

## Great Ming 921

### Chapter 921: Help Me Contact the Chuǎng Wang

The shopkeeper opened the money pouch and took a look inside. His heart jumped. The amount of silver and copper within was at least a hundred times the compensation he should have received. Such an excessive sum made his hands feel heavy, and unease crept up his spine.

He hurriedly poured out only a few dozen copper coins and pushed the rest back.

"These are enough. Truly, this is enough," he said earnestly. "I cannot possibly take more than this."

Zheng Gonggong waved his hand, clearly eager to be done with the matter. "It's fine, it's fine. Just take it."

The shopkeeper shook his head even more forcefully. "This is not money I am owed. I really cannot accept it."

Zheng Gonggong's expression collapsed. His eyes reddened, and his voice took on a pleading tone that bordered on sobbing.

"Please, you must take it. If you do not, who knows how many people in the prince's manor will be unable to sleep tonight?"

The shopkeeper stared at him, completely confused. "Huh?"

Zheng Gonggong wiped sweat from his brow and hurried on. "This is the compensation plan our prince personally agreed upon with Dao Xuan Tianzun. Only after Dao Xuan Tianzun found it satisfactory was he willing to spare us. If you refuse to accept it, and Dao Xuan Tianzun's wrath descends again, the prince will surely punish me. Look at me, one of my arms is already broken. Please, shopkeeper, show a little mercy."

Only then did the shopkeeper notice the bandaged arm hanging stiffly in its sling. Cold sweat immediately broke out across his forehead. After hesitating for a long moment, he finally accepted the money pouch with trembling hands.

Seeing this, Zheng Gonggong finally let out a long breath of relief. He clasped his hands in farewell, then quickly slipped into the shop next door, continuing his door to door compensation tour.

The entire farce, from start to finish, was witnessed clearly by the forty-one original villagers of Gao Family Village. They burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! To dare eat without paying right under Dao Xuan Tianzun's watch. That is truly courting death!"

At this moment, the shopkeeper emerged from the kitchen with two steaming bowls of duck blood vermicelli, one in each hand. His eyes flicked across the room, immediately locking onto the Village Chief. Without hesitation, he placed the first bowl respectfully in front of him. The second bowl was set beside it.

While serving, the shopkeeper overheard their conversation about Dao Xuan Tianzun. His merchant instincts stirred. He noticed that everyone in this group wore an embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on their chest. Some were stitched in gold thread, some in silver, some in plain cotton, and others in bright multicolored thread. One youth who looked only seventeen or eighteen even wore a small metal badge bearing Dao Xuan Tianzun's likeness.

At once, the shopkeeper realized that these outsiders were anything but ordinary.

He leaned closer to the Village Chief, his face full of respectful flattery.

"Old sir," he said carefully, "you seem very knowledgeable about Dao Xuan Tianzun. Might you be...?"

The Village Chief grinned openly.

"We are the very first people in this world to receive Dao Xuan Tianzun's protection."

Understanding dawned immediately. The shopkeeper bowed deeply, his back nearly folding in half.

"Honored sirs," he said earnestly, "please offer guidance to this humble man."

The Village Chief reached out and patted his shoulder.

"What guidance is there to offer? Do not talk nonsense. As long as you do not do evil, and even if you do not perform great deeds, but simply live your life honestly as an ordinary person, Dao Xuan Tianzun will still bless you."

While the original villagers continued exploring Luoyang and quietly waiting for news, far away at Gubai Ferry, Jiang Cheng arrived once again aboard a cargo ship, accompanied by several of his subordinates.

The ferry crossing was peaceful as ever. As the ship docked, a figure slipped out from the reeds by the riverbank. It was a Hui border scout serving under Lao Huihui.

The scout approached quickly and cupped his fists in salute.

"Instructor Jiang," he said, puzzled, "you delivered supplies only a few days ago. It is still early for the next shipment. Why have you come again today?"

Jiang Cheng answered frankly.

"This time, I am here because I have an important request."

The scout was surprised.

"Oh? Is there something our side can assist with?"

Jiang Cheng said, "I have several important people who wish to meet the Chuǎng Wang and speak with him directly."

The scout hesitated.

"This matter exceeds my authority. Please wait a moment, Instructor Jiang. I will go inform my chief."

Before long, Lao Huihui arrived at the riverbank with a troop of cavalry.

After exchanging salutes, Lao Huihui spoke first.

"The Chuǎng Wang is constantly on the move. Even I find it difficult to locate him, and chances to meet are rare. Even if I found him, my status is not enough to ask him to come meet your people. And if I sent your people to him, by the time they arrived and returned, the Chuǎng Wang would likely have moved on again."

This was indeed a problem. Fortunately, the original villagers of Gao Family Village had come prepared.

Jiang Cheng reached into his robes and pulled out a small, old iron hairpin. He handed it to Lao Huihui.

"Show this to the Chuǎng Wang," he said.

Lao Huihui examined the hairpin carefully. It was old and worn, worth almost nothing. It was clearly not a token of love or anything valuable. Yet precisely because of this, Lao Huihui felt it carried weight. The Chuǎng Wang had risen from poverty, and such a humble object could easily touch something deep in his heart.

Understanding flashed across Lao Huihui's face.

"After seeing this, the Chuǎng Wang will voluntarily ask to meet your people?"

Jiang Cheng nodded.

"Have him meet us here at Gubai Ferry."

Lao Huihui cupped his fists.

"Understood."

Jiang Cheng added one more warning.

"Under no circumstances may this hairpin be lost. If you cannot deliver it to the Chuǎng Wang, bring it back to me. Otherwise, a certain young woman will be heartbroken."

Lao Huihui answered solemnly.

"Understood."

Jiang Cheng boarded his ship and departed.

Lao Huihui stood in place for a few moments, then turned to his subordinates.

"Which direction is the Chuǎng Wang heading now?"

One man stepped forward.

"South, near Baisha Lake. He appears to be pursuing Gao Jie. The Chuǎng Wang's subordinate, the Dashing General, is determined to kill Gao Jie. Wherever Gao Jie goes, the Dashing General follows, and wherever the Dashing General goes, the Chuǎng Wang follows."

Lao Huihui shook his head.

"This Chuǎng Wang is far too indecisive. What kind of leader allows himself to be dragged around by his subordinate like this?"

Everyone present knew this well. These days, the Chuǎng Army was practically run by the Dashing General alone.

Lao Huihui made his decision.

"The entire army will move. We will pursue Gao Jie as well. Where Gao Jie is, we will find the Chuǎng Wang."

At the Seventy-Two Families' Xingyang Conference, lots had been drawn to determine the movements of each rebel faction. Lao Huihui had drawn "central support," granting him broad freedom of movement. At the time, it had seemed merely convenient. Now, it proved extremely useful.

He waved his hand decisively.

"Let us go find Gao Jie, the man who famously cuckolded another."

Meanwhile, Lu Xiangheng, the Supreme Commander of five provinces, was leading five thousand troops toward Huashi Town.

Not long ago, he had received intelligence that the bandit chieftains known as the West Camp Eight Great Kings, who had plundered Fengyang, were now active near Huashi Town.

Upon receiving the report, Lu Xiangheng mobilized without hesitation.

He ordered He Renlong and Gao Jie to circle north of Huashi Town.

He himself would lead troops to encircle from the south.

Cao Wenzhao and his nephew Cao Bianjiao were tasked with blocking the west.

Zuo Liangyu would approach from the east.

With four forces converging, Huashi Town would be sealed completely. The West Camp Eight Great Kings would be executed on the spot, washing away the national disgrace of Fengyang.

Orders flew swiftly. Government troops moved with practiced speed, and the encirclement soon took shape. Before long, the West Camp Eight Great Kings had fallen squarely into the trap.

If this battle succeeded, the Fengyang affair would finally be settled.

"Report. Supreme Commander, He Renlong reports that the northern force is in position."

"Report. Cao Wenzhao reports that the western force is in position."

Lu Xiangheng glanced at his own formation. The southern force was also ready.

Only one remained.

Zuo Liangyu's eastern force had yet to appear.

Lu Xiangheng frowned slightly.

That fellow... why was there still no movement from him?

Chapter 922: Is Gao Jie That Important?

Zuo Liangyu was a native of Linqing in Shandong. He was thirty six years old, and he could not read a single character.

In the late years of the Ming, it would not be an exaggeration to call him the most infamous villain the court had produced. He slaughtered civilians to pad his military merits, built private armies, openly defied imperial orders, and committed every possible dishonorable act without restraint.

The utterly wicked, shameless feudal warlords portrayed in later novels and films were, in many ways, modeled directly after men like Zuo Liangyu.

At this very moment, he was leading a massive force eastward toward Huashi Town.

His army was a complete hodgepodge. Three thousand were genuine imperial soldiers. The remaining seven thousand were "pacified" rebels gathered from various defeated factions.

He had never reported these rehabilitated rebels to the court. Instead, he quietly kept them as his personal troops.

Zuo Liangyu surveyed the terrain ahead, then motioned to a messenger.

"Go inform Supreme Commander Lu that our army has reached its position."

Before the messenger could even turn to leave, a scout galloped in from the distance.

"Report, General. Your subordinate has just received urgent news. The Dashing General has offered a reward of one hundred pounds of gold for Gao Jie's head."

"What?!" Zuo Liangyu shouted. His voice leapt several octaves. "How much did you say?"

The scout swallowed.

"One hundred pounds of gold."

Zuo Liangyu leaned forward sharply.

"Are you certain it is one hundred pounds, not one hundred taels?"

The scout answered firmly.

"Confirmed."

Zuo Liangyu burst into laughter.

"Damn it all. If I miss this fortune, I would not deserve to be called a hero."

One of his trusted personal retainers poked his head out from nearby.

"General, Gao Jie has already surrendered and is now under He Renlong's command. Surely we cannot still earn that hundred pounds of gold?"

Zuo Liangyu sneered.

"You must learn to be flexible. So what if Gao Jie has been pacified? We simply will not use imperial troops to deal with him. We still have seven thousand pacified rebels, do we not?"

The retainer's eyes lit up immediately.

"Understood. I will lead the seven thousand pacified rebels to kill Gao Jie. You, General, can lead the three thousand imperial soldiers to deal with Lu Xiangheng."

Zuo Liangyu chuckled approvingly.

"That is how one thinks. Stay with me and you will learn not to be so rigid. Do not draw such clean lines between imperial soldiers and rebels. Whoever helps us make money is our friend."

The retainer bowed and hurried off to carry out the plan.

Zuo Liangyu then waved lazily at the messenger.

"Go ahead. Take your time informing Lu Xiangheng. Just tell him that I am in position, that all three thousand of my men have arrived. Tell him I am earnestly carrying out the Supreme Commander's orders."

He laughed loudly to himself.

The four contingents of imperial troops were now "all" in position.

Lu Xiangheng was overjoyed. Although Zuo Liangyu had arrived somewhat late, the encirclement was finally complete. This was the perfect opportunity to annihilate Zhang Xianzhong's West Camp forces in one decisive blow.

"Attack!"

With Lu Xiangheng's order, the southern army he personally commanded surged forward toward Huashi Town.

At the same time, Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao advanced from the west. He Renlong and Gao Jie pressed in from the north. Zuo Liangyu's forces moved from the east.

Inside Huashi Town, Zhang Xianzhong was shocked when he saw the encirclement tightening.

"Damn it all. We are finished."

Yet at that very instant, a sudden and absurd twist occurred.

From the northeast, a force of roughly seven thousand rebel soldiers appeared out of nowhere. Instead of avoiding the imperial troops, they charged straight toward He Renlong and Gao Jie's units.

As they rushed forward, they shouted at the top of their lungs.

"Traitor Fan Shan Yao. How dare you betray us. Your grandfathers are here to take your dog's life."

Gao Jie was following behind He Renlong when he heard the roar. He turned sharply toward the northeast, panic flashing across his face.

"Who is coming?"

Subordinates shouted back one after another.

"We do not know."

"They are not flying any banners."

"No idea which faction they belong to."

"Definitely not the Dashing General or the Roaming King."

Gao Jie was completely bewildered.

Meanwhile, the so called rebel soldiers saw He Renlong's and Gao Jie's banners clearly. They ignored He Renlong entirely and charged straight at Gao Jie.

"Gao Jie is here."

"Fan Shan Yao is here."

"Seize Gao Jie."

"Capture him alive."

Every rebel soldier's eyes burned as if they had been carved into the shape of coins. They rushed forward without fear of death, charging like madmen, as though dying meant nothing and they would simply stand up again afterward.

Gao Jie shouted in disbelief.

"What in the blazes is going on?"

His troops hastily turned to engage.

He Renlong's contingent was dragged into the chaos as well. With no choice, they turned and fought.

The northern defense line of the imperial army collapsed almost instantly.

Trapped inside Huashi Town, Zhang Xianzhong saw this and shouted joyfully.

"Heaven helps me. Charge north."

As the West Camp rebels surged northward, He Renlong's and Gao Jie's forces were attacked from both front and rear. Disorder erupted at once, and the carefully constructed encirclement was shattered.

Lu Xiangheng was frantic.

"How could this happen? Pursue them. Surround them. Do not let them escape."

Cao Wenzhao and his nephew Cao Bianjiao were also alarmed. They spurred their horses and charged recklessly toward Zhang Xianzhong's fleeing forces.

But it was already too late.

The rebels retreated while firing volleys of arrows. Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao had pursued too aggressively. Several arrows struck their horses. The mounts screamed and collapsed, throwing uncle and nephew to the ground. Both were severely injured and lay unable to rise. Their subordinates rushed in desperately to save them.

Lu Xiangheng pushed northward, intending to pursue Zhang Xianzhong relentlessly. But he was blocked by the rebel force attacking Gao Jie. He could not simply abandon He Renlong and Gao Jie to be overwhelmed, so he was forced to divert his troops.

The battlefield descended into total chaos.

Before long, another roar erupted from the north. The Dashing General and the Roaming King had arrived.

The moment they appeared, they shouted in unison.

"Fan Shan Yao. Hand over your dog's head."

They led their armies straight into the fray.

The chaos intensified even further.

The massive melee raged on, its duration unclear.

Lu Xiangheng looked left, then right, and his heart sank. The imperial forces were steadily losing ground. Rebel ranks seemed endless, while the imperial side had already lost a crucial fighting force with the serious injuries of Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao.

He Renlong was no strategist. He only knew how to charge headlong. His nickname, Mad He, was well earned. In a battle of this scale, his reckless assaults were utterly ineffective.

Gao Jie was now fighting purely to survive. Rebel soldiers swarmed him from every direction. Staying alive was already a struggle. Turning the tide was out of the question.

Zuo Liangyu also appeared to be fighting fiercely, but his actions achieved almost nothing.

The entire battlefield now rested on the desperate resistance of Lu Xiangheng's Tianxiong Army.

Just as the situation grew utterly dire, a thunderous rumble of hooves erupted from the north. A massive force of border cavalry charged onto the battlefield.

"Lao Huihui."

The moment Lu Xiangheng recognized the banners, he knew the battle was lost for the day. The Tianxiong Army was already stretched to its limit. With the addition of border cavalry, there was no chance of holding on.

"Retreat."

Lu Xiangheng had no choice but to order a temporary withdrawal.

The four imperial contingents retreated in four separate directions.

Large groups of rebels, however, continued to chase Gao Jie relentlessly, slashing their way northwest.

Lu Xiangheng watched this scene in disbelief.

"The rebels are not pursuing me, the Supreme Commander of Five Provinces. They are instead hunting Gao Jie without pause. Why?"

He clenched his fists.

"Is Gao Jie truly that important?"

Chapter 923: No Gossip

Two days later, in Luoyang.

Early in the morning, Li Daoxuan had only just climbed out of bed when his consciousness slipped once more into the box. At the same moment, his avatar of Dao Xuan Tianzun slowly opened its eyes.

The first thing he saw was Gao Yiye, still sleeping soundly on the bed beside him.

For the past several days, his avatar had been spending the night in Gao Yiye's room.

Naturally, nothing inappropriate ever happened.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun merely sat quietly within the room.

There was nothing strange about this arrangement. His avatar had long been stationed in the watchtower of Gao Family Village, and Gao Yiye had long since grown accustomed to falling asleep with his presence nearby.

At the beginning, she had still felt shy. When bathing or changing clothes, she would carefully make sure that Dao Xuan Tianzun was not currently inhabiting the avatar. But as time went on, even that trace of bashfulness faded away. Whether Dao Xuan Tianzun was present or not no longer mattered to her.

After all, the Dao Xuan Tianzun was not a stranger. Seeing or not seeing made no difference.

Now, Gao Yiye could do anything with complete natural ease.

Li Daoxuan quietly watched her for a while, his gaze gentle and calm, until Gao Yiye woke up on her own.

The moment her eyes opened, she saw Dao Xuan Tianzun watching her.

Her cheeks flushed almost instinctively.

"Oh?" she said softly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is already awake? You didn't wake me."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "There is no harm in sleeping a little longer."

Gao Yiye threw off the covers and got out of bed. Standing right beside it, she began changing her clothes.

She did not attempt to hide herself or avoid his gaze.

However, at that very instant, a benevolent blur suddenly leapt into existence, completely blocking Li Daoxuan's view.

Li Daoxuan tried shifting left, then right, shaking his head as if performing some kind of focus test. Unfortunately, the benevolent blur moved perfectly in sync with him, mercilessly sealing off his line of sight.

After a brief and utterly futile struggle, Li Daoxuan understood something very clearly.

This so-called "God of Harmony" truly lived up to its name.

He himself was only a pseudo-god. There was absolutely no way he could contend with it.

He saw nothing.

Not a single thing.

By the time the benevolent blur finally faded away, Gao Yiye had already finished dressing. She now wore a beautiful white blouse, upon whose front a golden image of Dao Xuan Tianzun was delicately embroidered.

Gao Yiye smiled brightly. "I'm dressed. Where shall we go play today?"

Li Daoxuan returned her smile. "Anywhere you wish to go, we shall go."

Gao Yiye giggled. "Then let's go to Xuanzang Temple. I want to see where the Tang Monk used to stay."

"Alright, alright," Li Daoxuan said with a chuckle. "Xuanzang Temple it is."

Suddenly, Gao Yiye seemed to recall something. She tilted her head and asked, "Dao Xuan Tianzun, when Sun Wukong caused havoc in the Heavenly Palace, were you there?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head. "I was not."

Gao Yiye gasped softly. "Ah, no wonder the Monkey King dared to make such a mess in the Heavenly Palace. Dao Xuan Tianzun wasn't there. If you had been there, Dao Xuan Tianzun, one slap would have subdued that Monkey King."

Li Daoxuan laughed. "You are talking nonsense. I could not possibly defeat the Monkey King."

Gao Yiye blinked. "But the Monkey King was just made up by Wu Cheng'en. There is no such thing anyway, right?"

Li Daoxuan shot back, amused, "You know that, yet you still ask so many questions?"

Laughing and chatting, the two walked out of the room together.

Outside, many militia soldiers were already training. Both new recruits and veterans hurriedly straightened up, saluted, and greeted them when they saw the pair.

Gao Yiye's specially assigned security team immediately gathered nearby, following at a discreet distance.

Just as the two were about to head toward Xuanzang Temple, Bai Yuan came running in from outside.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he reported urgently, "the Guanning Iron Cavalry has just returned to Luoyang to rest and recuperate. The two generals leading them, uncle and nephew Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao, are both gravely wounded."

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly.

Wounded, but not dead. That was still acceptable.

According to history, both Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao should have died around this time. The involvement of the Gao Family Village militia had clearly altered the course of events. The butterfly's wings had flapped, allowing the uncle and nephew to narrowly escape their fatal fate.

Bai Yuan quickly recounted the details of the battle at Huashi Town. "The bandits are becoming stronger and stronger. This time, they almost smashed through the government troops' encirclement head-on."

Li Daoxuan tilted his head back and let out a long sigh. "This is troublesome. The more victories the bandits achieve, the harder it will be to persuade Gao Yingxiang to give up."

Huashi Town.

Lao Huihui stepped forward and clasped his fists toward Chuǎng Wang. "Big Brother Chuǎng Wang."

Chuǎng Wang smiled in response. "Brother Lao Huihui, what brings you here?"

Lao Huihui lowered his voice. "What I wish to say is best spoken without others present."

Chuǎng Wang's brows knitted together slightly.

The personal guards behind him, along with the Dashing General, all instinctively stepped forward half a pace.

The Dashing General whispered, "Big Brother, being alone with someone like Lao Huihui is very dangerous. He is a former border army general and highly skilled in martial arts. If he were to suddenly attack you..."

Chuǎng Wang naturally understood this reasoning. He was an indecisive man by nature, and for a moment, he found himself hesitating.

Although Lao Huihui had clearly not heard the Dashing General's words, he seemed to have guessed them. He spoke calmly, "Am I, Lao Huihui, the kind of man who would suddenly ambush someone?"

Chuǎng Wang's expression brightened. "Brother Lao Huihui's character and martial prowess are beyond question."

With that, he waved his hand. "All of you, withdraw."

The Dashing General protested, "Big Brother."

Chuǎng Wang insisted, "It is fine. Leave us alone for a while."

Left with no choice, the Dashing General nodded and led all the guards out of the room.

Soon, only Chuǎng Wang and Lao Huihui remained inside the small chamber.

Lao Huihui reached a hand into his inner pocket.

At the same time, Chuǎng Wang's hand dropped to rest on the hilt of his saber.

In a world like this, no one could afford to be careless.

Everyone had to guard against everyone else.

When Lao Huihui's hand emerged, however, it held only a small, old iron hairpin, clearly worn and utterly worthless.

The instant Chuǎng Wang saw the hairpin, his entire body trembled.

Lao Huihui gently placed it on the table, then deliberately stepped far back.

Chuǎng Wang rushed forward, snatching the hairpin into his hands. He caressed it again and again, turning it over slowly. A deep sorrow and desolation spread across his face, completely beyond his control.

After several breaths, he clenched the hairpin tightly and whispered, "Where did you get this? You did not kill someone and steal it, did you?"

As he spoke the final words, a terrifying killing intent surged out from his body.

That an indecisive man like Chuǎng Wang could release such fierce intent widened Lao Huihui's eyes.

"So you are not merely a figurehead leader after all," Lao Huihui thought silently. "You are someone who can truly fight when it matters."

Aloud, he said in a low voice, "Do not worry. I did not kill anyone. This was entrusted to me by someone else. He asked me to deliver it to you. He said he is waiting for you at Gubo Crossing."

"Waiting for me?" Chuǎng Wang immediately grew agitated. "Good. Excellent. Are they still alive? This is truly wonderful."

His gaze turned sharply toward the direction of Gubo Crossing.

"Brother Lao Huihui, thank you," he said. "I will rush to Gubo Crossing as soon as possible."

Lao Huihui could not resist asking quietly, "An old flame, separated for many years?"

Chuǎng Wang shook his head. "They are my last remaining family in this world. I dared not reveal my true name precisely because they were still alive."

Lao Huihui pursed his lips.

How boring.

He had thought there might be some juicy gossip worth savoring.

Chapter 924: He Won't Spare You

A few days later, at Gubai Crossing.

As evening descended, the sun sank below the horizon, and a layer of dim gloom gradually enveloped the land.

This darkness was exactly what Chuǎng Wang needed.

He did not wish to implicate his relatives, so he dared to meet them only under the cover of shadows.

His main army had been deliberately left twenty li to the south.

Using a flimsy excuse, he ordered the rebel forces to halt. After that, he changed his appearance, and with only two of his most trusted personal guards, quietly slipped out of camp and headed toward the agreed meeting place.

On the other side, the people from Gao Family Village had already received word.

They arrived at Gubai Crossing aboard a long cargo boat and had been waiting there for quite some time.

Chuǎng Wang approached the large vessel by the river slowly, step by step.

Before he could even draw close, a rough and honest voice rang out from the deck.

"Sneaking up on our boat. What are you trying to do?"

The moment Chuǎng Wang heard that voice, his whole body shuddered.

"Is that... Chuwu?"

"Huh?"

With a sudden movement, a tall and sturdy figure leapt down from the boat. It was Gao Chuwu.

"You're... Uncle Yingxiang!"

Gao Chuwu turned his head and shouted loudly toward the boat, "Uncle Yingxiang is here. Come out, all of you, come out!"

From within the longboat's superstructure, people poured out one after another.

Gao Yiye rushed forward. "Second Uncle!"

The moment she spoke, her eyes instantly reddened with tears.

Gao Yingxiang was equally overjoyed. "Yiye!"

Gao Yiye took two quick steps forward, intending to throw herself into his arms. But midway, she suddenly remembered that she was no longer a child, and such behavior was no longer appropriate for her age.

She stopped herself with effort.

Gao Yingxiang asked, his face full of joy, "Where is your mother?"

Gao Yiye shook her head. "Mother passed away," she said softly. "She was killed by mountain bandits."

Gao Yingxiang froze on the spot.

The Village Chief stepped out from behind them. "Alas," he said, "after you left, the drought worsened with each passing day. One day, mountain bandits raided the village. Your mother... she then..."

The words trailed off.

A heavy silence settled over the group.

Gao Laba walked over and patted Gao Yingxiang on the shoulder. "Yingxiang, you've really made something of yourself, haven't you? If we hadn't seen the Gaojia News, we wouldn't have even known you'd become Chuǎng Wang."

"News?" Gao Yingxiang looked utterly confused.

Gao Yiyi came up from behind, gave him a silent punch on the shoulder, then stepped back without a word.

Gao Sanniang followed. She looked him up and down, then spoke with a strange tone. "Back then, when you beat up an official and ran away, everyone said you were a hero. Who would have thought you'd end up becoming a bandit? Alas, you're not the Yingxiang I once knew."

Gao Yingxiang was stunned.

Gao Sanwa sighed, but said nothing.

Gao Yingxiang's gaze slowly swept across everyone present. Each face was deeply familiar, yet after more than ten years, they also felt faintly strange.

"Are you all... doing well?" he asked. "These past years of chaos and warfare, I was always worried about Gao Family Village. I never expected you'd all be living so well. Only my sister in law..."

"Qingwa also died at the hands of mountain bandits," the Village Chief said calmly. "Didn't you notice? Your closest friend, Qingwa, isn't here."

Gao Yingxiang staggered as if struck.

The Village Chief's expression suddenly turned solemn. "We arranged this meeting today because we need to talk to you about this 'banditry' of yours."

Gao Yingxiang straightened his posture. "Uncle, please speak plainly."

The Village Chief did not mince words. "Stop being a bandit. Give it up."

"Huh?" Gao Yingxiang blinked.

He truly had not expected the Village Chief to open with that.

"Uncle," Gao Yingxiang said urgently, "I'm no ordinary bandit anymore. I'm a king. I'm Chuǎng Wang, famous throughout the land. I command hundreds of thousands of troops. I have the power to seize the realm. Once I march into Yanjing, kill that dog emperor, and take the throne myself, I'll make you Imperial Preceptor, Yiye a princess, and Chuwu a great general..."

"Shut up!" the Village Chief roared.

"What king? A self proclaimed king? How are your actions any different from the mountain bandits who killed your sister in law and Qingwa? What you are doing now is killing other people's sisters in law, killing other people's closest friends. And you still dare to call yourself a king?"

Gao Yingxiang argued back, "No. I'm not a bandit. I'm leading an uprising. I'm doing what is righteous. I never intentionally killed anyone's sister in law or closest friend. I... those who died, they were just... just..."

He faltered, unable to find the words.

At that moment, Li Daoxuan's voice sounded from within the crowd of Gao Family Village.

"Isn't it simply that an uprising is not child's play? Bloodshed and sacrifice are unavoidable, right? Some collateral damage is inevitable. As long as you are ultimately right, as long as you can establish a brand new nation, then those people died for a worthy cause, didn't they?"

"Yes, yes, exactly. That's what I mean." Gao Yingxiang agreed without hesitation. Then he suddenly realized something was wrong. "Huh? Who are you? You're not from Gao Family Village, are you?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "Just a passerby, offering a casual comment. Don't mind me. Please continue."

Gao Yingxiang's anger flared, and he wanted to lash out. But when he saw that no one from Gao Family Village, including the Village Chief, objected to Li Daoxuan's interruption, he found it hard to vent his rage.

Suppressing it, he continued speaking to the Village Chief and Gao Yiye.

"Just a few days ago, I completely crushed the imperial army at Huashi Town. Even the Supreme Commander of the Five Provinces, Lu Xiangheng, was no match for me. We also defeated the Guanning Iron Cavalry and severely wounded Cao Wenzhao."

The more he spoke, the more agitated he became.

"Uncle. Yiye. Believe me. What I'm doing is righteous. I am overthrowing corrupt officials who oppress and torment the people. Once all the evil officials are killed, the world will naturally be at peace, and everyone will live happily."

This time, Li Daoxuan remained silent.

But Gao Sanwa spoke up.

"Uncle Yingxiang, if all the officials are killed, who will govern the land?"

Gao Yingxiang sneered. "Who needs governance? No one needs to govern. If no one governs, everyone can live happily without paying taxes."

Gao Sanwa countered, "If no one governs, then when people murder, steal, rob, or assault innocent young women, who will deal with them?"

Gao Yingxiang paused, clearly startled. "This..."

Gao Sanwa pressed on. "If no one governs, who will repair broken roads? Who will mend breached river dikes? And when the Manchu invaders come, who will stand against them?"

Gao Yingxiang said stiffly, "Sanwa, you've grown up. You've become quite capable. You even dare to talk back to your uncle now."

Gao Sanwa stuck out his tongue. "The river shifts course every thirty years, so don't underestimate a youth in his poverty. Uncle Yingxiang, I've grown up, and I understand many things now. You can't look down on me anymore."

Only then did Gao Yingxiang suddenly realize something.

It was not just Gao Sanwa.

All the people from Gao Family Village carried a completely different air now.

In the past, they had been timid villagers, confined to a remote mountain settlement, ignorant of the wider world. But now, they were full of vigor and spirit. Their expressions were confident and composed.

Compared to them, his own decade of wandering the land felt strangely insufficient to establish authority.

He wished they had never seen the world, and would simply listen to him as before.

The Village Chief spoke again.

"Give it up. Come back with us to Gao Family Village. If you stop now, it will count as voluntary surrender, and you will not be sentenced to death. But if you continue..."

He raised his finger and pointed toward the sky.

"He will not spare you."

Chapter 925: I'm Not Going Back

Gao Yingxiang shook his head. "No. I can't stop now. I'm already so close to success."

The Village Chief retorted angrily, "Wake up. You cannot possibly succeed."

Gao Yingxiang bristled at once. "Uncle, I respect you as an elder, but you should not look down on me. I burned Fengyang, desecrated the Zhu clan's ancestral tombs, and now I've even defeated the Guanning Iron Cavalry under the Supreme Commander of the Five Provinces. How could I not succeed? I am only one step away from victory. As long as I take the Yan Capital, this world will be mine."

Gao Yiye spoke up softly, "Second Uncle, Grandpa Village Chief's idea of success isn't about who you defeat or overthrow. It's about whether you can truly establish a nation where everyone can live a good life."

Gao Yingxiang fell silent.

The Village Chief gave a firm order. "Come back with me."

"I'm not going back," Gao Yingxiang said resolutely. "I am now the supreme leader of seventy two factions and three hundred thousand troops. I will not go back."

Gao Chuwu suddenly stepped forward. "Uncle, don't blame little Chuwu for being disrespectful. Even if I have to use brute force, I will drag you back."

The moment he spoke, the two trusted guards accompanying Gao Yingxiang immediately stepped forward, blocking his path.

These two men were tall and powerfully built, clearly not easy opponents. Yet when they looked at Gao Chuwu, a flicker of apprehension involuntarily rose in their hearts.

Gao Chuwu's physique was simply too imposing. It was hard to imagine what he had been eating. His bulging muscles made him look downright terrifying.

Gao Yingxiang could not help but mutter inwardly, Gao Family Village is so poor. When Gao Chuwu was young, his tall stature and large frame meant he never had enough to eat, and he was always a bit thin. But now his presence is no weaker than a giant bear. Is he eating meat every single day now or what?

Gao Chuwu cracked his knuckles twice, the sharp sounds echoing clearly. "Move aside. This is Gao Family Village business. You don't carry the Gao surname, so don't interfere."

The two guards glanced at Gao Yingxiang, unease flashing in their eyes.

But Gao Yingxiang gave no instruction at all. In this moment, he was completely at a loss.

Taking his silence as tacit approval, the two guards lunged at Gao Chuwu simultaneously.

Gao Chuwu planted his feet firmly and slammed his shoulder into one of them.

The force was on an entirely different level compared to Li Daoxuan's earlier Kun Kun Iron Mountain Shoulder Slam.

The guard was sent flying backward instantly. He slammed onto his back with a heavy thud, then slid several zhang across the ground, scattering dry leaves everywhere.

At the same time, Gao Chuwu's fist, as large as a monk's begging bowl, thundered toward the second guard.

The guard hastily blocked with both arms. A dull impact rang out, and his body swayed violently, nearly losing balance.

Gao Chuwu surged forward, about to unleash the Ghost God Fist Style. Then he suddenly remembered that this set of techniques usually involved snapping necks or breaking bones, which was not appropriate when dealing with his uncle's men.

He immediately switched styles, using the Guanzhong Hong Fist taught to him by Cheng Xu.

The Guanzhong Hong Fist was fast and fluid. Once unleashed, it erupted like a storm.

A rapid series of thump thump thump sounds rang out. In the blink of an eye, the guard was struck an unknown number of times and crashed heavily to the ground.

Gao Yingxiang stared in shock. "Chuwu, you little brat. You know how to fight now?"

Gao Chuwu grinned. "Hehe. Uncle, you definitely can't beat me. I have to take you back to the village. Please pardon the offense."

Gao Yingxiang took half a step back. A trace of panic rose uncontrollably in his heart.

"Stop," the Village Chief suddenly said. "Chuwu, come back."

Gao Chuwu turned his head. "Huh?"

The Village Chief explained, "Dao Xuan Tianzun said that he must surrender himself in order to avoid the death penalty. Without an act of surrender, death is inevitable. If you drag him back by force, it will not count as surrender."

Gao Chuwu exclaimed, "Oh. You're right. Then I can't grab him."

He retreated gloomily back into the crowd, pouting. "Useless at a time like this."

Gao Yingxiang frowned.

He had grasped something important. The people of Gao Family Village seemed to have pledged allegiance to some greater power, and the leader of that power was called Dao Xuan Tianzun. Was it something like the White Lotus Sect?

He had never intended to stop in the first place. This realization only strengthened his resolve.

Reaching into his tunic, he pulled out an iron hairpin and gently tossed it toward Gao Yiye.

The iron hairpin traced a graceful arc through the air. Gao Yiye quickly reached out and caught it.

Gao Yingxiang said quietly, "Yiye, this belonged to your grandmother. She passed it to my elder sister back then, and naturally it should be passed down to you. As for your Second Uncle, haha, just consider me already dead."

The moment he said this, everyone understood that he had no intention of staying.

Their expressions darkened.

Li Daoxuan could not help but sigh inwardly. Just as I expected. If Gao Yingxiang had been suffering defeat after defeat, chased and cut down by government troops, he might have been persuaded to give up by the people of Gao Family Village.

But he has just achieved a great victory.

At a time like this, how could he possibly be convinced?

Human nature is simply like this.

Gao Yingxiang cupped his hands toward the crowd. "Everyone, I am very glad to see you all today. In these chaotic times, knowing that you are all doing well is better than anything. Return to Gao Family Village and hide yourselves away. Let me seize this world first. When I succeed, I will return and bestow

high official ranks upon all of you. Uncle Village Chief will be appointed Grand Tutor. Yiye will become a princess. Chuwu will be made a great general. Wait for my good news."

No one spoke.

"I'm leaving," Gao Yingxiang said.

He turned and walked away.

The two guards injured by Gao Chuwu hurriedly scrambled to their feet and followed him. The three exited Gubai Crossing, mounted their warhorses, shouted sharply, and galloped southward, disappearing into the night within moments.

The people of Gao Family Village all turned to look at Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan shrugged, spreading his hands. "Let's go back."

Gao Yiye asked sadly, "Dao Xuan Tianzun, is there truly no way? No divine method at all?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head. "There are no divine methods that can control another person's heart."

Gao Yiye pleaded, "You can see the past and the future. Can you please help us predict what will happen to Second Uncle? Even just a little?"

Li Daoxuan extended his right hand and pretended to calculate with his fingers. In truth, he was recalling the late Ming historical records he had read.

In official history, Gao Yingxiang would die in the ninth year of Chongzhen, which would be next year. He provoked the formidable Sun Chuanting, was utterly defeated, captured alive, and sent to the capital for execution.

But in this timeline, Sun Chuanting had already been "abducted" to serve as Principal Sun of the Yellow Pole Military Academy. It was unlikely he would suppress bandits again.

Gao Yingxiang's future was now completely uncertain.

The flutter of a butterfly's wings could plunge the entire world into an unknown future. Who could possibly predict his fate now?

Li Daoxuan could only sigh. "The secrets of Heaven cannot be revealed."

Gao Yiye pressed on. "Not even a little? Can't you say anything at all?"

Li Daoxuan sighed once more. "Yiye, the cycles of Heaven are just. Those who commit evil deeds rarely meet a good end. Do not ask me to foretell this."

Chapter 926: Zhu Cunji Takes Action

In the summer of the eighth year of Chongzhen's reign, a catastrophic locust plague swept across the land.

A delegation from Gao Family Village had set out to persuade Gao Yingxiang to abandon his path and return home, but the attempt ended in complete failure. Disheartened and exhausted, the group could only turn back, retracing their steps toward Gao Family Village.

At the same time...

Xi'an.

In the rear courtyard of the Prince of Qin's mansion, dozens of Zhu Cunji's sworn guards quietly emerged from the back garden, carrying with them a massive black sack. They moved swiftly and cautiously, their actions furtive and secretive, making it obvious that whatever they were doing was not meant to see the light of day.

Along the way, maids, servants, and eunuchs who happened to witness the scene hurriedly lowered their heads, shielding their faces as they retreated to the sides. None of them dared to interfere. None of them dared to take a second look.

They all understood one thing very clearly.

These were not ordinary guards. They were the Heir Apparent's sworn men, not the usual attendants of the household. The fact that they had been dispatched personally meant that this matter was of extreme secrecy. Anyone who knew too much would not meet a good end.

In such situations, pretending to see nothing was the safest choice.

At that moment, Zhu Cunji was in the middle of a meal with his Princess Consort. A trusted eunuch slipped quietly into the room and leaned close, lowering his voice.

"Your Highness, they have returned."

"Returned?" Zhu Cunji's eyes lit up. He sprang to his feet so abruptly that his chair scraped loudly against the floor. Without another word, he strode toward the rear courtyard.

The Princess Consort could not help herself. She called after him, her voice heavy with worry.

"My husband, do not forget that Dao Xuan Tianzun is watching from above. When you do things... you really must observe some limits. You cannot be as reckless as you were in your youth."

Zhu Cunji laughed, utterly unconcerned.

"Relax. What I am doing may not be suitable for public viewing, but it is absolutely something Dao Xuan Tianzun can see."

A massive question mark seemed to form on the Princess Consort's face.

She had never planned to involve herself in whatever foolish scheme her husband was cooking up this time, but now her curiosity had been fully stirred. She pushed her meal aside, lifted the hem of her skirt, and stood.

"Then I will go see it for myself."

Zhu Cunji nodded.

"Good. I can hide this from anyone else, but I cannot hide it from you. Otherwise, if I somehow ended up wearing a cuckold's green hat, I would be very unhappy."

The Princess Consort instantly bristled.

"What do you mean by that?" she snapped. "Do you take me for some fickle, unvirtuous woman? How could I ever put a green hat on you?"

Zhu Cunji waved his hand casually.

"Do not be angry. Just come with me and you will understand."

There was no way for her not to be angry. No woman could hear such words without indignation. Her cheeks puffed out as she followed behind him, seething in silence.

Soon, the two arrived at the back garden. By then, the sworn guards had already carried the large black sack into a hidden underground chamber.

The trusted eunuch stepped forward, opened the concealed door, and led both the Heir Apparent and the Princess Consort inside. At the same time, several sworn guards emerged silently from among the flowering trees, drawing their weapons and positioning themselves around the entrance to stand guard.

Seeing this, the Princess Consort's heart tightened further.

"What exactly is my foolish husband doing?" she thought anxiously. "I am so nervous. If Dao Xuan Tianzun sees this, he will not just slap my foolish husband to death, will he?"

With trepidation weighing heavily on her heart, they finally reached the center of the secret chamber.

Several sworn guards had already been waiting there. The moment they saw Zhu Cunji, they knelt and bowed.

"Your Highness," one of them reported, "your humble servants have successfully completed the mission. The person has been brought back."

At these words, the Princess Consort's gaze immediately fell upon the black burlap sack lying on the ground. Her heart seized.

"You did not kidnap some beautiful girl, did you?" she blurted out. "Heavens above. Dao Xuan Tianzun despises such acts the most. If he finds out, his palm will surely come down!"

Zhu Cunji snorted.

"Hmph. What kind of person do you take me for? Is my only pursuit beautiful women? How shallow."

The Princess Consort could only stare at him in silence.

Zhu Cunji grunted impatiently.

"Open the sack."

The trusted eunuch quickly crouched down and untied the ropes. He pulled back the black cloth, revealing a man's head.

It was not a beautiful girl.

It was a middle-aged man.

The Princess Consort leaned closer for a better look, then gasped in shock. The man inside the sack bore an uncanny resemblance to Zhu Cunji, almost as if they had been carved from the same mold. The only difference lay in their bearing.

Zhu Cunji himself radiated the comical unreliability of a dissolute noble, a man who lived comfortably and irresponsibly. The man in the sack, however, looked rustic and worn, his face etched with worry and hardship, the unmistakable marks of a life spent scraping by.

The Princess Consort stammered, utterly stunned.

"Ah? Ahhh? Who is this man?"

Zhu Cunji grinned broadly.

"His name is Zhao Si. He is from Yaozhou, in Shaanxi. A poor actor who has struggled his entire life. Some time ago, when our railway reached Yaozhou, my men happened to see him performing there. Hehehe."

The Princess Consort grew even more anxious.

"Then why did you bring him here like this?"

Zhu Cunji scoffed.

"Bring him? Kidnap him? I did no such thing."

He turned his head toward Zhao Si.

"Tell the Princess Consort yourself. How did you come here?"

Zhao Si immediately bowed deeply.

"Your Highness, Princess Consort," he said respectfully. "Your humble servant came of his own free will. His Highness's subordinates told me that because I resemble His Highness and know how to act, they wanted me to do some work in the mansion. His Highness also promised me an extremely high salary, so I willingly came."

The Princess Consort inhaled sharply.

She was not foolish. At this point, she already had a vague idea of what her foolish husband intended.

Zhu Cunji chuckled.

"Zhao Si, you should already have some idea why I brought you here, right?"

Zhao Si nodded earnestly.

"I understand. Your Highness wants me to serve as a body double, to guard against assassins or similar dangers."

"Hahaha!" Zhu Cunji burst out laughing. "Assassination? Who would dare assassinate this Heir Apparent? This is Xi'an Prefecture, Dao Xuan Tianzun's territory. Who has the guts to try such a thing here?"

Zhao Si was completely baffled.

"Then... why am I here?"

Zhu Cunji straightened slightly and declared proudly.

"This Heir Apparent intends to travel the four seas. You will remain here in Xi'an and live exactly as I do. Eat whatever you want, play however you want, and spend money lavishly. Only by doing so will you truly resemble me."

Zhao Si was speechless.

The Princess Consort was also speechless.

Zhu Cunji continued, entirely serious.

"To play this role well, you must indulge in luxury, wastefulness, emptiness, restlessness, and degeneration. In short, however one lives a life completely devoid of soul, that is precisely how you must live."

Everyone present stared at him in stunned silence.

Zhu Cunji turned to his trusted eunuch.

"From today onward, in this secret chamber, you will teach him everything. The rules of the mansion, my demeanor, my gestures, my tone of voice, how I speak, how I look at people, my habits, my temperament. Everything must be identical."

The eunuch bowed deeply.

"This servant obeys."

Zhu Cunji added casually.

"First, bring him a bowl of shark fin to practice with. Let him get used to it."

The eunuch quickly departed. A moment later, he returned, carrying an exquisitely prepared bowl of shark fin on a fine tray, and presented it respectfully to Zhao Si.

Zhao Si's eyes reddened. He had never tasted anything so precious in his life.

He reached out with both hands, trembling, afraid that spilling even a single drop would be a crime beyond forgiveness.

Zhu Cunji roared.

"Not like that. For such a trivial thing, why are you acting so reverent? Take it casually with one hand. Even if you spill it, it does not matter."

Zhao Si broke out in a cold sweat.

"This..."

Gritting his teeth, he switched to holding the bowl with one hand, trying his best to appear casual. He took a small sip. A flavor he had never experienced before instantly spread across his tongue.

He was just about to cry out that it was delicious when Zhu Cunji barked again.

"What is that expression? Twist your mouth, spit it out, say 'disgusting,' and then scold the cook for not improving their skills."

Zhao Si did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Inside his heart, he could only think one thing.

"Playing such an eccentric Heir Apparent is truly harder than acting on stage."

Chapter 927: Wanderer of the Four Seas

The people of Gao Family Village had already returned.

Li Daoxuan's attention was no longer focused on them.

That evening, Li Daoxuan ordered a takeout of Squirrel Fish. As he ate, he locked his gaze onto the bustling city of Xi'an within the diorama box, watching the tiny figures move about in their lively, orderly chaos.

It was almost time for the daily Gaojia News broadcast.

As always, the common people of Xi'an began to gather, gradually converging on Caishikou Square.

At this same hour each day, the Prince of Qin's Kulinan would also arrive.

Today was no exception.

The glittering Kulinan rolled into view right on time. As usual, the heir sat in the driver's seat. On either side of the vehicle, two neat rows of mounted princely guards rode alongside it, their presence creating an atmosphere of wealth and authority.

However, there was one noticeable difference from the norm.

In the passenger seat sat a masked figure.

This person wore a knight's outfit in the style associated with Dao Xuan Tianzun. A large conical hat covered their head, and a black veil concealed their face entirely.

At a glance, the figure practically screamed "martial artist."

The onlookers immediately began to whisper among themselves.

"The heir is up to his old tricks again. Who knows where he spent money to hire some wandering knight to sit beside him, and even dressed him up in Dao Xuan Tianzun's knight attire. What is he planning now?"

"You still do not understand the heir? He is completely incapable of doing anything serious. How could he ever pull off something real?"

"That knight definitely is not a good person."

"He must be helping the heir do his dirty work."

"No... do not say that. The heir has not really done anything terribly evil. He just likes to pull pranks now and then."

Of course, no one knew the truth.

The masked knight was none other than Zhu Cunji himself.

And the "heir" sitting behind the wheel was the actor Zhao Si.

Over these past few days, Zhao Si had truly been immersed in wealth and splendor. Living such a life of princely extravagance, he was already on the verge of "enjoying this place so much that he forgot his home."

That said, he had not been idle.

Every single day, he had to study. He learned how to read and write properly, memorized the complex rules and etiquette of the princely estate, and used portraits to memorize faces. He familiarized himself with all of the heir's former acquaintances. He had to recognize every official in Xi'an at a glance and call them by name without hesitation.

Beyond that, he also had to learn the names of countless mountain delicacies, exotic seafoods, and rare curiosities.

He even had to develop an eye for famous paintings, poetry, sculptures, and all manner of obscure cultural relics, lest he accidentally reveal his true identity during high society gatherings.

Only after beginning this training did Zhao Si truly realize something.

That so called princely dandy was not as useless as he appeared.

The knowledge he had accumulated since childhood far surpassed that of ordinary poor folk like Zhao Si. It was just that none of it had ever been applied to proper pursuits. Instead, it had all been squandered on indulgence and pleasure, rendering it effectively meaningless.

At that moment, Zhu Cunji spoke quietly from the passenger seat.

"Keep your foot on the brake. There are too many people here. If you accidentally run over a commoner, Dao Xuan Tianzun will smash you flat with one hand."

Zhao Si did not need to be reminded.

He was not some lofty noble who treated human lives as worthless. In fact, he feared hitting common people even more than Zhu Cunji did.

His foot remained firmly pressed on the brake, not daring to move in the slightest.

The glittering Kulinan carefully threaded its way through the crowded streets, eventually arriving beneath the "Prince of Qin's Heir's Exclusive Viewing Platform."

Once the car came to a stop, Zhao Si finally let out a long breath of relief.

However, the moment he stepped down from the vehicle, a serious test awaited him.

The Governor of Shaanxi, Lian Guoshi, was already approaching from afar, waving cheerfully.

"Your Royal Highness," Lian Guoshi called out, "may this humble official share your exclusive spot today?"

Zhao Si's heart skipped a beat. Cold sweat instantly formed on his forehead.

He frantically searched his memory, replaying his training over and over, desperately trying to match the man's face to a name.

Beside him, Zhu Cunji was equally nervous.

Finally, inspiration struck.

"Ah, Governor Lian," Zhao Si said, instinctively about to respond politely.

But halfway through the motion, he suddenly remembered the heir's habitual disdain for civil officials. His expression changed at once. His tone became sharp and mocking.

"Governor Lian," he sneered, "you civil officials wield boundless influence and connections. You even torment His Majesty until he is at his wits' end. Building your own platform to watch Gaojia News should not be difficult for you, should it?"

A flawless retort.

Zhu Cunji nearly burst out laughing in delight.

"What an outstanding stand-in," he thought. "He really was born to be an actor."

Lian Guoshi showed no sign of anger after being "roasted." He had long since grown accustomed to the heir's temperament. Without even asking permission, he simply lifted his foot and squeezed into the heir's exclusive spot.

Zhao Si huffed theatrically.

"Hey. Move over. Do not sit so close to this heir. I do not like you."

Despite the performance, the two still ended up sitting shoulder to shoulder.

Lian Guoshi glanced toward the "martial artist" seated on the other side and asked curiously, "And who might this be?"

Zhao Si snorted.

"This is my highly paid guard. In the martial world, he is known as... known as... eh, what was your name again?"

Zhu Cunji quickly lowered his voice.

"Wanderer of the Four Seas, Zhu Piaoling."

Lian Guoshi was utterly baffled.

What kind of name was that? What kind of ridiculous moniker? It sounded extremely pretentious, yet at the same time incredibly silly.

Zhao Si smiled smugly.

"With Knight Zhu here to protect me, I can freely indulge in the finest food and drink and live my days in absolute comfort."

Lian Guoshi simply dismissed him as a madman. There was no point in taking him seriously.

At that moment, the screen flickered.

Gaojia News began.

These past few days, Gaojia News had mainly been broadcasting reports from Luoyang. Gao Yiye appeared on the screen, her smile carrying a faint trace of melancholy.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, with supreme divine power, has resolved the locust plague in Luoyang. The people of Luoyang have painted a 'Locust Eradication Scroll' in gratitude to Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The camera zoomed in, displaying the painting that Gao Yiye had purchased from the impoverished scholar in Luoyang.

Gao Yiye continued with a gentle smile.

"Episode Thirteen of The Legend of Dao Xuan Tianzun: Exterminator of Demons will detail the events that took place in Luoyang. Please look forward to it."

Zhu Cunji gasped softly.

"Ah... I truly want to go see Luoyang."

Lian Guoshi turned his head, confused.

"?"

Realizing his slip, Zhu Cunji immediately clamped his mouth shut.

Yet once obsession takes root, it is not easily shaken.

Though he remained silent, his thoughts surged uncontrollably.

On the screen, scenes from Luoyang continued to play. Factories were rising rapidly on the outskirts of the city. Construction teams made up of Luoyang's own people worked with fiery enthusiasm as they laid railway tracks across the land.

"Not enough iron," a Blue Hat exclaimed.

At once, a colossal golden hand appeared in the sky. Dao Xuan Tianzun descended from above, holding a massive pile of iron spheres, slowly lowering them toward the ground.

The workers below erupted in thunderous cheers.

"Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

The scene shifted again, cutting to a coal mine under the patronage of the Prince of Fu. Crowds of workers bustled at the mine entrance, hauling out dark, gleaming ore. Every face was filled with joy.

The camera moved once more, showing merchant ships from Gao Family Village sailing down the Yellow River, their holds loaded with handcrafted goods. On both banks, the grand and magnificent canyons of the Yellow River stretched endlessly, forming a breathtaking panorama.

Zhu Cunji could endure no longer.

He suddenly stood up, cupped his fists toward Zhao Si, and spoke solemnly.

"Your Royal Highness, I must resign. I can no longer serve as your guard. I am going to become a Wanderer of the Four Seas. Though mountains may not meet, waters always flow. We shall meet again."

With that, Zhu Cunji turned and strode down from the viewing platform.

The guards, unaware that he was the real Zhu Cunji, made no move to stop him.

Only his sworn bodyguards quietly followed after him, disappearing into the crowd.

From above, Li Daoxuan watched the entire scene unfold.

A faint smile curved at the corner of his lips.

Chapter 928: I'm So Scared

The railway connecting Xi'an to Hanzhong Prefecture was officially named the West Han Railway.

This project had been initiated by Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's heir. He had gathered several imperial relatives to pool their money together and fund its construction.

Only after the West Yan Railway was completed did work finally begin on this one. Even now, construction had only been underway for a few short days.

It was the peak of summer.

The sun burned mercilessly overhead, and the heat pressed down like a heavy lid.

The workers labored beneath it, their clothes soaked through with sweat from dawn to dusk.

But for a daily wage of three catties of flour, no one dared to complain. They endured the blazing heat and worked without pause, afraid to stop even for a moment.

The people of the Celestial Empire were famously hardworking. As long as the pay was fair, they were willing to grind themselves down to the bone. Holidays were unheard of. Rest days did not exist. The idea of balancing work and leisure was completely alien to them.

As long as they were paid properly, they would work until their employer went bankrupt.

In the midst of this feverish activity, a white-hatted overseer appeared along the railway line.

He had a pale, beardless face and a shrill, high-pitched voice. Anyone with a bit of experience could tell at a glance that he was a eunuch.

He shouted until his throat was hoarse. "No slacking off! Hey, you lot, your hands are slowing down! Damn it, all of you know nothing but how to slack off! Looks like I'll have to dock your wages."

The workers immediately exploded in protest.

"Eunuch Zhang, we're clearly working hard. How is that slacking off?"

"You're just looking for excuses to deduct our pay!"

Eunuch Zhang snorted coldly. "Excuses? Could what I saw with my own eyes be wrong? You, you, you, and you. All of you stopped working just now to slack off."

"We only took a sip of water and went straight back to work. That counts as slacking off now?"

"If I say it's slacking off, then it's slacking off," Eunuch Zhang snapped.

The worksite fell silent.

Every face was filled with indignation, but no one dared to speak further.

This Eunuch Zhang was the trusted attendant of Prince Rui, Zhu Changhao.

Prince Rui Zhu Changhao was the fifth son of Emperor Shenzong Zhu Yijun and the half-brother of Emperor Guangzong Zhu Changluo. His status was lofty, and his fiefdom lay in Hanzhong Prefecture of Shaanxi.

The two largest investors behind the West Han Railway were Prince of Qin Zhu Cunji and Prince Rui Zhu Changhao.

Zhu Changhao was not particularly fond of women, but he loved money with obsessive passion. He had spent his entire life scheming ways to make more of it. When he heard Zhu Cunji claim that building railways could be profitable, he immediately bought himself a share.

Not only that, he even sent his most trusted eunuch, Eunuch Zhang, to oversee the construction personally.

From a shareholder's perspective, this was perfectly reasonable. Zhu Cunji had no grounds to refuse.

And so Eunuch Zhang prowled along the railway day after day, behaving like a tyrant.

One of the workers finally couldn't hold back anymore.

"Eunuch Zhang, at least be reasonable. We're working ourselves to death here, not daring to slack off for even a breath. We're working harder than if we were building our own homes, yet you deduct our wages at the slightest excuse. Are you planning to pocket the money yourself?"

Eunuch Zhang flew into a rage.

"How dare you say such things!" he screeched. "Nonsense! Fired! You're fired!"

The worker was so frightened his face turned pale, and the others fell silent, too scared to speak.

Just then, a cold snort came from the tall grass beside the construction site.

"Oh my, such imposing official authority. An insignificant eunuch with a little power, already acting so unbearable."

Eunuch Zhang roared, "Who said that? Who's being sarcastic? I'll fire you!"

A figure flickered in the grass, and a strange person stepped out.

He wore martial attire, a massive conical hat on his head, and a black veil draped down from it, completely hiding his face.

Standing at the edge of the grass, he spoke lazily, "I'm not a worker here, so you can't fire me. Since that's the case, why should I be afraid of you?"

Eunuch Zhang snorted. "So it's just some wandering pugilist. You'd better find somewhere cool to rest and stop meddling in other people's business. Don't provoke someone you can't afford to offend."

The hat-wearing figure giggled. "Oh, I'm so scared. Someone I can't afford to offend? Heheheh. How many people under heaven are there that I can't afford to offend? Heheheh."

Eunuch Zhang sneered. "Listen to you. Can't even laugh properly. Wandering martial artists really are contemptible and utterly classless."

The hat-clad figure bristled. "You dare say that about me, I..."

He coughed sharply and forced himself to stop.

Remembering that he absolutely could not reveal his true identity, he swallowed the urge to shout his name to the heavens.

Instead, he snorted. "Even if I'm classless, I'm still better than someone who skims a few miserable coins from hardworking laborers. If I hadn't seen this with my own eyes, fine. But since I have, I won't ignore it."

Eunuch Zhang laughed coldly. "And who do you think you are? What right do you have to interfere?"

The hat-clad figure struck a dramatic pose. "In the martial world, I am known as the Wandering Hero of the Four Seas, Zhu Piaoling."

Eunuch Zhang barked, "Idiot! Guards! Beat this lunatic with sticks and drive him far away!"

At his shout, a group of men leaped out from nearby.

These were local ruffians and idlers hired by Prince Rui's mansion in Hanzhong Prefecture. Their job was to "maintain order" at the construction site.

Naturally, thugs had to look the part. Cracking their knuckles and swinging their arms, they gripped their clubs and advanced menacingly.

The hat-clad figure snorted. "So you plan to bully people with power, is that it?"

Eunuch Zhang sneered. "Yes, we're bullying you. What are you going to do about it?"

The hat-clad figure shouted just like Eunuch Zhang had earlier. "Guards! Beat this bullying lackey senseless with sticks!"

Eunuch Zhang laughed. "You think you can summon people just by shouting..."

Before he could finish, a large group of figures burst out from the tall grass behind the hat-clad figure.

These were no common ruffians.

They were the Prince of Qin's elite retainers.

The Prince of Qin's heir loved to play pranks, but his retainers were anything but amusing. They had been raised by the Prince of Qin's mansion since childhood, prepared to give their lives for him at any moment. They were his most trusted enforcers.

The instant they appeared, their presence completely crushed the ruffians from Prince Rui's side. Each step they took radiated a murderous pressure that made the thugs tremble uncontrollably.

The ruffians immediately realized that something was very wrong.

Eunuch Zhang felt it too.

"What are you waiting for? Attack!" the hat-clad figure commanded.

The retainers surged forward in an instant.

What followed was the dull thud of fists hitting flesh, miserable cries of pain and terror, frantic begging for mercy, and loud cheers from the nearby workers.

In just a short while, every one of Prince Rui's men lay sprawled on the ground, Eunuch Zhang included.

The hat-clad figure clapped his hands and laughed heartily, raising his head toward the sky. "How delightful. The outside world really is delightful."

Eunuch Zhang lay there, his whole body aching, yet his mouth remained defiant.

"Just you wait... just you wait... Prince Rui's mansion won't let this go. The Prince is not someone you can afford to provoke."

The hat-clad figure burst into laughter. "Oh, I'm so scared. I'm absolutely terrified, hahahaha!"

With that, he turned and walked away, his elite retainers silently following behind him.

After they had gone some distance, the hat-clad figure extended his hand. "The Four Treasures of the Study."

One of the retainers immediately presented them.

The hat-clad figure swiftly wrote a letter addressed to Prince Rui.

"Deliver this to Prince Rui's mansion," he said.

The retainer bowed and departed at once.

Several days later, Eunuch Zhang was summoned back to Prince Rui Zhu Changhao's residence, where he received fifty lashes. Every copper he had skimmed from the workers was returned at double the amount.

Chapter 929: The Legendary Sun

The sky above Gao Family Village was clear.

Ultimately, Dao Xuan Tianzun's most cherished place remained Gao Family Village itself.

As summer arrived, the villagers of Gao Family Village enjoyed a great privilege, one that no other place could experience.

Ice!

Dao Xuan Tianzun bestowed a colossal block of ice from the heavens, placing it directly on the open ground in front of the village fortress. The people of Gao Family Village happily gathered around the massive ice block, discussing how best to savor this wonderful gift.

Gao Laba approached with a meticulously clean small mining pick. With a resounding clang, he chipped off a piece of ice. His son, Gao Shan, immediately brought over a basin of flat Happy Fat Water.

Gao Laba placed the ice chunk into the Happy Fat Water, and then, father and son gleefully shared it, sip by sip.

"That's a rather uninspired way to eat it," a mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzun emerged from the side. "Yiye, let me show you a truly refreshing method. First, figure out how to shave the ice into a fine slush, then mix it with fruit..."

Gao Yiye tilted her head. "Slush? How can we make ice into slush?"

"Shave it!" Li Daoxuan laughed. "Right now, you can only use ordinary tools. But if you dare to imagine and experiment, specialized ice-shaving tools will eventually be invented."

Gao Yiye hesitated. "But to invent a specialized tool just for a snack, wouldn't that be a bit..."

Li Daoxuan burst into laughter. "Technological innovation isn't just for weapons. Applying it to food is incredibly important too. Our primary challenge right now is the contradiction between the people's ever-growing material and cultural needs and our currently underdeveloped productivity. Therefore, striving to invent things that can elevate these material and cultural needs is also crucial, wouldn't you agree?"

Everyone nearby chuckled. "If Dao Xuan Tianzun says so, it must be true! Someone go ask Mister Song Yingxing if he can invent a machine to shave ice into slush."

Song Yingxing, who was actually on the other side of the ice block, poked his head out when he heard this. "Of course! I've already thought of several methods just now."

The crowd's laughter grew even merrier. "Quick, have Li Da get to work and forge those tools!"

Just then, a scholar dressed in a literati's robe hurried over from a distance. It was Shi Kefa. His gaze was frantically searching through the crowd, and when he spotted Dao Xuan Tianzun, his eyes instantly brightened.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is here! Excellent! I was truly worried you might have gone off to explore other places, and I dared not trouble the Saintess by having her ring the bell for such a minor matter. I was utterly conflicted."

Li Daoxuan asked, intrigued, "Oh? What matter brings you to me?"

Shi Kefa pulled a document from his robes, his face a picture of embarrassment. "An appointment decree has arrived from the Ministry of Personnel. It promotes this humble official to Right Vice Commissioner, tasked with guarding Anqing, Chizhou, and other areas, and supervising the Jiangbei army."

Li Daoxuan was utterly bewildered.

Without a modern map, Li Daoxuan honestly had no idea where Anqing and Chizhou were located. His mind was a complete blank.

To avoid ridicule, he quickly cut the connection, returned outside the box, and swiftly consulted his phone. He discovered that Anqing and Chizhou were situated along the Yangtze River, south of Hefei, quite close to Nanjing.

In later generations, this territory would fall under Anhui Province's jurisdiction, but during the Ming Dynasty, it was directly administered by Nanjing.

Once he understood the location, Li Daoxuan quickly reconnected.

"Transferred so far?" Li Daoxuan questioned.

Shi Kefa sighed. "Indeed, it's quite a distant transfer. Once this humble official takes up the post, it will be difficult to return to Gao Family Village for further learning. I truly don't know what to do."

At this, Shi Kefa seemed a little dispirited. "This humble official doesn't wish to go, and I'm quite torn, so I wanted to ask for Dao Xuan Tianzun's guidance."

"Go, of course you must go," Li Daoxuan declared without a moment's hesitation. "Such an important position! If you don't take it and a corrupt official does instead, wouldn't the common folk of Anqing and Chizhou Prefectures be plunged into utter misfortune?"

Hearing this, Shi Kefa's spirits lifted. "That's true. Although this humble official is untalented, I am certainly better than a corrupt official. At the very least, I wouldn't oppress the good people. I can strive to ensure peace and tranquility for the residents of Anqing and Chizhou."

As he spoke, he sighed again. "Anqing and Chizhou are simply too far from here. Gao Family Village's advanced machinery cannot be utilized in Anqing."

That was undeniably true.

Gao Family Village was indeed a thousand li from Anqing, separated by the expanse of Henan Province. Henan, currently overrun by bandits, made it impossible for merchant caravans to pass safely, meaning supplies absolutely could not get through.

Hmm? Wait a moment.

Li Daoxuan suddenly remembered that Anqing and Chizhou both bordered the Yangtze River.

In ancient times, cities situated along the Yangtze or Yellow Rivers inherently possessed formidable transportation capabilities.

If he were to dispatch cargo ships, they could sail from the Yellow River's mouth into the sea, then along the coastline to the Yangtze estuary, and finally upstream on the Yangtze to reach Anqing and Chizhou, bypassing the perilous Henan.

Li Daoxuan told Shi Kefa, "Please wait here for a moment. I'll go back and conduct some research."

When he said "go back," to Shi Kefa's ears it meant "return to the heavens." He thought to himself that Dao Xuan Tianzun was going back to the heavens to retrieve some divine artifact. How incredible.

Li Daoxuan, with a swift movement, reappeared outside the box. He pulled out his phone.

"Hello, is this Cai Xinzhi?"

A girl's voice answered from the other end of the line. "Daddy's getting scolded by Mommy, Uncle. Please wait a moment."

Li Daoxuan was speechless.

Right. Cai Xinzhi had long since married and had children after striking it rich with Li Daoxuan in the micro-sculpture business. His kids were already old enough to answer the phone for their dad.

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Cai An'yi, what did your dad do to get scolded by your mom?"

The girl on the phone giggled. "This morning when he left, Mommy told Daddy to buy seven or eight potatoes on his way back. Daddy came straight home after work and forgot the potatoes, so he's getting scolded."

Li Daoxuan roared with laughter.

After a moment, Cai Xinzhi's voice came through on the line. "Well, old brother, what brings you to call today? Just now, my wife was disobedient, so I taught her a lesson. My hand still aches from it. She knelt and begged for mercy, and only then did I let her off..."

Li Daoxuan hummed. "Understood, understood. You're truly the master of your household, aren't you?"

Cai Xinzhi puffed out his chest proudly. "Isn't that obvious? I walk around the house like I own the place."

Li Daoxuan retorted, "And when exactly are you planning to go buy those forgotten potatoes? I know. You're currently jogging to the supermarket to get them, not at home at all, which is why you dare to speak with such bravado."

Cai Xinzhi fell silent.

He had been found out. The conversation could not possibly continue.

Cai Xinzhi quickly changed the subject. "Is there anything you needed from me?"

Li Daoxuan asked, "I wanted to know if there's a type of ship that can sail from the Yellow River, out into the ocean, and then from the ocean into the Yangtze River?"

Cai Xinzhi laughed. "Of course there is! A river-sea vessel, the famous Legendary Sun. You mean you've never heard of it? It's 239 meters long and 36.6 meters wide. It has the shallowest design draft among global LNG carriers of its class, with a unique draft of less than 8.5 meters, allowing it to navigate both rivers and seas with excellent seaworthiness."

Li Daoxuan exclaimed, "What? Two hundred thirty-nine meters long? With an eight point five meter draft? That's far too massive! It wouldn't be able to navigate the Yellow River, would it? Are there any smaller ones? Medium or small river-sea vessels?"

Cai Xinzhi chuckled. "Of course there are! All the models you request are one to two hundred scale. Even a Legendary Sun class ship would be over a meter long as a model, too big! It would take up too much

space at home. I also think you should go for a medium-sized vessel. Something around seventy meters long, with a draft as shallow as two to four meters. I'll make it for you as a one to two hundred scale model, about thirty-some centimeters long, and it'll still need motors, solar charging, and internal controls for driving, right?"

"Exactly!" Li Daoxuan affirmed.

Cai Xinzhi declared, "Minor issue. I guarantee I'll fast-track everything you need and deliver it to you within a week."

Chapter 930: Don't Stare at Me

Cai Xinzhi immediately threw himself into the design and construction work.

Before long, he completed a scale model of a river-sea vessel. The original ship was meant to be seventy meters long; even after being reduced at a 200:1 ratio, the model still measured several dozen centimeters in length.

At this scale, integrating mechanical systems was remarkably convenient.

Miniature electric motors were installed inside the hull, along with several compact rechargeable batteries. Solar panels were mounted neatly along the deck, ensuring that whenever sunlight struck the surface, energy would be fed directly into the batteries below.

A week later, a delivery truck stopped outside Li Daoxuan's villa and handed over the massive half-meter-long ship model.

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Shi Kefa, carrying his imperial appointment documents and accompanied by a group of loyal retainers, stepped out through the gates of Thirty-Two Middle School, his luggage already prepared.

He paused, turned around, and bowed deeply toward the school.

What he had gained here was not merely knowledge, but experience—practical, applicable, and invaluable for governance. It filled him with confidence. He was certain he could put it to use in his new post, guarding Anqing Prefecture and Chizhou Prefecture.

He had taken barely two steps when he noticed Gao Yiye waiting nearby, with Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatar standing calmly at her side.

Shi Kefa's spirits lifted at once. He hurried forward and cupped his fists in a deep bow.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, Esteemed Saintess," he said solemnly. "This humble official is ready to depart."

Li Daoxuan nodded lightly. "Mm. Do not attempt to cross Henan on your own—it is far too dangerous. Take the train first. At Hedong Circuit, transfer to a solar bus to Xiaolangdi. You will meet Bai Yuan there. I have already arranged a vessel to take you onward to Anqing Prefecture."

Shi Kefa bowed again. "Many thanks for Dao Xuan Tianzun's gracious consideration."

Li Daoxuan waved his hand. "Go. Govern well, and bring peace and prosperity to the people."

With another deep bow, Shi Kefa departed, confidence filling his chest.

—

The route he was to take was the Xihe Railway.

This ultra-long-distance line connecting Xi'an to Hedong City ran only once per day. Miss it, and there would be no second chance.

Arriving precisely on time, Shi Kefa purchased a first-class ticket.

First-class seats were prohibitively expensive. Though he was not poor, he could only justify buying one ticket—for himself alone. His household guards were sent to the standard carriage behind.

It was much like a modern small business owner on a work trip: flying business class personally while booking economy seats for their assistant.

He had money—but not the kind one squandered casually.

The moment he stepped into the first-class carriage, however, a sense of unease crept over him.

Inside sat a mysterious martial artist.

The man wore heroic robes similar in style to Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatar, yet his build was noticeably heavier, his figure broad and stout rather than slender. Clearly, he was not the deity himself.

Moreover, the man wore a wide-brimmed straw hat and covered his face with a black cloth, giving him an unmistakably suspicious air.

But that wasn't even the most outrageous part.

What truly shocked Shi Kefa was that this martial artist was accompanied by a large number of bodyguards—so many that they occupied more than half of the first-class carriage.

Shi Kefa couldn't help letting out a soft exclamation.

Extraordinary, he thought. I am an imperial official, and I can't even afford first-class tickets for my own guards. Yet this wandering martial artist has filled an entire carriage with attendants. What background does he have? A mining magnate's son?

He stared.

The martial artist immediately noticed—and visibly panicked.

Turning toward Shi Kefa, he demanded in a hoarse, deliberately lowered voice, "Why are you staring at me? Hey—why are you staring? Is there something wrong with me?"

The tremor in his tone betrayed him completely—the instinctive fear of someone who had something to hide.

Shi Kefa had once served as Judicial Commissioner of Xi'an. He specialized in criminal law. He needed only a single sentence to judge.

This man was trouble.

Deep trouble.

"Ahem!"

Shi Kefa cleared his throat sharply, then raised his voice. "This official can tell at a glance that you are engaged in illicit affairs. Such audacity! This place lies under Dao Xuan Tianzun's protection. Speak—what crimes have you committed?"

The martial artist nearly jumped out of his seat.

"I haven't! I did not!" he shouted. "Do not slander me!"

Shi Kefa stepped forward.

The martial artist, reclining comfortably moments before, leaned back in panic, nearly toppling over. Only the seatback saved him.

All of his guards rose in unison, alert and tense.

Shi Kefa felt no fear whatsoever.

Within Dao Xuan Tianzun's domain, reason outweighed brute force. No one dared to act recklessly here.

Why should I fear a mere carriage of thugs?

He took another heavy step forward—thump—his footfall ringing out.

"To encounter me, Shi Kefa," he declared coldly, "is your grave misfortune. Confess truthfully, and your punishment may yet be reduced. Persist in deception, and you will face severe consequences."

"I didn't do anything!" the martial artist roared.

"Then why are you so guilty?" Shi Kefa pressed.

"I'm not guilty at all!" the man shouted, sweat soaking his face covering.

"You are absolutely guilty."

The martial artist's breathing grew ragged. "I—I am not! You have no evidence! These are baseless accusations! In Dao Xuan Tianzun's domain, slander is also a crime. I—I'm not afraid of you!"

That point struck home.

Shi Kefa had suspicion—but no proof.

In territories governed by the Great Ming Code, the principle was often guilty until proven innocent. But within Dao Xuan Tianzun's domain, the law was reversed.

After a few seconds, Shi Kefa snorted. "Very well. This official lacks evidence for now. I will not apprehend you. However—throughout this journey, I will be watching you closely. Should you harbor any ill intent, abandon it immediately."

The martial artist exploded in frustration. "Stop staring at me! Look outside—the scenery is beautiful! Why do you keep watching me?"

"This official will, of course, admire the scenery," Shi Kefa replied calmly. "But suspects must also be observed. One must handle both matters diligently."

"You're misusing Dao Xuan Tianzun's teachings!" the martial artist groaned.

He wanted to curse aloud—but he endured. More importantly, he restrained his subordinates.

Any conflict would only draw attention and risk exposing his identity.

Discretion is the path to power, he reminded himself.

Though he was merely a princely heir for now, he was destined to inherit the throne. There was no harm in beginning his lessons in patience early.

He forcibly swallowed his frustration.

Shi Kefa opened a treatise on governance and began to read.

Yet every so often, his eyes would lift—

Watching.

Always watching.

With a deep roar, the great train finally lurched into motion.

Leaving Gao Family Village behind, it sped toward Hedong Circuit.

To Shi Kefa's astonishment, the instant the train began moving, the martial artist's demeanor transformed completely.

Like an excited child, he pressed himself against the window.

"So beautiful!" he exclaimed. "Look at those mountains! That water—so green! Wow, that tree grew in such a strange shape!"