barracks to muster the troops.

Lu Xiangheng shook his head, holding the bamboo box, and returned to his Tianxiong Army, quickly issuing orders to move out.

Then another problem hit him.

"What about the three thousand captives?"

Lu Xiangheng's head immediately began to ache.

At that moment, a man wearing a Blue Hat approached respectfully.

"Sir, if you have no way to settle those three thousand captives, why not entrust them to us? We need manpower for heavy labor here. We have plenty of grain to feed them."

Lu Xiangheng's eyes widened.

"What?!"

That evening, halfway to Miejia Gully, the Tianxiong Army halted to rest and cook.

Lu Xiangheng's personal guards heated the lunch meat and respectfully presented it to him.

He took a small bite.

His expression instantly relaxed.

"...Mm? This is actually quite good," he murmured. "No wonder that fellow Luo Xi likes it so much."

And while Lu Xiangheng had earlier been terrified by Li Daoxuan's unblinking stare...

Li Daoxuan's consciousness had not been in that body at all.

At this very moment, it was in Xi'an.

Outside Xi'an's North City Gate.

A brand-new railway station stood proudly just beyond the gate.

A large sign hung above it:

Xi'an North Station

In the lower left corner, a smaller inscription read:

Prince of Qin's Residence.

From the station, a railway stretched northward, vanishing into the distant horizon.

This was the Xi-Yan Railway, heavily funded and constructed by the Prince of Qin's heir.

At present, it extended only twenty li. The latter half of the tracks had yet to be laid, rendering it temporarily unusable.

And now, the most difficult obstacle in the entire project lay ahead—

The Wei River.

The Wei River was not wide, less than a hundred meters across.

Stone bridges, wooden bridges, suspension bridges—bridges of all kinds had existed here for years.

Yet none of them could withstand the weight of a heavy train.

Chapter 782 Go Ask the Tianzhun

Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's heir, stood by the riverbank with a dark scowl on his face.

His gaze swept over the flowing Wei River, and rage welled up inside him.

"My glorious money-making plan," he snarled, "is blocked by this blasted Wei River! Absolutely infuriating! Someone—come here! Fill this river up for me!"

Standing beside him, Wu Shen wore a strange expression.

"Your Highness," he said carefully, "please mind your words. The Wei River is the mother river of the people of Shaanxi. Adding words like 'blasted' in front of its name will easily provoke public outrage. If word spreads, the common people of the entire Qin region may very well rise up against you."

He paused, then added flatly, "As for filling the river... don't even think about it."

The words 'the common people would rise up' struck Zhu Cunji like a thunderbolt.

He instantly sobered.

"Fine, fine," he said quickly. "I won't curse the Wei River anymore. Before the people get angry, I'm already furious myself!"

He waved his hands anxiously.

"The railway is blocked by this river. What are we supposed to do? What should we do?!"

Wu Shen frowned, a trace of impatience seeping into his voice.

"Your Highness, haven't you noticed? The people from Gao Family Village are already researching how to build a bridge."

Zhu Cunji immediately lowered his voice.

"Minister Wu, you don't understand. These steam-powered vehicles weigh hundreds of tons, and once fully loaded they'll carry over a thousand passengers. With that much weight, who knows how heavy they'll be? Can any bridge in this world truly support such a monster?"

Shi Kefa, who had been standing quietly nearby, leaned forward.

"Of course a bridge can support it," he said calmly. "For example... a divine bridge."

Zhu Cunji snorted.

"Divine bridge? You're talking about that Longmen Yellow River Bridge again, aren't you?" He waved dismissively. "I don't believe it. How could a bridge possibly span the Yellow River?"

Shi Kefa replied seriously, "I saw it with my own eyes, Your Highness. If you don't believe me, a visit to Longmen will settle it."

"I'll see a ghost!" Zhu Cunji exploded. "Are you trying to kill me? The moment I leave this small area around Xi'an, I violate ancestral law. That's a capital offense!"

Shi Kefa could only shrug helplessly and spread his hands.

The Jinyiwei all knew this clearly: princes of the blood were strictly forbidden from leaving their fiefs, and monitoring them was precisely the Jinyiwei's duty.

If Zhu Cunji truly dared to go to Longmen, Shi Kefa would be the first one obliged to arrest him.

While the three were arguing at the rear...

At the front, a large group had gathered along the Wei River.

Scientists, senior engineers, graduate students, along with Blue Hats and Yellow Hats from Gao Family Village, were all studying the river's current and terrain.

Young Master Bai squatted on a rock by the riverbank, gesturing as he spoke.

"The river itself is over a hundred meters wide. Add to that the elevation required on both banks, and the bridge will need to be at least two hundred meters long. A stone bridge or wooden bridge is completely impossible. Neither could bear the load of a train."

A graduate student stole a glance at Li Daoxuan, who stood quietly among the crowd, and whispered, "Should we... ask the Heavenly Lord to bestow a divine bridge?"

Song Yingxing immediately shook his head.

"We shouldn't trouble the Heavenly Lord with this. Building a divine bridge over the Yellow River is one thing, but using such a solution for the Wei River would be like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. This river is small enough that we mortals should deal with it ourselves."

Young Master Bai laughed.

"I think the same. This time, we'll build the bridge ourselves."

The graduate students were startled.

"Build it ourselves? A bridge that can carry a train?"

Wang Zheng leaned forward and said decisively, "Use steel and cement."

Almost at the same moment, Song Yingxing and Young Master Bai exclaimed together:

"Steel and cement!"

The two paused, then burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! Great minds think alike!"

At that moment, Li Daoxuan walked over, smiling.

"What are you all discussing?"

Several scientists immediately bowed.

"Greetings, Heavenly Lord! We were discussing that this time, there's no need for you to intervene. We intend to research and construct a large steel-and-cement bridge ourselves."

Li Daoxuan nodded approvingly.

"Commendable courage," he said. "But this won't be easy. Without several years, it's impossible."

The scientists answered in unison, without hesitation:

"Then several years it shall be."

Just as they finished speaking, Zhu Cunji suddenly poked his head in from the side.

"Several years won't do!" he protested loudly. "I'm counting on this railway to make money! The funds are invested, the workers are hired, construction is happening everywhere. How can the whole project be stalled for years?"

"Hahaha!" Li Daoxuan laughed. "The Heir Apparent is quite anxious."

"Of course I'm anxious!" Zhu Cunji nodded vigorously. "Mr. Li, we've been business partners for years now. Our cooperation has been very pleasant. If this venture collapses, please help me out."

Although they were indeed partners...

Zhu Cunji's forty percent share of the profits had long since been reinvested back into Li Daoxuan's enterprises, effectively leaving Li Daoxuan with one hundred percent of the dividends.

Li Daoxuan clasped his hands and sighed.

"What can I do? I'm just a weak, helpless, and pitiable merchant."

Zhu Cunji stared at him.

"These people are all your subordinates," he said impatiently. "Help me urge them on!"

Li Daoxuan thought silently: Several years is indeed too long. I'm already planning developments around Yan'an. In the future, faster transport between Yan'an and Xi'an will be essential for materials, culture, everything.

The scientists' desire to rely on their own abilities was admirable, but research required time.

It would be better to first build a bridge that could be used immediately—open the Xi'an–Yan'an route—then allow the scientists to slowly research and construct another one.

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Very well, Heir Apparent. I'll give you a good solution."

Zhu Cunji's eyes lit up.

"What solution?"

Li Daoxuan said calmly, "The Daoist sect venerating Dao Xuan Tianzun is very popular in Xi'an lately. Go offer incense, ask for assistance, and perhaps the Heavenly Lord will bestow a divine bridge."

Zhu Cunji shot him a sideways look.

"Are you messing with me?"

Li Daoxuan replied with a straight face, "Not at all. Didn't Minister Shi Kefa say it himself? The Heavenly Lord can bestow divine bridges."

"I don't believe it," Zhu Cunji said stubbornly. "Absolutely not."

Li Daoxuan merely smiled and said nothing.

That smile made Zhu Cunji feel inexplicably uneasy.

He thought it through carefully.

If the bridge isn't built, there will be no ticket revenue. This concerns my grand money-making plan!

When people cannot solve a problem with their own strength...

They turn to the gods.

Even princes were no exception.

Zhu Cunji turned to his personal guards.

"Have you heard of a deity called Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

The guards replied respectfully, "Yes, Your Highness. Lately, Xi'an has been full of talk about him. Even the Heir Apparent's consort... ahem... has gone to offer incense."

Zhu Cunji was stunned.

"Why am I the only one who doesn't know?"

The guards thought silently: You're busy drinking and chasing women all day. Why would you care about deities?

Zhu Cunji sighed.

"Fine. I want to pray to this deity and ask for a divine bridge. How should I do it?"

The guards didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

With such half-hearted belief and zero sincerity, how could the Heavenly Lord possibly respond?

Impossible. Absolutely impossible.

Zhu Cunji narrowed his eyes.

"Judging by your expressions... are you looking down on me?"

The guards immediately straightened.

"We wouldn't dare!"

Chapter 783 Go Big, Go Grand

Zhu Cunji curled his lips into a smug smile.

"Hmph. This heir carries the Emperor's bloodline, you know," he said proudly. "Strictly speaking, I'm also a descendant of celestial immortals. If I ask my venerable ancestors for a small favor, wouldn't it be far easier for me than for ordinary folk?"

His personal guards exchanged glances.

Huh?

It's rare to hear His Highness say something that actually makes sense.

Zhu Cunji wasted no time on further discussion. He clasped his hands together—whether the gesture belonged to Buddhism or Daoism was unclear—and bowed deeply toward the sky.

"Zhu Cunji is here," he declared loudly. "I humbly ask my heavenly ancestors for a favor. Might you bestow upon us a celestial bridge?"

As he spoke, the guards all thought the same thing.

He's just spouting nonsense.

However—

In the very next instant, the heavens answered.

The sky had been clear and cloudless, yet suddenly, a low cloud formed out of nowhere.

This was Li Daoxuan adjusting his field of view. Wherever his perspective shifted, a low cloud naturally appeared at an altitude of roughly sixty-seven zhang—about two hundred meters—above that location.

To the people of Gao Family Village, there was only one possible explanation.

"Dao Xuan Tian Zun has arrived, riding upon a celestial cloud!"

This manifestation was far more solemn and imposing than his usual descent through a statue.

The people from Gao Family Village immediately understood what was happening. The three scientists took the lead, retreating quickly.

"Everyone, move away from the riverbank! Quickly!"

Seeing them withdraw, Wu Shen and Shi Kefa also grasped the situation at once and hurriedly backed away as well.

Zhu Cunji stood there completely dumbfounded.

"What? What are you all doing?"

Before he could finish speaking, the clouds overhead parted.

From the sky, a colossal bridge began to descend, slowly and majestically.

Zhu Cunji's eyes widened to their limits.

"Wow!"

"Wow!"

"Wow!"

He had completely lost the ability to form proper sentences.

Shi Kefa, having witnessed such a spectacle before, merely let out a long sigh. He glanced meaningfully at Zhu Cunji.

"It's here," he said. "Dao Xuan Tian Zun has personally bestowed a celestial bridge. Could it be that the Emperor's bloodline truly is more favored by the heavens?"

Wu Shen, however, leaned closer and whispered, "Perhaps it's not solely because of the bloodline. This official believes Dao Xuan Tian Zun simply wishes to expedite construction and clear the obstruction. This is a benevolent act meant to benefit all living beings, not just the Prince of Qin's heir."

He paused, then added dryly, "Just look at His Highness' foolish expression."

Zhu Cunji, still dazed:

"Wow! Wow! Wow!"

His personal guards were equally stunned.

Could our master really be this incredible?

Meanwhile, the people of Gao Family Village simply smiled and shook their heads.

Dao Xuan Tian Zun is teasing Zhu Cunji again.

The enormous bridge slowly settled over the Wei River. The land on both banks was flattened and compacted by an invisible force. Suspended in midair, the bridge swayed slightly as it was guided into position by that immense, unseen power.

After a long while, the bridge finally stabilized.

The southern end aligned perfectly with the already-laid railway tracks.

Zhu Cunji continued chanting his mantra.

"Wow! Wow! Wow!"

Wu Shen sighed helplessly. "Your Highness, you've been saying 'wow' for quite some time now. Could you try saying something else?"

Zhu Cunji stared ahead blankly.

"Wow! Wow! Wow!"

There was clearly no reasoning with this eccentric heir.

The Blue Hats from Gao Family Village stepped forward to measure the southern approach of the bridge. After comparing it with the tracks, they quickly marked a line on the ground and began directing the laborers.

"Lay the rails from here, straight onto the bridge!"

The laborers shouted in unison,

"Wow! Wow! Wow!"

The Blue Hat scowled. "What's wrong with all of you? You're acting just as foolish as the Prince of Qin's heir. Snap out of it and get to work!"

Only then did the laborers gradually regain their senses. They picked up their tools and resumed construction. Yet as they worked, many of them unconsciously murmured the name of Dao Xuan Tian Zun in their hearts.

Those who already believed became even more devout.

Those who had once doubted instantly turned into firm believers.

Wu Shen watched the scene, feeling dazed himself.

Shi Kefa had spoken many times about the Yellow River Dragon Gate Bridge, but for various reasons, Wu Shen had never seen it in person. Now, witnessing such a miracle over the Wei River, he felt truly shaken.

No matter what, he decided he had to walk across it.

Wu Shen cautiously stepped onto the bridge, still maintaining his official composure. But after taking a few steps, a cool breeze brushed against him, refreshing his spirit.

Suddenly exhilarated, he let out a joyful shout, spread his arms wide, and began running across the bridge.

Shi Kefa's face changed instantly.

"Minister Wu! Don't do that! It'll be on Gaojia News! On Gaojia News, I tell you!"

Wu Shen laughed loudly. "Hahaha! Running on the bridge feels wonderful! I'm inspired—I want to write a poem! I really want to write a poem!"

Shi Kefa hurried after him in panic. "No, please! It really will be on Gaojia News!"

That evening, Zhu Cunji returned to the Prince of Qin's manor in a daze.

The events of the day were so overwhelming that he still hadn't fully recovered. His spirit felt detached from his body, and he had no awareness of how he even made it home.

It wasn't until cold water splashed onto his face that he jolted awake.

"Huh?" he muttered. "How did I get back to the manor? When did I return?"

He turned his head—and saw his Princess Consort standing there.

"Ah!" Zhu Cunji suddenly remembered what his guards had said earlier. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her excitedly. "My dear! You know about Dao Xuan Tian Zun, don't you? You must know everything!"

The Princess Consort was startled. "Indeed, my lord. This concubine often goes to the Heavenly Lord Daoist Temple in the city to offer incense. Just yesterday, I donated Daoist robes and incense and personally performed a ritual, praying for Your Highness' wishes to come true."

Zhu Cunji burst into laughter.

"So that's it! So that's it!" he exclaimed. "Hahahaha! No wonder! I was wondering why Dao Xuan Tian Zun immediately bestowed a celestial bridge when I prayed today. It turns out you had already made a wish for me yesterday! My dear, you've rendered a great service! A great service!"

The Princess Consort stood there in utter confusion.

"???"

Zhu Cunji excitedly recounted everything that had happened by the Wei River, sparing no detail.

After listening, the Princess Consort was also stunned.

Although she believed in the Heavenly Lord Daoist Sect, her faith was no different from most noblewomen—burning incense, making wishes, accepting whatever outcome followed. It was not particularly fervent.

Who could have imagined that this time, her prayer truly came true—helping her husband obtain a celestial bridge and reopen the railway?

It was an unexpected blessing.

The Princess Consort immediately said, "Since that is the case, this concubine must go fulfill her vow tomorrow."

"Yes, yes, you must," Zhu Cunji replied, waving his hand grandly. "This time, we'll spare no expense. We'll build a magnificent Heavenly Lord Daoist Temple—a grand one! One the entire city of Xi'an can see! Three grand halls, five courtyards, an eight-story pagoda! Go big—go grand!"

The Princess Consort hesitated. "Ah... my lord, didn't you use all your money to build the railway?"

Zhu Cunji snorted confidently.

"The railway must be built, and the Heavenly Lord Daoist Temple must also be built! Hmph! It's rare for a deity to favor this heir—how could I not cling tightly to his divine leg?"

Chapter 784 The Divine Mirror Arrives

Just as the couple's conversation reached that point, a household servant came charging in, nearly tripping over the threshold, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Your Highness! Prince's Heir! Princess Consort! Dao Xuan Tian Zun has manifested in Xi'an City! Oh heavens—he's manifested in Xi'an again! A colossal Divine Mirror has descended in the central marketplace! A massive crowd is already gathering to see it!"

"What?" Zhu Cunji shot to his feet. "Manifested again?"

His eyes lit up instantly.

"Quick! Quickly! Let's go see it! The Heavenly Lord's manifestations are always incredible. Every single one is worth seeing!"

The Princess Consort also stood up at once, her movement swift and decisive.

"I wish to see it as well."

The couple hurried out together. Outside, their personal guards had already prepared the carriages and horses, sweeping them toward the marketplace at top speed. At the same time, Zhu Cunji's secondary consorts and concubines poured out as well, afraid of missing the excitement, all scrambling to be among the first to witness the spectacle.

Once they exited the princely estate and stepped onto the street, they were immediately confronted by a terrifying sight.

People.

People everywhere.

Countless heads surged in the same direction, flowing like a human tide toward the central marketplace.

Xi'an was no small city. It was an ancient capital that had hosted countless dynasties, with a vast population. The streets were packed so tightly that not even a needle could be inserted. The princely carriages were instantly swallowed by the crowd, unable to move forward at all.

The guards at the front shouted at the top of their lungs, trying to clear a path.

The common people were, of course, wary of the Prince of Qin's estate and wanted to give way—but the street was simply too crowded. Even if they wanted to move aside, there was nowhere to go.

Zhu Cunji and his entourage advanced at a snail's pace.

Hop—stop.

Squeeze—stop.

Push—stop.

Zhu Cunji was hopping mad with impatience.

As they struggled forward, Zhu Cunji suddenly noticed a familiar carriage ahead. He squinted, then burst into laughter.

"That's Lian Guoshi's carriage!"

It was indeed the Governor of Shaanxi. Clearly, Lian Guoshi had also rushed out to witness the Heavenly Lord's manifestation, only to be blocked by the same sea of people.

Zhu Cunji laughed heartily.

"Even if I, this Prince's Heir, don't get to see the Divine Mirror tonight, it's no great loss. I already watched Dao Xuan Tian Zun cast down a celestial bridge during the day!"

He laughed even harder.

"But Governor Lian? He saw nothing during the day, and now he'll see nothing at night either! Hahahahaha!"

It was the pure joy of watching someone else suffer.

Stuck—jostled.

Stuck—jostled.

After an exhausting struggle, Zhu Cunji and Lian Guoshi finally squeezed into the marketplace.

The square was a sea of heads, packed so densely that there wasn't even standing room left.

In one corner of the square stood a colossal rectangular object.

For most of the people present, it was the first time they had ever seen such a thing. Only Shi Kefa, Wu Shen, and a handful of others who had visited Gao Family Village recognized it immediately.

The crowd erupted in amazement.

"Wow! It's huge!"

"What in the world is that thing?"

"I heard Censor-Inspector Wu say not to be afraid," someone shouted. "He said this is a Divine Mirror, capable of showing things happening a thousand li away!"

"Is it really that powerful?"

"Master Wu is a man of great learning! If he says it can do that, then it must be true!"

"Look, Judicial Commissioner Shi is here too—he's saying the same thing!"

In one corner of the square, a large group of officials clustered around Wu Shen and Shi Kefa. The Prefect of Xi'an and many other officials were present as well, chattering endlessly and bombarding them with questions.

Wu Shen and Shi Kefa explained over and over again:

"Don't panic. There's nothing to be afraid of. It's just a mirror."

"As long as you haven't done anything against your conscience, there's no need to fear what it might show."

While they were still explaining, Lian Guoshi and Zhu Cunji arrived one after the other.

"Greetings, Governor!"

"Greetings, Your Highness, Prince's Heir!"

The lesser officials hurriedly bowed and paid their respects.

After the greetings, another round of explanations was unavoidable. Wu Shen and Shi Kefa once again praised the Divine Mirror's wonders from every angle.

Lian Guoshi listened quietly, then frowned slightly.

"So you're saying this mirror can show events from the past, the future, and even things happening a thousand li away?"

Shi Kefa nodded. "That's correct."

Lian Guoshi said skeptically, "But it looks pitch black to me. I don't see how it can show anything at all."

Zhu Cunji immediately echoed him.

"Yes, yes! Why is it so dark?"

Shi Kefa hesitated. "...I'll go take a look."

As the person who supposedly "understood the Divine Mirror best," he had no choice but to step forward.

He walked around the Divine Mirror in a circle.

Then another.

His brow furrowed deeper and deeper.

This is bad.

Shi Kefa began to panic.

At that moment, someone pushed through the crowd and walked in.

The man at the front was Wang Tang, Deputy Director of the Gao Family Village Office in Xi'an—and the adopted son of Principal Wang.

Wang Tang cupped his hands and bowed deeply to everyone present, smiling as he spoke:

"Everyone, there's no need to panic. I know how to operate this device. Allow me to turn it on for you."

He squeezed past Shi Kefa and went straight to the side of the Divine Mirror, where a very strange, oversized button was mounted.

Bracing himself, Wang Tang shoved it with all his strength.

"Thump!"

The button sank in—then popped back out.

Instantly, the Divine Mirror lit up, flooding the square with brilliant light.

The crowd gasped.

"It lit up!"

"It really lit up!"

"Manager Wang knows even more than Master Shi!"

On the illuminated screen, a row of enormous icons appeared along the bottom, each one as tall as a person.

Wang Tang selected one icon and slapped it decisively with his palm.

The screen flashed.

Gao Yiye appeared.

"People of Xi'an," she said, her face composed, her smile dignified and serene. Years of training had given her a bearing even more refined than that of a crown princess. Only the older generation of Gao Family Village knew that, in truth, she was a playful child at heart.

"My name is Gao Yiye. I am a news broadcast anchor, and also the messenger of Dao Xuan Tian Zun."

The crowd erupted.

"Wow! That means—"

"The Saintess!"

People instinctively tried to kneel, but the crowd was so dense that doing so would likely get them trampled to death.

Gao Yiye smiled gently.

"Since this is our first meeting, let's skip the formalities and allow everyone to experience what the Divine Mirror can do."

With that, the scene changed.

In an instant, the image transformed into an aerial view of Xi'an Prefecture.

It was as if an immortal's eye hovered high above the city, gazing down upon it.

Then the view plunged downward, swooping from the sky to the streets in a heartbeat, racing along a main thoroughfare.

The people of Xi'an exploded with excitement.

"That's me! I saw myself!"

"That's me buying vegetables yesterday!"

"My shop!"

"So this is how immortals see the world!"

The image passed through walls and rooms as if they didn't exist. It flew into the Xi'an Prefectural Yamen.

On screen, Shi Kefa was seated in the main hall, interrogating a prisoner.

The image shifted.

Lian Guoshi appeared, frowning deeply as he reviewed a stack of official documents.

It shifted again.

Zhu Cunji appeared—lounging in a small bamboo pavilion, holding a dancing girl in his arms while drinking wine.

The Princess Consort gasped sharply.

The secondary consorts and concubines all froze.

Zhu Cunji panicked.

"What? What's going on? Has the sky fallen? Why are you all staring at this Prince's Heir like that?"

The screen shifted one final time.

Wu Shen appeared—running across the newly constructed Wei River Bridge, arms spread wide, his expression utterly carefree and childlike, like a complete simpleton.

Everyone fell silent.

Wu Shen: "...Huh?"

He lunged forward, trying to block the screen with his arms.

But when even a single icon on the Divine Mirror was as large as a person, how could he possibly cover it?

The more he struggled, the more ridiculous he looked.

The crowd roared with laughter.

Shi Kefa covered his face with one hand.

"I knew this would happen," he groaned. "I told him not to run on that bridge. I told him it would be mortifying..."

Chapter 785 Let the Fun Begin

As the officials and common people of Xi'an stared at the Divine Mirror, an unspoken awe settled deep in their hearts.

This Immortal Treasure Mirror could clearly reveal events from the past.

If it could show the past... then surely it could glimpse the future as well.

The methods of immortals were truly vast and unfathomable—utterly beyond mortal understanding.

Just as these thoughts stirred through the crowd, the screen darkened. A moment later, it lit up again, and Gao Yiye appeared once more.

She smiled gently and spoke in a clear, steady voice:

"After seeing what was shown just now, everyone should now understand the purpose of this Immortal Treasure Mirror."

"From today onward, every evening after dinner, anyone with free time may come to the marketplace to watch the news broadcast. Through this mirror, you will see all kinds of interesting happenings from the past few days."

Her tone remained calm and pleasant as she continued.

"Besides news, the Divine Mirror will also broadcast agricultural cultivation techniques, blacksmithing and forging skills, as well as various educational programs—language lessons, mathematics, and legal education taught by Shi Kefa. These programs will be aired in rotation."

"Legal education... taught by Shi Kefa?"

Lian Guoshi turned his head slowly, staring at Shi Kefa with an expression full of disbelief.

Shi Kefa immediately straightened his back, a smug grin spreading across his face.

"Your humble subordinate has long been aware of this arrangement," he said proudly. "I have even personally participated in the filming of several segments, with the goal of promoting and popularizing the Great Ming Code."

Lian Guoshi let out a low grunt, not sure whether to praise him or feel a headache coming on.

Gao Yiye smiled again.

"Please remember: starting tomorrow, the news broadcast will officially begin every evening after dinner."

"As for today, we will not air the news just yet. Instead, let us present some song and dance performances for everyone."

"These performances are provided by the Flower World Star Agency of Puzhou. Under normal circumstances, one would need to purchase tickets to watch them. However, today, for the next two hours, they will be broadcast free of charge, on a continuous loop."

The moment she finished speaking, the screen brightened.

A young woman stepped onto the stage.

She was Miss Cai Lin—radiant, graceful, impossibly beautiful. Dressed in flowing garments with cloud-like sleeves, she stood beneath the lights like a celestial maiden descending into the mortal world.

As the music began, she sang Brocade Carp Scroll.

"Distant scenes...

Like endless fine rain falling through time..."

The entire marketplace gasped.

In an instant, the whole city of Xi'an exploded with excitement.

Cheers, exclamations, and excited chatter erupted everywhere.

Among them all, Zhu Cunji was the most animated.

His eyes sparkled as countless graceful dancers filled the screen. Their movements were soft yet captivating, elegant yet seductive. As the atmosphere heated up, Zhu Cunji could no longer restrain himself.

He began twisting his waist and waving his arms awkwardly, trying to imitate the dancers' movements.

Beside him, the Princess Consort, along with the secondary consorts and concubines, all rolled their eyes in perfect unison.

Damn it!

The moment he sees beautiful women, his legs turn to jelly!

What kind of useless, foolish husband did we marry?

Not far away, a group of officials quietly gathered around Lian Guoshi.

"Governor, shouldn't this matter be reported to the capital?"

"This should count as a heaven-sent auspicious sign, shouldn't it?"

"If His Majesty were to see this, he would surely be pleased."

"Enough!" Lian Guoshi raised his hand sharply, cutting them off.

"Are all of you so comfortable in your official positions that you're looking for trouble?"

He glanced at them coldly.

"The current Emperor despises talk of divine revelations and strange phenomena. Have you already forgotten how Wang Shunxing was dismissed from office?"

The officials instantly fell silent, cold sweat breaking out on their backs.

Lian Guoshi concluded calmly, "As for this Immortal Treasure Mirror, everyone may watch it, enjoy it, and then let it be."

"Do not go stirring up trouble where there is none."

While the entire city of Xi'an was buzzing with excitement—

Far away, Li Daoxuan sat in front of his computer.

He was uploading video files to his old classmate, known online as Queen of a Thousand Faces M.

"Alright, old friend," Li Daoxuan said casually. "Here are some clips from the new film—A Soldier of the Daling River Border Army. I'll leave the editing and production to you."

"This time, your skills will really be put to the test."

Queen of a Thousand Faces M opened one of the videos at random.

Her eyes widened instantly.

"Holy—!"

She sucked in a sharp breath. "You... you... how much money did you spend filming this segment?!"

What she was watching was a scene of Qing soldiers attacking Daling River City.

The Qing forces were played by Zao Ying's cavalry battalion and the Gao Family Village militia. The defending army was portrayed by Lao Nanfeng's Guyuan Border Army. Half of Han City's population had been mobilized as extras.

This wasn't acting.

This was practically a full-scale military exercise.

In truth, this massive drill involving soldiers and civilians alike was also preparation for real future combat.

The battle scenes were so lively, brutal, and authentic that no modern director could ever hope to replicate them.

After all, no one in later generations had ever witnessed a real Ming Dynasty war.

But for Lao Nanfeng and the Guyuan Border Army, this knowledge was engraved into their bones. Did they need to act?

Queen of a Thousand Faces M exclaimed, "How many extras did you even hire for this?!"

Li Daoxuan replied lightly, "Not that many. Just one hundred yuan per person per day. Nothing too serious."

Cold sweat streamed down her back.

"One hundred yuan per person per day..." she muttered. "Ten thousand people would already be a million yuan per day!"

Li Daoxuan laughed. "Didn't our last movie earn a few million? I figured using that money to hire some extras for a day wouldn't be a big deal."

She asked weakly, "Then... where did you even find a city like this?"

"I spent a bit of money and rented Jiangjin Baisha Film and Television City in Shuangqing."

"Oh..." she murmured. "So that's how it is."

She shook her head in disbelief.

"You really spend money like water. By this logic, if the film doesn't earn back a few million, it won't even break even."

Li Daoxuan grinned. "Exactly. That's why I'm leaving it all in your hands."

Queen of a Thousand Faces M slapped her chest confidently.

"Leave it to me. With footage like this, if I still can't make a profit, I might as well jump into a river."

"Oh, right," Li Daoxuan added. "I need two versions."

"Two?"

"Yes. One short-drama version—each episode just over a minute. The other a full-length movie, about an hour and a half."

She waved her hand dismissively. "That's nothing. Your battle scenes are already perfect. I'll just add sound effects, transitions, smoke, and a bit of fast and slow motion."

"It won't take long. I'll have it ready in a few days."

"In that case," Li Daoxuan said, "send me the movie version first. I'll keep it for my collection. As for the short-drama version, I'll leave promotion and distribution to you."

A few days later...

Outside the Puzhou Grand Theater, crowds surged endlessly.

After being deeply moved by Mu Guiying, the people of Puzhou heard that a new film—A Soldier of the Daling River Border Army—was being released.

They immediately brought their children and rushed to the theater.

Tickets sold out three days in advance.

Yet wealthy households that failed to secure tickets still sent their retainers to the theater entrance, shouting loudly:

"High price for movie tickets! High price! My master will pay double!"

"Double plus ten percent!"

"Double plus thirty percent!"

"My master will pay four times the original price!"

"Damn it," someone cursed. "Is your master flipping the table now?!"

The bidding escalated rapidly.

The wealthy had entered a phase where they competed purely on who could throw more money around.

Meanwhile, ordinary people who had managed to buy tickets stared thoughtfully at the slips in their hands.

The movie isn't showing just once, they reasoned.

I can always watch it tomorrow... or the day after.

Why not sell this ticket for four times the price, then come back later to watch it?

A massive profit, just like that.

Chapter 786 So You Want to Drive Up Prices?

While the wealthy citizens of Puzhou City were locked in a fierce bidding war, scalping movie tickets and throwing money around without restraint...

...over in Gao Family Village itself, at the newly completed theater entrance, a subordinate dispatched by Lao Nanfeng to manage the Gao Family Village Grand Theater stood quietly to the side, watching the spectacle unfold.

Just moments earlier, a small merchant—having come to Gao Family Village on business and failed to buy a movie ticket—rushed to the theater entrance and shouted at the top of his lungs:

"I'll buy tickets at double the price!"

That single shout immediately brought trouble down upon his head.

From the side, the Old Village Chief of Gao Family Village emerged. He wore a faded cotton tunic and a pair of wooden clogs. Stroking his flowing white beard, he spoke mildly:

"My good sir, isn't this sort of price gouging rather unsavory?"

"Because you have more money, you want to exploit the poor and buy their tickets?"

The merchant had only done business in Gao Family Village a handful of times and had no idea who this old man was. Seeing the shabby clothes and clogs, he dismissed him as just another rustic villager.

He sneered. "What business is it of yours, old man? I'll buy at a high price if I want to. If someone's willing to sell, that's their choice. I'm not forcing anyone. What's wrong with that?"

The Old Village Chief replied calmly, "You may not be forcing anyone, but high-priced purchases like yours will only encourage speculators."

"Soon enough, people will start snapping up tickets in advance, hoarding them, and reselling them at outrageous prices. Then those who truly want to watch the movie won't be able to."

The merchant shrugged indifferently. "I don't care. If people can profit by satisfying my needs, isn't that a good thing?"

The Old Village Chief's expression darkened slightly.

"Oh?"

"So you're determined to throw your money around and stir up trouble?"

He looked at the merchant steadily.

"Do you even know where you are? This is Gao Family Village itself."

The merchant snorted. "Isn't Gao Family Village famous for being orderly and reasonable? As long as I'm not breaking the law, even Dao Xuan Tian Zun wouldn't fault me."

The Old Village Chief's eyes gleamed faintly. "Very well. Those were your own words."

Seeing that the old man had stopped lecturing him, the merchant turned back toward the crowd and once again shouted:

"Tickets for sale! Double the price! Buying tickets!"

Before his voice had even faded—

"Tickets for sale!"

"Triple the price!"

The Old Village Chief's voice rang out clearly.

The merchant's jaw dropped.

He spun around, glaring. "Old man, if you don't have money, don't interfere!"

"How do you know I don't have money?" the Old Village Chief countered mildly.

"If I dare shout such a price, I can certainly afford to pay it."

"Oh?" The merchant sneered. "So you want to compete over who has more money?"

"Indeed," the Old Village Chief replied with a mischievous grin.

"I just happen to have too much money to burn—and today, I don't feel like letting you buy any tickets."

Furious, the merchant shouted, "Four times the price!"

"Five times," the Old Village Chief answered instantly.

"Six times!" the merchant roared.

The Old Village Chief shook his head disdainfully. "How petty. Raising it a little each time is so boring."

"Watch and learn from me."

"Tickets for sale! Ten times the price!"

"You—you—this is outrageous!" the merchant stammered.

"I'm not breaking any laws," the Old Village Chief said calmly.

"...Eleven times," the merchant said weakly, already losing ground.

"Twenty times the price!" the Old Village Chief boomed.

The merchant collapsed to the ground with a thud.

After lying there for a few seconds, he suddenly sprang up, pointing accusingly.

"You old man, you must be bluffing! You don't have that much money. When someone actually comes to sell a ticket, you won't be able to pay!"

No sooner had he finished speaking than a theater worker hurried over, ticket in hand, smiling awkwardly.

"Old Village Chief," the worker said, "why are you suddenly buying tickets at twenty times the price? Are you planning to watch the movie?"

"I can just give you my ticket for free, you know."

The Old Village Chief chuckled. "I wouldn't take it for free."

He reached into his sleeve and took out a piece of silver, placing it in the worker's hand.

"Here. Take it."

The worker hesitated, embarrassed by the amount, but the Old Village Chief was a figure of immense respect. Once he spoke, there was no refusing.

As the worker accepted the silver and turned to leave, the Old Village Chief called him back.

"Wait. Take your ticket as well."

The worker blinked. "Huh?"

"I bought your ticket only to give it away," the Old Village Chief explained.

"Now that I've bought it, I'm giving it back to you so you can watch the movie."

"But remember—you must watch it yourself. You may not resell it to anyone else."

The worker stood there, dumbfounded.

The merchant's eyes bulged even wider.

Completely bewildered, the worker finally left—still holding both his ticket and the silver.

Cold sweat poured down the merchant's back.

"Y-you... just who in the heavens are you?"

The Old Village Chief smiled gently. "Just an ordinary old man."

At that moment, Gao Yiye came running over from the distance.

Seeing the Saintess approach, the merchant immediately straightened, preparing to bow respectfully—

Only to see Gao Yiye run straight up to the Old Village Chief, smiling brightly. Like a child, she grabbed his arm and shook it back and forth.

"Grandpa!!!" she said sweetly.

"I want to eat chocolate while watching the movie, but the Tianzhun gave me some earlier and it's all gone now. I can't find him to get more."

"Do you have any left?"

The Old Village Chief laughed indulgently, just like a doting elder, and handed her a key.

"There, there. Go take some from my house."

"Just yesterday, I helped the heavenly immortals make a small chair, and Dao Xuan Tian Zun rewarded me with a huge bar of silky milk chocolate. It's in the cupboard."

"Eat as much as you like."

"Thank you, Grandpa! You're the best!" Gao Yiye exclaimed, clutching the key as she dashed off.

The merchant sucked in a sharp breath.

The Old Village Chief turned back to him leisurely.

"So? Still want to raise the price?"

"Go on. What's next—thirty times? Or forty?"

The merchant dropped to his knees with a thud.

"This humble one was mistaken!"

Only now did he finally understand the meaning of those words:

"This is Gao Family Village itself."

Hidden dragons and crouching tigers were everywhere. An old man in wooden clogs was not someone he could afford to offend.

Fortunately, the Old Village Chief did not pursue the matter further.

The original forty-two inhabitants of Gao Family Village, living under Dao Xuan Tian Zun's benevolent light, had not developed the habit of bullying others.

The Old Village Chief waved his hand dismissively, letting the merchant go.

Then he sat down at the theater entrance, crossed his legs, and gently swung them, his clogs tapping rhythmically against his soles.

With him sitting there, no one dared to inflate prices again.

Those with tickets watched the movie. Those without simply waited for the next showing.

Order was perfectly maintained.

Soon, the movie began.

"Huh? This one wasn't personally made by Dao Xuan Tian Zun!" someone exclaimed.

"The director is Queen of a Thousand Faces M. Who's that?"

"Maybe some female Immortal King from the heavens, like the Queen Mother of the West?"

"Incredible! Dao Xuan Tian Zun even invited a female Immortal King to produce the film!"

The movie quickly got underway.

As it progressed, murmurs spread through the crowd.

"Wait... this Immortal King's production skills seem even better than Dao Xuan Tian Zun's!"

"So spectacular!"

"There are even slow-motion shots in the fight scenes!"

Seeing slow motion for the very first time, the audience erupted in cheers.

Then came an even more astonishing scene.

The protagonist, Lao Nanfeng, loosed an arrow—and the camera followed it in flight.

Bullet time.

Aesthetic violence.

The entire audience exploded.

"Holy cow! This is unbelievable!"

"Long live the female Immortal King!"

Somewhere far away—

"Ach-choo!"

Queen of a Thousand Faces M sneezed violently.

"Who's talking about me behind my back?" he muttered.

"And why does it sound like someone's calling me a woman?"

"Dammit! I'm a man, alright?!"

Chapter 787 Kill the Jinyiwei on Sight

Although the special effects had thrilled the audience beyond measure, as the film came to an end, a heavy and somber atmosphere settled over the entire cinema.

The Battle of Dalinghe had ended in total defeat for the Ming army.

Zu Dashou surrendered.

He Kegang—loyal to the Ming to the very end—was killed by Zu Dashou.

The civilians inside the city were all slaughtered and consumed as military rations.

In the final scenes, the protagonist fought his way out of the encirclement with He Kegang's corpse strapped to his back. After returning inland, he concealed his face behind a mask and began training a militia, preparing to save the Great Ming with his own strength.

The plot struck directly at the heart.

Many viewers walked out of the theater with red eyes and tear-streaked faces.

Outside the cinema, a small merchant who had failed to get a ticket was still lingering around. Seeing the first batch of viewers emerge in such a state, he was completely baffled.

"What's wrong with you all?" he asked anxiously.

"What happened? Was the movie bad? Why are you all crying like this?"

A worker, still sobbing, answered through tears, "It was incredible... but... too tragic. Boohoo... the common people... they were all eaten as military rations..."

The small merchant sucked in a sharp breath.

"!!!"

"General He Kegang, loyal to the Ming, was killed by that scoundrel Zu Dashou!"

"Zu Dashou is pure evil!"

"I recognize his face!" someone shouted angrily. "He played Xiao Tianzuo last time too!"

"Boohoo! That man is truly evil—he's responsible for all the wickedness in this world!"

The small merchant: "..."

The more they talked, the more desperate he became to watch the movie himself. But with all the tickets for the day sold out, he could only wait for tomorrow.

With the Village Chief sitting right there overseeing things, he didn't dare try to buy tickets at a higher price. In the end, he could only resign himself to fate.

At that moment, the first screening ended completely. The cleaners entered to tidy up the theater. After a short break, the second screening was about to begin. Viewers for the second show gradually arrived, brushing past those leaving from the first.

Suddenly, someone pointed toward the incoming crowd and shouted:

"Hey! Everyone look! It's Instructor He!"

At once, a large crowd turned their heads.

Cheng Xu was walking over with a few militia soldiers, chatting and laughing casually. His face was covered by a mask—looking exactly like the masked protagonist from the movie.

A particularly "sharp" audience member suddenly had a revelation.

"Wait a second... could this movie be telling Instructor He's story?"

"Oh!"

"That makes sense!"

"Right! It must be Instructor He! He's masked, and he's organizing a militia!"

The audience members who had just exited the first screening instantly swarmed toward Cheng Xu like a tidal wave.

"Instructor He! So you were from the border army!"

"Instructor He, was it you who carried General He Kegang's body and fought your way out of the encirclement?"

"You're my idol! Please sign an autograph for me!"

A massive question mark seemed to pop up over Cheng Xu's head.

"Instructor He, you're a true master who hides his strength!"

"Instructor He, I love you! I want to bear your children!"

Cheng Xu panicked immediately. "What are you all talking about?!"

One particularly inconsiderate child even reached out and tugged at his mask—and did so frighteningly fast, pulling it down halfway.

In that instant, Cheng Xu's mind exploded with hallucinations.

He imagined more than a dozen great-grandmothers wearing Jinyiwei uniforms leaping out of the crowd, smiling eerily as they said:

"My dear grandchild... come, come... follow your great-grandmas down to the underworld..."

Cheng Xu broke out in a cold sweat. He slapped his hands over his face, shoved his mask back into place, and bolted in panic.

"Don't come closer! Don't touch my mask!"

The child's parent grabbed the kid by the scruff of his neck and smacked him soundly.

"You little brat! How can you just pull off Instructor He's mask like that?"

"He's a border army deserter! If his face is exposed, the Jinyiwei will come knocking!"

Cheng Xu nearly fainted.

"What nonsense are you spouting?!" he shouted.

"When did I become a border army deserter? And don't mention the Jinyiwei! I hate hearing those three words!"

The parent immediately slapped himself. "Right, right! I misspoke. How could Instructor He, a border army hero, be called a deserter? I deserve a beating!"

Cheng Xu: "???"

The crowd declared unanimously, "Instructor He is a true hero!"

"Don't worry! The Jinyiwei can't reach Gao Family Village!"

"If we see a Jinyiwei, we'll beat him to death!"

Cheng Xu screamed, "No! No! No! Don't do that!"

"You can't just kill Jinyiwei on sight! Kill one and a whole group will come! Kill a group and even more will come!"

The audience from the first screening reassured him earnestly.

"Alright, we won't tell anyone."

"We'll help Instructor He keep this secret."

Cheng Xu nearly lost his mind.

"Hey! Hey! Someone explain to me what exactly is going on here?!"

No one explained anything.

After throwing him countless looks of admiration, the audience from the first screening dispersed.

The second screening began.

This time, Cheng Xu also sat down inside the theater and watched the movie properly.

Like everyone else, he was amazed by the visuals—the bullet time, the violent aesthetics, the slow-motion shots. For someone from the past, it was an eye-opening experience.

Then came the cannibalism.

He Kegang's death.

Zu Dashou's surrender.

Cheng Xu's heart sank deeper and deeper.

Finally, in the very last shot of the film, the protagonist raised a mask... and covered his face.

Cheng Xu's heart jolted violently.

Only then did he understand why the audience from the first screening had behaved so strangely.

"Ah... this..."

Several viewers seated beside him turned to stare at him almost simultaneously.

Then more people turned.

Then nearly the entire theater turned their heads together, all staring at Cheng Xu.

"No, no!" Cheng Xu shouted. "Let me explain!"

"Instructor He, no need to explain!"

"Yes, yes! We understand!"

"We'll keep your secret!"

Cheng Xu was drenched in sweat.

"What secret?! This movie plays multiple times a day, and it's screening both in Gao Family Village and Puzhou City! How many people will watch it every day?! How could this possibly stay secret?!"

The crowd roared, "Then we'll kill the Jinyiwei! Kill them all!"

Cheng Xu howled, "Calm down! Calm down!"

"The Battle of Dalinghe happened two years ago, but I—He Jiu—have been in Gao Family Village for six or seven years! Six or seven years! It doesn't match the timeline at all!"

Hearing this, everyone suddenly exclaimed in unison:

"Oh?"

"Ah!"

"So that's how it is!"

Cheng Xu finally let out a breath. "Good. As long as you understand."

"This is a fictional story. It's just a coincidental plot arrangement. It has absolutely nothing to do with me. Nothing at all."

Everyone nodded sagely.

"So the Battle of Dalinghe actually happened six or seven years ago!"

"The imperial court really lied to us, saying it was only two years ago!"

Cheng Xu screamed, "Can you please respect historical facts?!"

The crowd replied solemnly, "Please let the facts respect the movie!"

"Aaaargh—!"

The militia soldiers beside him spoke sincerely.

"We always knew Instructor He was capable... but we never imagined he was this capable."

"From now on, we will definitely listen to you."

"We will never anger you again."

Cheng Xu lifted his gaze toward the sky, utterly speechless.

Chapter 788 Reviving the Guanxiang Districts

Cheng Xu had become an unexpected sensation.

This outcome was, in truth, unavoidable.

In Gao Family Village, only the oldest handful of villagers still remembered when Cheng Xu had first arrived. Even among them, only a very small circle—Gao Yiye, San Shier, and Gao Chuwu—knew his true identity.

As for everyone who had come to Gao Family Village later?

They knew only of Instructor He—the masked drillmaster of the Gao Family Village Militia. His past, his origins, his experiences before arriving here... all of it was a blank.

Now, with the release of the movie, the audience instinctively grafted Cheng Xu onto the heroic protagonist.

After all, ordinary people never cared too much about cold, hard facts. What they cared about was whether a story was good.

And clearly, the legend of the "Minor Border Soldier of the Daling River" was an irresistibly compelling one.

That alone was enough.

In no time at all, rumors about Instructor He swept through Gao Family Village and Puzhou City alike.

And rumors—once they start—never stop at the original version.

At first, the gossip more or less followed the movie's plot.

But after just three days, things began to... mutate.

"Have you heard? Instructor He has mastered the Yang Family spear techniques and Li Guang's divine archery. And recently, he even created his own flintlock technique—called Shadow Gale. They say within three hundred meters, every shot kills."

"But isn't Bai Yuan from Bai Family Fortress the best flintlock marksman in Gao Family Village?"

"That's only because Instructor He rarely takes action! If he actually showed his skills, Bai Yuan wouldn't even get a chance!"

"I heard Old Zhang San say that more than six years ago, on a snowy night, he was sleeping at home when someone knocked on his door. When he opened it, Instructor He was standing there. He spoke in a northeastern accent and asked, 'Do you take in outsiders here?' Old Zhang San nodded—and the very next day, the Gao Family Village Militia was founded."

"I heard that before Instructor He arrived, the militia already had a drillmaster—Chen Qianhu!"

"What? The same Chen Qianhu who played Xiao Tianzuo and Zu Dashou?"

"Exactly! He tried to edge Instructor He out, but lost completely. In the end, Instructor He defeated him and took over."

"That doesn't sound right. Didn't Instructor He build the militia from nothing?"

"Uh... well... I'm not entirely sure anymore."

As Cheng Xu's reputation skyrocketed, another sentiment quietly began to ferment throughout Gao Family Village and Puzhou.

"Those Manchus are truly despicable."

"Zu Dashou's surrender was hateful, but the real culprits are the Manchus, aren't they? If they hadn't invaded, Zu Dashou wouldn't have surrendered, and the people of Daling River City wouldn't have been eaten like grain."

"Exactly. The Manchus are utterly vile."

For the common people of the Central Plains and Shaanxi, the Manchus of the northeast had always been distant and vague—little more than a name.

The imperial court's propaganda was weak, and most people had no real understanding of them at all.

But this movie dragged the scars and suffering caused by the Manchus directly before their eyes.

The "Northern Barbarians" in Mu Guiying belonged to ancient history.

But the Manchus in *Minor Border Soldier of the Daling River* were real, immediate, and terrifyingly present.

"I want to enlist," someone said passionately. "So I can fight the Manchus in the future."

"Me too!"

"Let's go together! How amazing would it be to fight the Northern Barbarians alongside Instructor He?"

With repeated screenings and emotions continuously stirred, enlistment numbers in both Gao Family Village and Puzhou surged sharply.

At the same time, Instructor He's image in the film—a man willing to risk his life for righteousness—fundamentally changed how people viewed soldiers.

The old saying, 'Good men don't become soldiers, good iron isn't used for nails,' was quietly pushed aside.

Mass-Produced Unit No. 3 entered the Flower World Star Agency and sat down across from Lao Nanfeng.

At that very moment, Lao Nanfeng was busy counting money.

The movie's explosive success had filled his coffers to the brim. With such wealth in hand, his first instinct was simple: good food, fine wine, luxury, pleasure.

Lao Nanfeng had never been a man of lofty ambitions. He loved the joys of the material world—something he had very much in common with Zhu Cunji.

When he saw Li Daoxuan arrive, Lao Nanfeng immediately bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said earnestly.

"The film you instructed the Saintess to assist with has been an unprecedented success. These past few days, this subordinate has counted money until my hands cramped."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "Now that you've earned your fortune, do not forget your task."

Lao Nanfeng straightened at once, his expression turning solemn.

"Your subordinate understands. Dao Xuan Tianzun did not produce this film merely to help me make money—its true purpose is recruitment."

"Correct," Li Daoxuan said. "How are the constructions of the sub-theaters progressing?"

Lao Nanfeng chuckled.

"The sub-theater in Gao Family Village is already in operation. The ones in Hedong Circuit, Han City, Chengcheng County, and Heyang County are nearing completion."

He coughed lightly.

"Only... Xi'an City has encountered a bit of trouble."

Li Daoxuan raised an eyebrow. "What problem?"

"The city is too mature," Lao Nanfeng explained helplessly.

"There's practically no vacant land left. I simply couldn't find a suitable location to build a grand theater."

Li Daoxuan immediately understood.

Xi'an—capital of countless dynasties—had been bustling since the Tang, a city where "carriages rolled out at dawn."

In modern terms: the more developed a place was, the harder it became to redevelop.

Just thinking about those tightly packed old residences was enough to make one's head ache.

Li Daoxuan spoke calmly. "If it can't be built inside the city, then revive the Guanxiang districts."

During the mid-Ming period, Xi'an's prosperity had overflowed beyond its walls. Outside each of the four city gates—east, south, west, and north—bustling districts had formed, collectively known as the Four Great Guanxiang.

But by the Tianqi and Chongzhen eras, famine and economic collapse had reduced them to ruins.

The railway station built by Gao Family Village—Xi'an East Station—now stood beside the remains of the East Guanxiang, just outside the eastern gate.

Lao Nanfeng hesitated.

"There's severe drought everywhere, and bandits roam freely. Even though Shaanxi's situation has improved greatly compared to past years, the people are still afraid."

"It's hard to lure them out of the main city in the evenings. Once dusk falls, hardly anyone dares venture into the Guanxiang districts."

"I understand," Li Daoxuan replied calmly.

"Then the Guanxiang districts must offer attractions strong enough to draw them out."

"Movies are one."

"We will also establish night markets."

"I'll notify the Gao Family Village Village Committee and have San Shier move all of Gao Family Village's wondrous and unusual goods to Xi'an's East Guanxiang."

A faint smile appeared on his lips.

"It's time for the people of Xi'an to experience the kind of life enjoyed in Gao Family Village."

Chapter 789 Rebuilding the Outercity

At the first pale hint of dawn, the guards stationed at Xi'an Prefecture's East Gate noticed something strange unfolding beyond the city walls.

A great mass of workers wearing yellow hats streamed toward the East Outercity, their figures moving in steady lines through the morning mist, pouring directly into the long-abandoned ruins.

The East Outercity had been decaying for years. Once lively, it had gradually turned into a wasteland of collapsed wooden houses, rotted beams, and half-fallen shopfronts, a bleak stretch of ruin where weeds grew taller than men and the wind howled through empty frames like a place already claimed by ghosts.

The Yellow Hats did not hesitate for even a moment.

They charged into the ruins and began swinging heavy sledgehammers, smashing apart the already fragile wooden structures. Beams cracked, walls collapsed, and clouds of dust rose into the air as if the Outercity were being demolished all over again.

The gate guards stared in disbelief.

"Good heavens," one of them exclaimed, eyes wide. "What are they doing? Isn't the Outercity ruined enough already? Do they plan to smash it into dust?"

Someone was quickly sent to report the matter to the Prefect.

Yet when the Prefect of Xi'an heard the news, he showed not the slightest concern. He waved his hand dismissively and said, "Leave them be, leave them be. That land belongs to the Prince of Qin's estate. His people informed us this morning that they intend to rebuild a market street there. It's his land. He can do whatever he wants with it. It has nothing to do with us."

With that, the matter was settled.

The city gate guards could only stand aside and watch.

They watched as the Yellow Hats finished leveling the ruins until nothing remained but bare ground. Then came another group, the Blue Hats, who walked the cleared land slowly, measuring with their eyes, sketching lines, making notes, and murmuring to one another in low voices that no outsider could understand.

Before long, the Yellow Hats returned to work once more.

Building materials were hauled in, carts rattling across the ground, and construction began at a startling pace. Yet what they built were not solid houses or permanent shops. Instead, rows upon rows of frames were erected, each one quickly raised and topped with a simple rain canopy.

Compared to proper construction, this method was astonishingly fast.

In just a few short days, the entire Outercity was filled with vast stretches of these makeshift shelters, laid out neatly and uniformly, forming the rough shape of a planned commercial street.

Then, with a long, echoing whoosh, a steam train arrived.

It brought with it a flood of merchants.

These were no ordinary vendors. Every single one of them was a seasoned hawker, veterans who had survived the brutal competition of the Gao Family Village commercial hub. They were the elites of street trade, people who knew how to sell, how to shout, and how to seize attention with ruthless efficiency.

Their goods were even more astonishing.

Each stall was piled with strange, novel items that no one in Xi'an had ever seen before, things that felt unreal, as if they had dropped straight out of legends.

"Celestial Realm snacks for sale! Oreo cream cookie crumbs, a special gift bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself! I'm the only one left in the entire world with five catties. You won't find them anywhere else, absolutely nowhere!"

"Chips Ahoy chocolate mini cookies! General Lao Nanfeng earned great merit and was specially rewarded by Dao Xuan Tianzun. He couldn't finish them all, so this rare treasure has entered the market. Only three catties left in the entire world. Miss this chance and who knows when you'll ever see them again!"

"Xi Zhi Lang Jelly! A grand prize from the Huanglong Mountain Labor Reform Camp Fighting Competition in Gao Family Village, personally bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. The last ten catties in the entire world!"

"Sachima! Sachima! Unique under heaven, scarcely seen in the mortal realm! I guarantee I'm the only one with stock!"

"Crispy Shark Wafers!"

"Daliyuan Chocolate Pies!"

"Want Want Senbei! Only ten catties left!"

The Outercity, which had been silent and dead for years, was instantly filled with shouting, laughter, and the clamor of trade. The city guards watching from the walls were dumbfounded.

"Are these people mad?" they thought. "The Outercity has been ruins for years. No one ever comes out here. Even if their goods are strange, who would buy them?"

After all, business depended on foot traffic. Without people, what use were even the rarest curiosities?

Yet that very evening, everything changed.

In Xi'an City's vegetable market square, the Immortal Treasure Mirror flickered to life as usual, broadcasting the final segment of the Gaojia News.

"Now for business news," Gao Yiye announced calmly. "A large number of vendors have gathered in the East Outercity outside Xi'an's East Gate, setting up stalls to sell a wide variety of goods."

As he spoke, the image shifted.

The mirror showed an aerial view of the Outercity. From above, the newly rebuilt area looked neat and orderly, rows of small shops stretching along a carefully planned commercial street. Stalls were packed tightly together, their goods displayed in dazzling abundance.

Items no one had ever seen before filled the screen.

The common folk watching in the square were instantly dazzled.

Among them was Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's heir.

He had developed a habit of watching the Gaojia News broadcast every evening, so much so that he had spent a fortune to purchase the house directly opposite the Immortal Treasure Mirror. From the second floor, he had built his own private viewing platform.

Each evening, he would sit there, snacking leisurely on fruits and sweets as he watched.

Tonight, however, the moment he saw the bizarre snacks displayed in the Outercity, snacks he had never tasted in his life, the candied fruit in his hand suddenly lost all flavor.

Zhu Cunji's eyes widened. "What are those?" he demanded sharply. "Why have I, the Prince of Qin's heir, never seen or eaten such things before?"

His steward hesitated, then said carefully, "Your Highness, you have eaten chocolate before. Your humble servant once obtained it for you from the salt smuggler Xing Honglang. Have you forgotten?"

Zhu Cunji froze, then brightened all at once. "Ah, yes, yes, yes. Chocolate. It was delicious, truly delicious. What a pity I only ate it those few times, and then never again. I heard Xing Honglang later ran off to become a roaming bandit, and only much later was pacified. She hasn't come to sell chocolate to me in ages."

As he spoke, his mouth began to water.

"What are we waiting for?" he shouted. "Quickly, prepare the carriage and horses. I, the Prince of Qin's heir, am going to the Outercity at once!"

His guards sprang into action, eager to obey.

Yet there was a problem.

Every evening, the vegetable market square was packed with people watching the broadcast, a dense, surging mass where even a single person could barely move, let alone a carriage and horses. Zhu Cunji's entourage found themselves completely blocked, unable to advance even a single step.

Unless they were willing to draw swords and hack through the crowd, which was unthinkable with Governor Lian Guoshi also present, there was no way through.

The carriage was stuck.

Zhu Cunji fumed, pacing in place, unable to go.

Just then, the Gaojia News broadcast ended, and the screen switched to "Corn Planting Methods." Farmers leaned forward with interest, but the city folk instantly lost all enthusiasm.

With a collective roar, the crowd dispersed.

They ran.

Every last one of them surged toward the East Gate.

Zhu Cunji saw the direction they were heading and immediately understood. "Damn it!" he shouted. "These scoundrels are all going to the Outercity. They're going to snatch up those rare snacks. Heavens above, hurry, hurry. We must get there before them. Those things are scarce. This mob will buy them all!"

With the square suddenly cleared, the carriage could finally move.

Zhu Cunji abandoned it at once and leapt onto a horse, gripping its sides tightly. "Faster," he urged. "Faster!"

"Your Highness," a guard cried anxiously, "the horse can't run fast. The streets are still crowded."

"Then cut across," Zhu Cunji blurted out, an idea striking him mid-ride. "Don't go through the gate. Go to the section of wall beside it."

Instead of following the crowd down the main road, he veered off, racing straight to the city wall. He scrambled up, glanced toward the gate, and saw that the small archway was already jammed solid with people.

The gate was completely blocked.

"Rope," Zhu Cunji commanded.

The guards understood at once. They tied a rope around his waist and carefully lowered him down the outer side of the city wall.

The moment his feet touched the ground outside the city, Zhu Cunji burst into triumphant laughter.

"Hahaha. In the end, I, the Prince of Qin's heir, still have my ways. A bunch of commoners, how could they ever be faster than me?"

He took off running at full speed toward the Outercity.

Splash.

He fell straight into the moat.

Chapter 790 Transfer Me to the Border

The East Ward of Xi'an City exploded with popularity.

It wasn't only the night market that drew crowds. Even during the daytime, the entire area buzzed with life, voices overlapping, footsteps never ceasing.

The peculiar snacks introduced by Li Daoxuan were, in truth, merely an opening move—a clever hook to lure people in. Once the crowds gathered, it wasn't just those rare treats that sold. All manner of ordinary goods soon followed, filling stall after stall.

Rice, noodles, vegetables.

Potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn.

Chili peppers, black pepper, Sichuan peppercorns.

Whatever goods could be procured were immediately transported into the East Ward.

With such a dense and constant flow of people, there was no such thing as unsellable merchandise. Everything found a buyer.

Before long, the common folk grew accustomed to purchasing their daily necessities there. Rather than weaving through the inner city, they simply headed straight for the Ward.

As for the pricier snacks, their novelty wore off quickly. The common people gradually stopped buying them. After all, these weren't necessities, and most families were still far from wealthy enough to indulge freely.

Of course—

Zhu Cunji was an exception.

"Behold! Celestial Jelly, a divine gift bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself—"

Before the peddler could finish his introduction, Zhu Cunji waved his hand impatiently.

"I'll take it," he said. "All of it."

The peddler froze for a moment, then bowed deeply.

"Many thanks, esteemed sir. That will be ten taels of silver."

"These are Immortal Delights, refined through—"

"Enough talking." Zhu Cunji flicked his sleeve. "Buy them. Every last one."

"Eight taels of silver, Your Grace."

Behind him, the princely guards slowly transformed into porters. Before long, each man was burdened with large bundles, arms full, backs bent.

The steward followed anxiously, sweat already forming on his brow.

"Your Highness," he said carefully, "this... this level of spending is rather excessive. Our monthly expenses have already—"

"Expenses?" Zhu Cunji snorted. "With the Prince of Qin's countless estates, are we truly lacking money?"

The steward wrung his hands.

"We are, Your Highness. Quite seriously. This month alone, we are already more than three thousand taels in deficit."

Zhu Cunji paused.

"Oh?"

"Perhaps," the steward ventured, "Your Highness might consider restraining—"

"Only three thousand taels?" Zhu Cunji laughed. "A trifling amount! Let the music play, let the dancers whirl!"

The steward nearly collapsed.

"But, Your Highness... it is only the beginning of the month..."

Zhu Cunji ignored him entirely and turned to another stall.

"What strange, colorful things are these?" he asked.

The peddler's eyes shone.

"This, Your Highness, is Popping Candy—a delicacy from the Celestial Realm. Originally as large as a washbasin, it was crushed into smaller fragments for mortals to enjoy. Place it in your mouth, and it will dance! Since you are a frequent patron, allow me to offer you a complimentary taste."

He produced a piece no larger than a mung bean.

Zhu Cunji popped it into his mouth.

Crackle. Pop. Snap.

The candy danced wildly across his tongue.

Zhu Cunji's eyes widened in delight.

"Remarkable!" he exclaimed. "No mortal craftsmanship could create such a thing. This must be an immortal treasure. How much for one piece?"

"A hundred copper coins," the peddler replied instantly.

The steward was horrified.

"A single speck of candy, and you charge a hundred coins? Why not rob people outright?!"

Zhu Cunji waved him off.

"Buy them," he said lazily. "All of them."

"Your Highness," the steward pleaded, "this merchant is clearly charging based on the customer—"

"Not so," the peddler said smoothly. "The candy sold to common folk is inferior. What I offer Your Highness has a stronger pop. Naturally, a stronger pop commands a higher price."

"Hahahaha!" Zhu Cunji laughed loudly. "Well said! A stronger pop deserves a higher price. Buy every last piece!"

The steward covered his face.

Who could possibly measure how strong a pop was once it entered someone's mouth?

Zhu Cunji chuckled.

"Relax. This entire Ward sits on my family's land. Forty percent of the stall rents flow straight into the Prince of Qin's coffers."

The steward sighed.

"But Your Highness... your spending these past few days has already burned through several months of that rent."

"Hahaha! A few months' rent?" Zhu Cunji waved his hand grandly. "This Prince's Heir can afford it!"

The steward could only bow in defeat.

Turning a street corner, the group suddenly came upon a colossal structure rising from the eastern side of the Ward.

A massive stage stood at its center. Tiered seating rose around it in a trapezoidal formation, each row higher than the last. Even unfinished, it was imposing enough to accommodate thousands.

"What is this?" Zhu Cunji asked.

The steward hurried off to question a Blue Hat and soon returned.

"Reporting to Your Highness, they are constructing a grand theater."

"A theater?" Zhu Cunji frowned. "Opera? On such a massive stage—will the voices even carry?"

The steward lowered his voice.

"This theater is for more than opera. Its primary purpose is to show... movies."

"Movies?" Zhu Cunji blinked. "What are those?"

"They are performances acted out, recorded using celestial mirrors, then projected onto a screen. Many in Chengcheng and Puzhou have already seen them. They say the experience is extraordinary."

Zhu Cunji's interest ignited instantly.

"When will it open? Will it be better than the news mirrors?"

"I cannot say," the steward replied. "But... these movies require tickets. They are not free."

"A fee?" Zhu Cunji clapped his hands. "Excellent! Fewer people, better seats. Watch closely—once it opens, buy the best and most expensive tickets. I must see this myself!"

His orders were carried out without delay.

A month later, *A Border Soldier's Tale of Daling River* premiered at the Xi'an Grand Theater.

Xi'an's population dwarfed that of Gao Family Village or Puzhou, and accordingly, ticket prices were higher. Special VIP seating was arranged for officials and nobility, priced at five taels per seat.

Zhu Cunji arrived with his consort, secondary consort, concubines, sons, daughters—nearly half the VIP section was occupied by his household alone.

Lian Guoshi, Wu Shen, Shi Kefa, and many other officials were also present.

Then—

The siege of Daling River began.

At first, the officials merely watched.

Walls. Banners. Formations.

Familiar images.

But soon, the camera lingered.

On frozen hands gripping spears.

On exhausted soldiers gnawing dry rations.

On men collapsing in the snow.

The common folk cried out in anger.

The VIP section was silent.

Zhu Cunji's face grew pale. By halfway through, his hands were shaking.

Each cannon blast made him flinch.

Lian Guoshi sat rigid, brows knotted, mind racing through grain tallies and troop numbers.

Wu Shen clenched his jaw, recognizing every tactical failure.

Shi Kefa leaned forward, fists trembling.

When the final assault played—

Darkness fell.

Silence filled the theater.

Then—

Shi Kefa leapt to his feet, chair crashing behind him.

"This is intolerable!" he shouted. "Utterly intolerable!"

"How can the Jiannu be allowed such arrogance?"

He struck his chest.

"I request transfer to the border! Send me to the front!"

"Transfer me to the border!"

The words echoed.

Zhu Cunji slumped back into his seat, drenched in cold sweat.

The screen was dark.

But the battlefield remained burned into their eyes.