

Great Ming 151

Chapter 151

Li Daoxuan's dinner that day was a dish of dried pot chicken gizzards, costing 68 yuan.

Since he had earned some money through Micro-sculpting and creating videos, his takeout choices had greatly improved, upgrading from the previous set meals to hearty dishes.

While eating the chicken gizzards, he watched Cheng Xu train the militia, which was quite entertaining.

A hundred small figures were spaced two meters apart horizontally and vertically, arranged in a large square formation.

Cheng Xu shouted loudly, "Strike!"

The hundred small figures simultaneously punched forward, shouting "Hah!" with one voice.

Cheng Xu said, "Kick!"

The small figures stepped forward together, shouting "Hah!" as they kicked their legs very high.

Cheng Xu felt quite satisfied; this troop was really well-trained.

Heh, much more spirited than the bunch of cowardly soldiers he had commanded before.

Those poor troops back then would slack off whenever ordered to train, complaining they hadn't received their military pay, had no money for food, and no energy to train.

But the militia of Gaojia Village, they all ate well and earned high wages.

Once orders were given, they carried them out with full enthusiasm, never slacking off at all during training.

Leading such a group, if he encountered Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi again, hmph, he wouldn't have to consider the grandmother issue; he could just charge straight through them.

Just as he was thinking that, a crowd escorting Ground Rabbit came walking up before him.

Ground Rabbit, upon seeing Cheng Xu, shrank back like a mouse spotting a cat, but he quickly pulled himself together and said loudly, "Instructor He, I... I'm here to join up."

Cheng Xu responded irritably, "Join up? Wrong term again. You can scam."

Ground Rabbit grew very anxious and quickly corrected himself, "I was wrong, I was wrong, Instructor He. Give me a chance. I sincerely want to join the militia."

Cheng Xu rolled his eyes, "Here to play with the Celestial Rabbit Sword again?"

"No!" Ground Rabbit said firmly, "You said it wrong. It's the Celestial Rabbit Sword."

Cheng Xu, "..."

A vein began to bulge on Cheng Xu's forehead.

His just-happy mood had been stomped on and ground into the dirt by Ground Rabbit.

Cheng Xu clenched his fist, "If you don't scam, I'll beat you so you can't get out of bed for three days."

Ground Rabbit flinched in fear, "No! No no! I came this time with real sincerity. Look at these short-term workers behind me; they are the most honest and reliable from Short-term Workers Village, here to guarantee for me."

The group behind him spoke in unison, "Instructor He, although Mr. Rabbit is a bit... cough... he really is a good person."

Cheng Xu glanced at the short-term workers, then turned to gaze at Ground Rabbit.

Their eyes met in the space between them.

Ground Rabbit thudded to the ground prostrate, "Master, please take me in. I sincerely want to learn martial arts and make a mark for myself."

Cheng Xu let out a long sigh, "Fine, get up. Stand at the back of the formation and train with everyone else."

Ground Rabbit looked up, overjoyed, "Thank you, master! I've joined up! I've finally joined up! Hahaha! I've joined up!"

Cheng Xu glared in anger, "Call me instructor, not master. And don't say 'joined up'; where did you pick up that underworld slang?"

Li Daoxuan thought to himself with inner amusement: How entertaining. This rabbit's troublesome nature might be worse than Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu's. Although those two are foolish, they are fairly obedient. This rabbit is super defiant; he could see Cheng Xu would frequently have veins bulging on his head.

At that moment, to the northeast on the Cement Road, a group suddenly appeared.

At its head was a tall horse, followed by thirty or forty men carrying shoulder poles; Xing Honglang had returned.

The villagers of Gaojia Village immediately cheered loudly, "The brave woman is here! Quick, quick, bring out the valuable goods we don't need from home!"

Gao Chuwu, rushing with pride, exclaimed, "Ah! Ah! Miss Xing has come!"

Cheng Xu was about to scold Gao Chuwu for being distracted, when he suddenly thought, "It seems the Deity likes gossip too. Last time when Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang were fighting, the Deity personally issued a divine decree to intervene."

All right, the Deity was the greatest; training was just a small matter.

Cheng Xu shouted loudly, "Dismiss! Take a break for half an hour and then continue training."

As soon as this dismissal was called, Gao Chuwu darted toward Xing Honglang.

Ground Rabbit said, "Huh? I just arrived. I haven't even started learning boxing yet. How can it be over? Teach me two moves before dismissing, just two moves."

No one paid him any attention; he was pitiful.

Li Daoxuan secretly praised Cheng Xu; this dismissal was well done, Chapter Three of Gao Chuwu's love story could finally be updated.

He saw Gao Chuwu running swiftly to Xing Honglang and grinning widely, "Miss Xing, you're here again. I miss you so much."

Xing Honglang had a headache the moment she saw him, the kind that really hurt. She rolled her eyes, "I'm in a bad mood. No time for you. Go play somewhere else."

Gao Chuwu said, "That doesn't matter. As long as I care about you, that's fine."

Everyone: "..."

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but gasp. "Could he be a genius in love? Did we mistake him for a fool? If I had been as brave as him, the girl I secretly loved in high school wouldn't have lost contact after graduation. Until now, I haven't said more than a few words to her."

"My youth, throbbing with pain!"

Gao Chuwu said, "Miss Xing, I have another big piece of chocolate. I want to challenge you again, just like last time. If you win, you pay me. If I win, I'll give you this chocolate."

Xing Honglang rolled her eyes, "With your skills?"

Gao Chuwu said, "Last time I lost, but recently I've been training hard in boxing and gotten much better. Third Lady said this is called 'now not... not... yesterday... compare.'"

The onlookers thought, "Although we are illiterates, we still feel this phrase isn't quite right."

Xing Honglang angrily said, "It's 'cannot compare to the past.' What the hell did you say?"

Gao Chuwu grinned widely, "That doesn't matter. Let's compete again."

The onlooking villagers started clamoring again, "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

With their monotonous lifestyle, these villagers rarely had such an amusement to watch, so naturally, they all turned into joy-seekers, not minding if things got bigger; they clamored wildly.

A slight furrow twitched between Xing Honglang's brows.

A subordinate walked up from behind her and whispered softly, "Boss, you can't fight. Your hand..."

Xing Honglang snorted and shoved the subordinate aside. Then, turning to face Gao Chuwu, she said, "Fine! Let's fight then! Today I'll beat this scoundrel into submission so you won't keep haunting me constantly."

Gao Chuwu grinned, "Today, this chocolate is definitely mine to give."

Xing Honglang also grinned, "Today, I'm definitely paying money."

The crowd burst apart with a roar, clearing a huge space.

The leadership of Gaojia Village—Gao Yiye, Thirty-Two, Cheng Xu, Tan Liwen, Mr. Wang, Madam Bai, Young Master Bai, and others—sat down together in the front row, sitting in a line, eating fruits, initiating the big-show-watching mode.

The excitement on New Year's Eve wasn't as much as today's.

Li Daoxuan saw the scene was so lively and thought to himself, "Is everyone this fond of gossip?"

"Oh no!"

He had overlooked something—entertainment industry. So far, Gaojia Village had no entertainment industry. Everyone had nothing to do during their leisure time, so they became enthusiastic about gossip.

In Civilization V, towns without an entertainment industry would suffer from insufficient "happiness," leading to decreased productivity, or even riots, causing productivity to halt completely.

Chapter 152: Were You Injured?

Li Daoxuan's thoughts drifted to the entertainment industry, but the martial arts competition in the arena was about to begin, excluding any marriage aspect.

Xing Honglang's right hand unobtrusively drooped down and moved slightly behind her back, while only her left hand was raised flat in front of her.

Gao Chuwu had now also learned the basic stance of Hong Fist. Upon seeing Xing Honglang's action, he couldn't tell which form it was, feeling quite strange in his heart: Was there such an opening stance in Hong Fist? Instructor He hadn't taught him that! Could it be that her Jin Hong Fist differed greatly from the Guanzhong Hong Fist he learned, and there was no such move in Guanzhong Hong Fist?

"It was starting!"

Knowing that Gao Chuwu wouldn't strike first, Xing Honglang took the initiative herself. She took a large step forward, swung her left fist, and aimed straight for Gao Chuwu's face.

She had already planned her strategy in her heart. She prepared several follow-up moves, waiting for that silly fellow to block her fist so she could unleash a combo and quickly knock him down.

However, Gao Chuwu was indeed different from before. When Xing Honglang's fist came, he didn't block it clumsily like last time but spun his body, not only dodging the punch but also counterattacking with a punch of his own.

Xing Honglang was startled in her heart: Hong Fist! Although that silly fellow's movement wasn't very standard yet, it was undoubtedly Hong Fist.

She blocked with her left hand, bang bang, blocking two punches from Gao Chuwu in succession.

The opponent had such great strength that she felt her arm almost going numb. She was secretly alarmed in her heart: This is bad, I can't beat him relying only on my left hand.

Distraction was most taboo in battle. If she hadn't thought about it, she might have been able to block a few more moves, but once distracted, her reaction slowed. Gao Chuwu "whooshed" as he swung a punch towards Xing Honglang's shoulder. Xing Honglang, in the midst of her haste, raised her left forearm to block it.

"Thud!"

The punch landed hard on her left forearm, causing a sharp pain. Xing Honglang stepped backward several paces, stumbled under her feet, and actually fell backward. Gao Chuwu “whooshed” as he pursued her, pounced on her to the ground, and pinned her down tightly.

Once pinned like that, she couldn’t turn over at all.

Although she was also a very tall and strong woman, she was still a step behind compared to Gao Chuwu’s massive, stubborn strength. She struggled several times but failed to break free. She accidentally bumped her right hand, and the pain nearly made her grunt aloud.

She sighed helplessly: “I surrender!”

“Wow! Gao Chuwu won!” The villagers were overjoyed.

“He won!”

“Gao Chuwu defeated the opponent woman.”

The villagers cheered together heartily.

But a salt smuggler from Xing Honglang’s side shouted loudly: “This doesn’t count, this doesn’t count, boss...”

“Shut up!” Xing Honglang interrupted her subordinate: “Don’t say any unnecessary nonsense.”

Gao Chuwu was as happy as a two-hundred-pound child: “Haha, I won, I can give you the chocolate. This time I can’t accept your money, ha ha.”

Xing Honglang silently clenched her left fist.

The salt smuggler also lowered his head in grievance.

Li Daoxuan felt that something was wrong.

The atmosphere wasn't right at all!

It didn't resemble the joyful reaction after the last fight. The salt smugglers all looked strange, so there must have been a problem with this competition.

He was about to intervene and ask the reason when Cheng Xu suddenly stood up and shouted loudly: "This battle doesn't count!"

"Bang!"

Everyone turned to look at Cheng Xu in unison.

Xing Honglang also abruptly turned to look.

Gao Chuwu cried out, "Ah? Instructor He, why doesn't it count?"

Cheng Xu strode into the center of the field and said to Xing Honglang, "Your right hand is injured."

Only then did the crowd suddenly snap to attention, remembering: throughout this entire duel, Xing Honglang had kept her right hand behind her back, using only her left hand to face her opponent.

Gao Chuwu's face changed dramatically. "What happened? Is your hand injured?"

Xing Honglang snorted. "Hmph! Whether I'm hurt or not is my business. It has nothing to do with the duel. A loss is a loss. Out here in this damn world, I never make excuses."

Gao Chuwu stammered, "Ah...? I fought you...! I... I... sob... I have no face to show anyone..."

Gao Chuwu suddenly charged through the crowd, fled from the scene, and vanished out of sight in the blink of an eye.

The crowd fell silent.

Suddenly, the entire “leadership” of Gaojia Village could no longer remain seated. They practically leaped to their feet. Gao Yiye reacted the fastest. Being a woman, it was easier for her to express concern for another woman’s injury. She quickly took Xing Honglang’s hand. “Sister Xing, what injury do you have? I have plenty of divine medicine; it can treat bruises or sword wounds.”

Seeing the matter was already exposed, Xing Honglang didn’t hide it anymore and lowered her voice. “A sword wound. On my upper arm. It’s not convenient to show it here.”

In these times, women couldn’t casually bare their entire arms for others to see. The upper arm especially was almost a forbidden zone.

Hearing this, Gao Yiye whispered, “Come to my room later. I’ll apply some medicine for you. Heavenly medicine heals wounds very fast.”

Xing Honglang nodded. “Hmm!”

Cheng Xu asked, “Miss Xing, you possess such formidable skill, yet were injured? What happened on the road?”

Xing Honglang sighed. “While passing through Heyang County, we encountered a large gang of bandits. They numbered two to three hundred. I only had thirty-eight people. Though we won by overcoming greater numbers, many of us took various wounds.”

“Heyang County?”

Everyone was taken aback. Heyang County was close.

Gaojia Village was located on the very edge of Chengcheng County's territory, perilously close to Heyang County. Zhengjia Village was even closer, practically straddling the border between Chengcheng County and Heyang County. One step east placed you in Heyang County; one step west put you back in Chengcheng County.

Upon hearing that bandits were active in Heyang County, everyone's expressions immediately turned grim.

Especially the villagers from Zhengjia Village.

Zheng Daniu was the first to shout. "Oh no! If there are bandits in Heyang County, our homes are in danger! The autumn wheat is growing splendidly, nearly ready for harvest!"

Li Daoxuan's brow also furrowed slightly.

Zhengjia Village was a full six li of mountain path from Gaojia Village. While he could tap the quick switch button to jump his view over there, he primarily watched Gaojia Village. He couldn't constantly toggle back and forth.

Would the bandits come? No telling. When would they come? No idea. How many would come? Still unknown.

If he glanced away at the wrong moment, the promising wheat fields of Zhengjia Village could be trampled or burned by the bandit army.

It wasn't just about the loss of some grain; it was the heartbreak of precious wheat, painstakingly nurtured during this major drought, being destroyed.

Not only the villagers would mourn; Li Daoxuan couldn't accept it either.

Alright, it was time to employ modern measures to solve this problem.

Li Daoxuan left his house, hailed a taxi, and sped towards the largest chaotic equipment market near his home. This place specialized in all sorts of bizarre flowers, plants, cats, dogs, insects, fish, and the various apparatus needed to raise these peculiar things.

Chapter 153: The Bottomless Fish Tank

Li Daoxuan wandered through the flower and bird market, quickly spotting a store selling fish tanks.

Tanks of all sizes were displayed, crafted quite beautifully.

Li Daoxuan ran his hand over one fish tank. Tsk, quite nice—several millimeters of thick glass, sturdy and secure.

To allow buyers a clear view of the fish inside, the glass, despite its thickness, was crystal clear and nearly invisible. If used for mall doors, a “Caution: Glass” warning sign would be necessary to prevent collisions.

Seeing Li Daoxuan seriously examining the glass, the shop owner immediately understood this wasn't a casual browser; clear purchasing intent was there. He darted out, a smile fixed on his face. “Handsome guy, buying a fish tank? Perfect choice—my tanks are the highest quality in this market!”

Li Daoxuan smiled. “Indeed, I'm quite satisfied.”

The owner was delighted. “Which one would you like?”

Li Daoxuan: “I want... a fish tank without a bottom.”

Pfft! The owner nearly coughed up blood. “What did you say? Bottomless fish tank? That's just four glass panes making a circle! How would it hold water? How could you keep fish without water? Making a fool of me? Impossible! No such thing! Can't do business then.”

Li Daoxuan: “I'm serious. Need twenty! Rush order. Extra 10% commission.”

The owner instantly restored his businesslike smile. “Oh, easy! Melt the adhesive, pop off the bottom. Modified on the spot—guaranteed bottomless every time! Ha ha ha! A tank truly doesn’t need a bottom! You, sir, understand fishkeeping—only a pro like you knows how to raise them properly.”

Working on-site, the owner melted the adhesive beneath each tank’s base and removed it. Beautiful fish tanks transformed into mere glass hoops.

He must have been cursing this idiot internally, yet outwardly remained perfectly composed. Before long, twenty bottomless fish tanks—differing sizes—were delivered.

Big ones dozens of centimeters long, small ones ten centimeters round or rectangular shapes.

Li Daoxuan added a home-delivery fee.

The owner personally drove, becoming a transporter, hauling all twenty tanks upstairs. Before leaving, he shook Li Daoxuan’s hand and whispered conspiratorially: “Handsome guy, when your fish all die next week, and you need new fish and tanks... be sure to come back to me.”

Then he scampered off.

Li Daoxuan returned to his crate. First, he glanced at Gaojia Village: Xing Honglang was already with Gao Yiye at the watchtower. The two girls had shut the doors and windows, smearing “divine medicine” onto Xing Honglang’s wound.

Gao Chuwu was off somewhere wallowing in self-pity.

Meanwhile, other villagers traded goods with the salt smugglers.

Li Daoxuan tapped “Zhengjia Village” outside the crate. The view instantly jumped above Zhengjia Village.

Assessing the farmland layout beyond the village, he mentally divided it into sections. Selecting one perfectly sized bottomless fish tank, he carefully placed it over one plot. Pressing slightly downward caused the glass rim to sink beneath the soil—thwarting any attempted tunnel digs by bandits.

He repeated this, tank by tank.

In no time, six or seven fish tanks were deployed.

Every major and minor farmland patch of Zhengjia Village was now encased within massive bottomless fish tanks. Good. Li Daoxuan clapped his hands contentedly. Mission complete. No longer needing fear random bandit hordes from Heyang County ravaging the crops.

He tapped “Gaojia Village,” his view snapping back. Gao Yiye and Xing Honglang had finished treating the wound. Xing Honglang’s right arm was now wrapped tightly in white bandages—the size suggesting severe injury.

Yet not a trace of pain showed on her face; her bold spirit remained intact, explaining why no one had noticed earlier. Only Cheng Xu, observing her boxing form, caught a hint.

Gao Yiye: “Sister Xing, since you’re hurt, you shouldn’t travel. Stay until your arm heals before leaving.”

Xing Honglang nodded. Losing to Gao Chuwu proved her combat strength had drastically fallen. Charging off injured risked death at some foolish bandit’s hands. She discarded bravado. “Saint Lady’s kindness—I’ll impose upon Gaojia Village awhile longer.”

Gao Yiye smiled. “The Deity promised last time. If Sister Xing returned, we’d arrange a residence. See that northern slope...”

Gaojia Village’s north slope, once barren with dead, bark-stripped trees, had been cleared by labor offenders.

Days earlier, Li Daoxuan had extended a miniature shovel into the crate. A few scrapes formed an expansive, level plot on the north slope. There, he positioned a cluster of hard-plastic structures: the “Gaojia Business Circle.”

One grand mansion was designated for Xing Honglang and her salt smugglers. A marketplace area surrounded by buildings included a brothel, inn, restaurant, teahouse...

Problem: Li Daoxuan instantly remembered plastic houses couldn't handle flames. Restaurants and teahouses were practically unfeasible; villagers would need stone constructions later. For now, the plastic facades were mere decorative illusions.

As for that brothel... cough, cough... forget that part!

Xing Honglang surveyed the hillside's multicolored structures, muttering internally: This unseen Supreme Deity shows bold generosity, extravagant with gifts.

But his taste? Questionable. Why such gaudily bright houses? Flashy, clearly not at all legitimate.

Criticism aside, a free mansion? Not living there would be a fool's choice.

She ushered her crew into the giant plastic mansion.

Opulent, high-class—pavilions, winding corridors, gardens with artificial hills, nothing missing.

Inside the Back Garden grew a gorgeous floral tree. Though Xing Honglang seemed rough, her womanly instincts enjoyed flowers. She reached to pluck a bloom, tugging the branch... yet it wouldn't snap. The blossom remained stubbornly fixed.

What madness was this? The tree felt alien—neither gold, iron, nor wood—just baffling.

That evening, Gao Chuwu came. Stood submissively before the plastic mansion, not daring to knock. For half an hour, he spilled apologies at the plastic doors.

Believing himself unheard, he didn't know salt smugglers remained ever-vigilant. Sentinels hid behind the plastic doors. Already alerted, Xing Honglang stood listening briefly. She snorted, "Boring."

Then she headed off to sleep.

Chapter 154: The Transparent Magical Artifact

The sun had just woken up. When it stretched, some sunlight broke free and spilled into the lower world.

Once the sun arrived, the public sun chariot could be set in motion.

Two newly appointed drivers took their positions. Over twenty villagers from Zhengjia Village boarded the vehicle in turn and began their journey toward the village.

Riding home to farm every morning had become essential for Zhengjia Village's people, but today their hearts were heavy.

The news brought by Xing Honglang was bad; thieves in Heyang County could rush into Zhengjia Village at any moment, ruining their crops...ah...

It was hard-earned progress after the Deity summoned the Dragon King, revitalizing Zhengjia Village. Everyone had tended the wheat fields carefully since planting last autumn. With the "celestial fertilizer" granted by the Deity, this year's wheat grew promisingly. Come harvest, they might achieve an unprecedented bounty.

Why did Heyang County have to see thieves now!

The two new drivers were overly cautious, moving the vehicle slowly. The six li of cement road took the time for most of an incense stick to burn. The villagers jumped off impatiently.

Zheng Daniu's father was the first to run to his field's edge. He was about to step onto the land when a loud "pa" sound echoed through the sky, as if someone had clapped their hands up high.

The villagers startled and lifted their heads. They saw a sheet of paper emerge where the clouds parted, bearing two large characters: “Be careful!”

None of the twenty-something villagers could read. They didn’t understand the giant paper in the sky, but they knew the Deity must have a reason for giving an instruction.

“The Deity issued an edict, but what does it say?” Zheng Daniu’s father shouted. “Everyone stay sharp and alert! Is it those Heyang County thieves coming?”

At this, they all jumped nervously. Movements became cautious instantly, and their eyes sharpened noticeably.

Curiously, with heightened awareness, something felt off at once.

Their fields seemed...tilted?

Yes, the field’s borders looked broken!

Though uncultured and inexperienced, the villagers knew sunlight could refract on water—they grasped the result, not the cause.

Zheng Daniu’s father cried out, “Hey, did anyone notice? A transparent wall is blocking the field front.”

Of course, everyone had spotted it.

This glass wall might escape detection if overlooked, but with the slightest attention, it was visible.

City dwellers might recognize this as “glazed glass,” but Zhengjia’s people did not. They exchanged confused glances. “What is this transparent wall? Why block our farmland?”

“Let’s find an opening to get in.”

The villagers circled the glass wall. After a full lap, they found no way through.

That baffled them even more!

“What on earth is going on?”

“Ah! I get it, haha, I know!” Zheng Daniu’s father suddenly laughed wildly. “This is a magical artifact set down by the Deity. He used it to surround our farmland and keep Heyang County’s thieves out, saving our wheat from destruction.”

Those words lit up their minds. The edict from the Deity just now must have been signaling the deployment of a magical artifact!

Though illiterate, they saw the edict had two characters—weren’t those “magical artifact”?

Armed with this outsider’s perspective, their thoughts flew free. “This magical artifact is transparent. It stops thieves but not sunlight—truly powerful.”

“A magical artifact is a magical artifact! This transparent wall is so thick. A heavy hammer couldn’t smash it.”

“Let them stare at our thriving wheat but starve. How maddening for them, hahaha!”

“Hey, but we can’t get in either. I planned to weed today.”

“This...”

Everyone went blank.

Li Daoxuan deliberately waited without action. Once they discussed it thoroughly and grasped the situation, he began. He reached into a box, gently picked up a bottomless fish tank, and lifted it out.

The villagers only heard a rumbling as the transparent wall suddenly rose into the sky, vanished into the clouds, and disappeared.

Zheng Daniu's father cheered. "I can enter my field now, haha! I get it, I understand! When we come to work, the Deity removes the magical artifact. After we finish and leave, he covers it again."

Li Daoxuan retrieved fish tank after fish tank.

Zhengjia's villagers hurried into their fields, hurriedly completing their tasks, then retreated beyond the fields and bowed respectfully to the sky.

True to their guess, when work was done and they readied to leave, sky-borne transparent magical artifact shells descended again, going "duang duang duang" as they sealed every wheat field in Zhengjia Village.

Zhengjia Village cheered, "The Deity bless us!"

This left the villagers more confident in their farms than ever. Their footsteps lightened as they cheerfully boarded the public sun chariot, happily returning to Gaojia Fortress...

Li Daoxuan also grinned. He tapped the characters "Gaojia Village," and his vision swept back instantly.

That very moment, a fine scene greeted him.

Gao Yiye was dressed formally, standing sternly before the militia.

The hundred-strong militia stood respectfully, feet together, posture bolt upright, each listening intently with serious faces.

Save one exception—Ground Rabbit!

Ground Rabbit mumbled softly, “What’s this? I barely passed the trials to join, yet you won’t teach me boxing. Now you pull me in for class for no reason.”

Gao Yiye glanced at him. “Ground Rabbit, you’re new, right?”

“Yes!” Being singled out, he shed some laziness and straightened hastily. “I enlisted just yesterday.”

He nearly called himself “Mr. Rabbit” by habit but, facing the Saint Lady, dared not be insolent, so he dropped the honorific.

Gao Yiye smiled. “I won’t blame you as a newcomer unaware of rules. But if you stay idle like this again, even if I let it slide, the Deity himself will punish you.”

That shocked Ground Rabbit. “What? Skipping class draws the Deity? Seriously? I thought he was easy on everyone. When Gao Sanwa cut classes, he didn’t get punished. Why am I singled out this harshly?”

Chapter 155: Deity Is Angry

Gao Yiye looked serious: “Gao Sanwa skipped class; that’s just childish immaturity. After the Deity laughed, he would still have Gao San Niang reward him with a serving of bamboo shoots stir-fried with meat. As the Deity put it, that’s called giving him a complete childhood.

But our militia is no place for childish play. Here, no playful attitude is tolerated, especially in my class, which is more critical than what Instructor He teaches. If you don’t listen properly and breach any rule, it will be handled by military law—no mercy!”

Ground Rabbit was startled, but deep inside, there was a tiny sliver of disbelief. How could a minor mistake trigger the Deity himself to descend and punish him? That seemed overly exaggerated. The Deity was a celestial being overseeing countless matters—why bother watching a mere small rabbit like me?

The Saint Lady must be trying to scare me!

Li Daoxuan saw his expression and knew this fellow didn't take it seriously.

This wouldn't do!

Those who possessed power must have superior character.

Otherwise, the dragon-slaying boy becomes an evil dragon.

He lifted the box lid, reached out his hand, and placed it on Ground Rabbit's back.

Gao Yiye saw the Deity's large hand already behind Ground Rabbit and knew this fellow was about to face punishment. She couldn't help but smile: "Ground Rabbit, you've angered the Deity. Prepare for punishment."

Ground Rabbit saw her smile—earlier she had worn a stern face while lecturing, but now she suddenly beamed. He assumed she was joking and brushed it off completely.

Just then, a tremendous force abruptly shoved him from behind.

He couldn't resist it at all; pushed forward by that force, he flailed and landed face-first with a thud—eating dirt.

This wasn't the first time he'd been beaten by the Deity!

Such a beating was an honor only he had experienced in all of Gaojia Village—truly a unique privilege.

Scared witless, Ground Rabbit lay flat on the ground, unmoving, and yelled aloud: "Deity, spare me! I was wrong, I was wrong!"

Gao Yiye laughed heartily: "Do you know why you were wrong?"

Ground Rabbit: "I do. I'll listen attentively to the Saint Lady's class, and pay full attention."

"Good. Get up now."

Gao Yiye wiped away her smile, resuming her stern expression: "Everyone, repeat after me: act strictly as commanded."

The militia group chorused in unison: "Act strictly as commanded."

Gao Yiye: "Take nothing, not a needle or thread, from the citizens."

The militia group repeated it together—their voices resounding across the entire village.

Ground Rabbit also cast off his lazy demeanor and echoed it loudly alongside the others.

Though he'd been set on becoming a forest hero by joining up, he was also born of impoverished good citizens. Listening to the slogans one by one, he suddenly thought—hey? These rules made perfect sense—they all protected ordinary folk.

If I followed them dutifully, wouldn't that turn me into a true hero?

At that thought, he shouted with immense enthusiasm.

Li Daoxuan nodded inwardly. Good, this was right. Discipline was the soul of a fine army. As for fighting strength, he could cheat to compensate for it, but discipline—even cheating couldn't aid that—it relied solely on these little people themselves.

With a creak, the door of the plastic mansion swung open. Xing Honglang stepped out, stretched mightily, and glanced down at her arm—it felt recovered quite well.

Before arriving in Gaojia Village, she'd used her own forest hero remedies, but they weren't effective at all—days passed with no improvement, the wound even growing putrid. Yesterday, after scraping off the pus and reapplying the “miracle drug” Gao Yiye had given, her arm truly felt far more comfortable.

Her spirits soared high!

Standing on the northern slope, she peered down at Gaojia Village and spotted the militia group instantly—standing rigidly, hearing the Saint Lady lecture, then chorusing periodically in full force: “Do not damage the crops!”

“No harassing women!”

Hearing those slogans, Xing Honglang found it quite amusing. The Gaojia Village Militia was interesting; they weren't practicing martial arts early in the morning, but these strange slogans instead? After listening closely, she thought these slogans actually made some sense.

If the Gaojia Village Militia could truly live up to these slogans, they would be far better than those undisciplined “forest heroes” running around now. Morals were declining in the world; few true heroes remained on the rivers and lakes, only a bunch of worthless thieves.

At the same time...

The most renowned hero under heaven, Bai Shui Wang Er, was leading six thousand righteous soldiers north from Yijun County into the territory of Luochuan County. The Patrol Officer of Luochuan was just about to go out to meet him in battle when he heard that Bu Zhan Ni of Luochuan had returned from Huanglong Mountain and entered Luochuan County from the west.

The Patrol Officer of Luochuan had no more soldiers under him than Cheng Xu, the Patrol Officer of Chengcheng— just around a hundred or so ragtag troops. Hearing the news that tens of thousands of bandits from two armies had entered his territory made his entire body go numb.

Who should he fight first?

After agonizing over it left and right, he decided he still had to fight Wang Er first. As long as he could eliminate Wang Er and topple this banner of the world's number one rebel, all the bandits out there would naturally be terrified out of their wits!

Meanwhile...

Hong Chengchou, Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor, recalled his troops and withdrew from the entrance to Huanglong Mountain. After all, he was a man with property and responsibilities; his official duty was supervising grain transport, not guarding mountain passes.

How could he possibly stay garrisoned at the Huanglong Mountain entrance all day and night, guarding against bandits slipping out?

As soon as Hong Chengchou recalled his troops and retreated, the main road from Huanglong Mountain leading to Yichuan County lay open once again. How could Yichuan's Zuo Guazi miss such an opportunity? He quickly led his bandit army back to Yichuan County to move at ease all over his own turf; this was like a fish returning to water.

The entire province of Shaanxi was thrown into disarray.

Xing Honglang had no idea that the so-called forest heroes had all turned mad. Within Gaojia Village, all one could feel was an atmosphere of calm. She strolled down from the northern slope and was halfway down when she ran into Cheng Xu.

Cheng Xu cupped his fist towards her: "Miss Xing."

Seeing he seemed to be coming specifically for her, Xing Honglang couldn't help but ask curiously: "Oh? Instructor He, you have business with me?"

Cheng Xu smiled: "Yes, I wanted to ask Miss Xing to lend me two people."

Xing Honglang looked very surprised: “You command a militia, and nearly a thousand villagers you can mobilize anytime. Just the Saint Lady ordering it would suffice; how could you possibly be short of people?”

Cheng Xu: “There may be many, but not a single one is much use.”

Xing Honglang: “What kind of people do you need?”

Cheng Xu: “Scouts!”

Hearing this word, Xing Honglang suddenly understood.

So it was scouts!

Scouts, since ancient times, were always undertaken by elite soldiers. Not only did they need exceptional individual combat ability, they also required agile minds, sound judgment, expertise in archery and horse riding, along with ample experience.

This wasn't the kind of talent that could just pop up in any village militia.

Cheng Xu said with slight awkwardness: “None of those under my command are fit to be scouts. The bandit army from Heyang County could arrive at any moment; I'd hate for them to be right under my nose before I realize they're here.”

Xing Honglang: “So you set your sights on my people?”

Cheng Xu said: “Miss Xing's underlings have all spent years on the rivers and lakes. In terms of keen observation, broad experience, and agile wits, they are far superior to the bunch under my command. Since you'll be recovering from your wounds at Gaojia Village for a few days anyway, lending me two seasoned men during that time actually enhances your own safety here too, doesn't it?”

Xing Honglang nodded. That made sense. While she was recovering here, deploying scouts would contribute to her own security. She turned and instructed: "Call Old Zhu and Old Zhang over."

Cheng Xu chuckled: "Have your men take two of my soldiers with them. Let them learn the ways of scouting."

Xing Honglang was both amused and exasperated: "Now you're trying to steal techniques right here from me?"

Chapter 156: His Name Still Lingered in the Jianghu

Northwest, Yongning Village, Heyang County.

Sui Fengxiong stood facing a large crowd of villagers, a vicious grin on his face. He was a bandit chief – that much was clear just from his name.

He was tall, powerfully built, and layered with thick, hard muscle. In those days, managing to become that fat was, naturally, because he excelled at the art of "robbery."

"My name is Sui Fengxiong, and I'm a good man," he declared to the group of trembling villagers in front of him, raising his big chopper knife. He grinned, "I'm just a poor commoner like you all. So I won't kill you. I'll give you a chance to live."

Hearing this, the villagers looked up, startled. They had thought their death was certain. Was Sui Fengxiong really offering them a chance to survive?

Sui Fengxiong chuckled. "Join me. Rob with me and enjoy ourselves. But, when I get hungry, I'll be asking you for grain."

The villagers: "..."

Sui Fengxiong: "Don't look at me like that. I'm doing this for your own good. Next time you take over a village, you say the same thing to the newcomers. Ask them for grain to feed yourselves. That way, wouldn't everyone be able to survive?"

The villagers understood now. Put plainly, it was a layered hierarchy where each level supported the one above.

The earlier you joined, the more people there were beneath you to support you. The later you joined, the more people you would have to support. Thinking carefully, the best thing was obviously to join right away.

The villagers immediately signed up, shouting, "Wise lord!"

"Don't call me lord," Sui Fengxiong chuckled. "Call me Captain Xiong. I have a boss above me named Fan Shanyue. When you see him, call him Lord Yue. Got it?"

Everyone thought: So you have to support someone above too.

They understood. They all understood.

Sui Fengxiong waved a big hand, accepting over a hundred villagers from Yongning Village as his new underlings. His number of followers had now swollen to over twenty-two hundred. Hah, he felt extremely pleased.

Just as he was basking in his satisfaction, he saw a bandit army descending the eastern hillside. It was his boss, Fan Shanyue, arriving. Also with him was another captain under the boss, named Erchun.

Sui Fengxiong quickly hurried forward to greet them. "Big Brother, Third Brother! I just took in another hundred-plus men in Yongning Village. How were your hauls?"

Hearing his question, a flicker of displeasure crossed Erchun's face. "I have over a thousand now."

Sui Fengxiong was greatly surprised. "Over a thousand? Why isn't Third Brother happy then?"

Erchun said, "I got chopped."

He showed a wounded arm. "A few days back, when I only had three hundred men, I spotted a merchant caravan in a small village. The leader was a woman, big and strong. Looked like she had money. Of course, I went to rob her. Who knew that woman actually had some skill? She only had thirty or forty men but defeated my three hundred, and even cut me twice!" He added bitterly, "Lucky I gave her a chop back. Not a total loss. The past few days I've been recruiting desperately. I swear I'll get revenge."

Sui Fengxiong was shocked. "A strong woman? Could it be... the infamous Shanxi salt smuggler, Xing Honglang?"

"Right, definitely her!" Boss Fan Shanyue spoke up. "Xing Honglang injured Third Brother and hacked several dozen of our brothers to death. Then she headed west, ran into Chengcheng County."

"Damn her!" Sui Fengxiong raged. "Cut our men and ran? How dare she!"

Fan Shanyue said, "I heard the Patrol Officer of Heyang has already brought troops marching this way. Nearby wealthy households and gentry have organized militia too, merging forces with that Patrol Officer. Their momentum isn't small. We can't stay in Heyang County anymore. Might as well take this chance to head west into Chengcheng County. On one hand, we dodge the pursuit by the Heyang Patrol Officer; on the other, we can chase after that Xing Honglang and get revenge for Third Brother."

Sui Fengxiong hesitated. "Patrol Officer Cheng Xu of Chengcheng... I heard he's a fierce character. They used to say in the jianghu he was timid, but that turned out to be fake news he spread. The real Cheng Xu is practically a War God! He first defeated Bai Shui Wang Er, killing Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao. Then he defeated Bu Zhan Ni from Luochuan and Zuo Guazi from Yichuan. His killing spree made all the forest heroes terrified to step even half a foot into Chengcheng County. If we go stirring up trouble in Chengcheng and run into War God Cheng Xu, wouldn't that be...?"

Fan Shanyue burst into loud laughter. "No worries! That Cheng Xu has already been killed by the Imperial Guards! Hahaha! The court sure is funny! As soon as Chengcheng finally gets an able Patrol Officer, the Imperial Guards help us kill him! Hahaha! Seems the old emperor is on our side!"

"Eh? Big Brother, where did you hear this news?"

"From a courier. It's absolutely true, no mistake."

“Then what are we waiting for! Chengcheng, let’s go go go!”

“Hahaha! Bai Shui Wang Er, Bu Zhan Ni of Luochuan, Zuo Guazi from Yichuan – they’re all nothing. When it comes to attacking Chengcheng, it’ll be down to my, Fan Shanyue of Heyang’s, abilities!”

In Chongzhen Year One, the War God of Chengcheng, Cheng Xu, had left “the world of men,” but the tales of the War God’s name still lingered in the jianghu.

...

Li Daoxuan was pondering the “entertainment industry.”

The enthusiastic crowd that had gathered to watch Xing Honglang and Gao Chuwu’s wrestling match last time proved one thing: now that Gaojia Village had a population exceeding a thousand, the lack of an entertainment industry was starting to affect productivity.

He had to find some amusement for the villagers who had filled their bellies and had nothing to do.

But the entertainment industry wasn’t easy. Where to start?

Give them books? They were all illiterates.

Using the village’s limited number of scholars as storytellers wasn’t very practical either.

Li Daoxuan hugged his head, racking his brains in deep thought...

Just then, people arrived from the direction of the county seat to the southwest of Gaojia Village.

The leader, riding a tall horse, wore official garments. It was County Magistrate Liang Shixian. Beside him was a military officer in armor – likely the newly appointed Patrol Officer replacing Cheng Xu.

Behind them followed a clerk, a deputy inspector, yamen runners, soldiers – a large, bustling procession.

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but let out an intrigued "Oh?" Fun. Something entertaining to watch.

Seeing the officials arrive, the people of Gaojia Village immediately grew excited. The ordinary villagers switched into "spectator mode."

Xing Honglang led the salt smugglers back into the plastic mansion and didn't come out.

Cheng Xu also adjusted his cloth mask and quickly retreated into the main fortress, hiding.

Thirty-Two smoothed his clothes and adopting an incredibly arrogant "head steward of a great family" demeanor, came out from the fortress to greet them. "Ah! Long time no see, County Lord! Your complexion remains splendid! Truly worthy of celebration!"

Liang Shixian dismounted and clasped his fist. "Steward Three!"

The new Patrol Officer beside him also dismounted, casting a strange glance at Gaojia Fortress.

Liang Shixian introduced him, "This is the newly appointed Patrol Officer of Chengcheng, named Fang Wushang. This is the Third Steward of the Li Family."

The introductions complete.

Thirty-Two finished the formal pleasantries and courtesies before asking, "What business brings Magistrate Liang and General Fang here today?"

Liang Shixian let out a long sigh. "This official has to borrow weapons again."

So the bandit trouble in Heyang County has reached the Magistrate's ears, Thirty-Two thought to himself.

Chapter 157: This Militia Is Useless

Liang Shixian practically burned with shame. Borrowing weapons from the Li Family every time bandits struck was downright embarrassing, leaving this county magistrate no place to salvage his dignity.

Yet with bandits potentially descending any moment, pride was utterly worthless—best discarded outright, trampled underfoot if needed. And if necessary, even licking it off the ground afterward wouldn't be beneath him.

Thirty-Two smiled. "Since Magistrate Liang personally requests it, our Li Family won't be stingy. We shall lend you those five hundred bows once more."

Liang Shixian beamed. "Truly, the Li Family is a kind-hearted family."

As the two engaged in strained small talk, the newly appointed Patrol Officer Fang Wushang scanned left and right, his gaze ceaselessly roving around.

The immense fortress before him fascinated him profoundly—the thirty-foot walls, the watchtowers at each corner... Much like Mr. Bai's first awestruck reaction to the Hakka roundhouse, he was deeply shaken.

Fang Wushang had originally planned to sponge off the wealthy in Gaojia Village while awaiting the bandit army. But this particular "wealthy" household was so formidable he dared not freeload, fearing powerful backers might impeach him. Getting his head chopped off for mooching wasn't worth it.

Fang Wushang interjected, "Steward Thirty-Two, have you heard about the bandit troubles in Heyang County?"

Thirty-Two nodded. "We have, sighed. Heyang County lies far too close to us, unsettling everyone deeply. We're already organizing militia local gentry to fight these scoundrels."

Fang Wushang had already glimpsed Gaojia Village's militia: over a hundred able-bodied men sitting on a distant clearing, listening intently to a solemnly dressed, stern-faced young woman.

Not a single militiaman showed the slightest disrespect as she spoke, clearly marking her as someone of significance.

Patrol Officer Fang sneered inwardly: They let a woman lead the militia? Instead of proper drills, she just lectures! Could such troops ever be useful? What a farce.

Just then, Gao Yiye finished her political thought lesson and walked toward the main fortress.

The second she departed, discipline among the militia dissolved.

Ground Rabbit leapt up instantly, laughing boisterously. "Hahaha! Finally, you'll teach me boxing techniques, right? Hurry! Where's Instructor He? He was just here a moment ago!"

He searched left and right. No instructor in sight; no one left to rein him in; the Saint Lady had gone.

Instantly reverting to his troublemaker nature, Ground Rabbit yanked his rusty sword from his waist, cackling. "Watch closely, everyone! I'll perform my ultimate secret move—The Celestial Rabbit Sword!"

The group jeered, "Oh, spare us!"

Ground Rabbit retorted, "This was hard-earned training! Observe!"

With an exaggerated leap, he swung his sword wildly, bellowing each syllable: "Heaven! Rabbit! Break! Dominance! Sword!"

Watching this clumsy strike from afar—utterly chaotic equipment, devoid of power and riddled with openings—Fang Wushang shook his head. "Just as expected from a woman-led rabble. This militia is completely worthless."

Meanwhile, Liang Shixian continued the awkward exchange: “Steward Thirty-Two, I brought Patrol Officer Fang to formally introduce you. He’ll be leading troops to shield Chengcheng from the bandit army. Given their overwhelming numbers and his limited forces, your militia may need to support him in battle.”

Thirty-Two hesitated, uncertain how to politely decline.

But Fang Wushang cut in sharply, “Unnecessary!”

Liang Shixian blinked. “Pardon?”

Fang Wushang declared, “I’ve seen the state of their forces. Militia like this would only hinder my operations and weigh me down. Our trip here was wasted.”

Thirty-Two fell silent.

Fang Wushang added, “I shall exterminate the bandits myself.”

Without another word, he turned and marched away.

Thirty-Two stared after him, speechless.

Slightly embarrassed, Liang Shixian coughed. “Ah... Steward Thirty-Two, forgive his manner. Military men are rough-edged and discourteous by nature.”

Thirty-Two secretly rejoiced in his heart: No blame! No blame! Of course I don’t blame it! It was actually good that he didn’t want our help. Half of our soldiers now had armor, and for the other half without armor, they had sewn armor patches on key positions of their cotton-padded clothes. Such equipment couldn’t be easily seen by you. If we acted together, it would have been troublesome for us anyway.

He turned his head and looked over at the militia from a distance, saw Ground Rabbit still making a fool of himself there, waving his rusty sword like an idiot, and secretly felt happy: Great! This idiot did a great service. I'll give him a bonus later.

Ground Rabbit hadn't yet realized he had performed a great service. Still holding a rusty sword and swinging it left and right, he suddenly saw a tall man wearing General armor walking over quickly.

Ground Rabbit: "???"

That man was naturally Fang Wushang. He suddenly took a big stride and rushed in front of Ground Rabbit. This movement was extremely frightening. Ground Rabbit cried out in surprise with an Aiyo! The sword in his hand involuntarily swung at Fang Wushang.

Fang Wushang sidestepped and tripped him with his foot. Ground Rabbit fell with a PLUNK, face planting into the dirt.

Fang Wushang: "Hmph! Useless!"

With that, he strode off.

Ground Rabbit climbed up from the ground, looking aggrieved: "Damn it, I knew none of the officials are good people! Mr. Rabbit didn't provoke him at all, so why did he suddenly come to hit me?"

The people around all spread their hands and shrugged their shoulders.

Zheng Daniu said: "Don't talk about him. Actually, I really want to hit you too."

Another man nearby raised his hand: "I want to hit too!"

"Actually, I want too!"

In the blink of an eye, in the militia of over a hundred people, except for Gao Chuwu, everyone else raised their hands.

Ground Rabbit was greatly startled. Seeing Gao Chuwu hadn't raised his hand, like he had grabbed a lifesaver, he darted to hide behind Gao Chuwu and urgently cried out: "Brother Chuwu, it's still you who treat me well. Only you won't hit me."

Gao Chuwu: "Sigh! I actually hit Miss Xing while she was injured. I'm really not a man."

Everyone: "....."

Ground Rabbit sweated: "Brother Chuwu, didn't you hear what just happened?"

Gao Chuwu: "Ah? What just happened?"

Ground Rabbit: "They all said they wanted to hit me."

Gao Chuwu: "Ah? Is that so? That's great! I've wanted to hit you for a long time too. Since everyone thinks so, let's do it."

Ground Rabbit: "AHHHHH!"

A group of people instantly tripped Ground Rabbit to the ground. They grasped his limbs and lifted him up, aligned his crotch with a big tree nearby, bumped him against it... rubbed it... rubbed it... like a devil's steps...

Ground Rabbit: "AAAAAH! Stop! Mr. Rabbit will be childless! Stop!"

The women in the village saw this scene, couldn't help but cover their faces and turn away, and angrily cursed: "Men are really nonsensical! Always doing foolish things."

Chapter 158: He Yang Bandits Arrive

The newly appointed patrol officer Fang Wushang led over a hundred soldiers left by Cheng Xu and began patrolling villages along the border between Chengcheng County and Heyang County.

The shared territory between the two counties was vast, stretching in a long, meandering line.

Fang Wushang had no idea where the bandit army might attack from. He could only send scouts out for reconnaissance, bribe mountain hunters for information, and simultaneously dispatch people to gather intelligence from villages along the border.

Beisi Village, Shijia Gou, Bangou Village, Beipo Village, Quangou Village, Li Family River Village...

Fang Wushang's figure appeared everywhere!

This new patrol officer was quite diligent—calling him a model worker wasn't an exaggeration.

But he was an "air-dropped official," unfamiliar with both Chengcheng and Heyang counties. Unable to guess the bandits' route, he sought advice from Liang Shixian: "Magistrate Liang, you arrived months earlier. Can you tell me where they're most likely to enter Chengcheng County?"

Liang Shixian was also new, but he had to respond when asked.

He needed to think carefully!

Liang Shixian, knowledgeable in many matters, immediately activated strategic analysis mode in his mind. Maps of Chengcheng and Heyang, possible bandit routes, and village distributions spun like a kaleidoscope in his thoughts. Finally, with a "ding," his focus locked onto one location on the map.

Quangou Village!

Quangou Village sat directly between Chengcheng County and Heyang County—the shortest straight-line path. It had to be the bandits' passage.

Thus, Fang Wushang stationed himself in Quangou Village. He ate provisions provided by the village's wealthy households and gathered militias organized by several local gentry. Soldiers and civilians united, waiting to resist the bandits.

...

Zhengjia Village.

The north-south mountain range resembled the 38th Parallel drawn with stationery on a middle school desk, splitting Chengcheng and Heyang counties in half.

A boy's hand never dared cross that line, but a girl's hand could reach over freely.

Zhengjia Village lay exactly on this 38th Parallel.

Two salt smugglers, Old Zhu and Old Zhang, sat on a hillside beside the boundary with two rookies from the Gaojia Village Militia, gazing at the lifeless woods on the eastern slope.

Three years of drought hadn't killed all the trees, but they stood spiritless.

The spring wind swept over the ridge, carrying an early chill. The lightly dressed salt smugglers shivered, but the two Gaojia Village militia rookies seemed unfazed.

"You usually eat well, huh? Not even afraid of the cold," Old Zhu remarked.

"Heh, thanks to the Deity's blessing, we eat decently," a militia rookie grinned. "After joining the militia, it got even better. The Deity said high-intensity daily training requires excellent daily meals—otherwise nutrition falls short."

Old Zhu asked, "What's nutrition?"

“Dunno!” The militia rookie laughed. “Why bother about that?”

Old Zhu chuckled, “True. As long as the food’s good, why fuss.”

The militia rookie pulled two air-dried beef sticks from his coat and handed them to the salt smugglers. “Chew on these for fun. Blessed by the Deity.”

The two smugglers eagerly accepted. Air-dried beef sticks—damn fine stuff. One bite felt like heaven.

Suddenly, Old Zhu’s expression shifted. He tucked his half-gnawed beef stick into his clothes and whispered, “They’re here. Bandits.”

The militia rookies followed his pointing finger.

At the foot of the slope, the vanguard of a troop appeared. They marched in a single-file formation, dressed in ragged clothes and wielding a chaotic array of weapons—pot lids and shovels included.

The two militia rookies were startled: “Dammit, they really came. Why must these bandit armies come to us? Wouldn’t it be better for them to go to where Patrol Officer Fang is guarding?”

Old Zhu went “heh” and said: “No wonder they’re heading here. I saw a familiar person.”

The two militia rookies: “Familiar person?”

Old Zhu whispered softly: “The guy who injured our boss. That guy’s name is Erchun. Not long ago, we ran into him at a small village near Heyang County. We fought him there. With thirty or forty of us, we beat his three hundred men, and the boss even got a slash into Erchun. However, that fellow was also a tough nut. He wounded the boss’s arm.”

The two militia rookies were startled: “So what should we do now? We’re high up, they’re low down. Should we grab some rocks and drop them on them?”

Old Zhu laughed and scolded: “Don’t say stupid things. We are scouts. We only handle reconnaissance. Deciding to fight, or how to fight—that’s not for scouts to order. What we must do is leave three people to keep watching them, and have one of them go back to report.”

The two militia rookies also learned a lesson. One raised his hand: “I’ll go back and report.”

“If you go, you won’t learn anything.” Old Zhu waved his hand: “Old Zhang, you go back and report. I’ll keep training these two rookies.”

Old Zhang grinned widely: “Got it, I’ll head back first then.”

He sprinted off with big strides, pattering and thudding toward the direction of Gaojia Village.

...

Old Zhu continued leading the two rookies, watching the bandit army slowly crawling up the eastern slope. His eyes locked tightly onto the leader at the center of the bandit army—Erchun. That guy still had cloth wrapped around his arm. Seemed like his injury hadn’t healed yet.

...

Li Daoxuan was holding a bowl of braised beef noodles, eating the noodles while mulling over the entertainment issue.

After some deep thinking, he had mostly formed a plan.

Comic books!

People who grew up in the seven-ties and eighties, when they were kids, had all seen a thing called comic books.

These comic books were only palm-sized. They held almost no text at all. The story got told completely with pictures. That let folks who couldn't read much watch with great pleasure.

Not only could they provide entertainment, they also offered some educational value.

He whipped out his phone fast and called his dad: "Dad, I'd like something from you."

"What?"

"Comic books. When I was little, I saw them in the house. You have the complete set of Yang Family Generals comic books, right? Do you still keep them now? I want to see them."

"They're preserved well. This is your dad's treasure."

"That's good. Then I'll pack them up and take them away."

"Hey, I can give them to you. But handle them carefully. If you ruin a page, I'll break your legs."

"Understood. I promise I won't ruin them."

After hanging up, just as he was about to leave to hail a taxi and go to his dad's place to pack up the comic books, he suddenly spotted a little person dashing in from the cement road in the top right of his view. That was heading toward Zhengjia Village.

Looking closer, that little person was a salt smuggler under Xing Honglang's command. He had been sent out as a scout. Li Daoxuan couldn't recall the name. With over a thousand little people in the village, he only remembered those who were "Jian Zai Xian Xin." Most others were a blur.

Li Daoxuan felt a slight stir inside: "Seems the He Yang bandits have arrived!"

Chapter 159: The Bandit Armies Might

"The bandits of He Yang have come!" Old Zhang dashed into the village while shouting all the way.

Hearing this shout, the ordinary villagers were utterly terrified, especially those “short laborers” who had just come to Gaojia Village recently.

These people had not experienced the battle against the Supreme Bright King or the night attack on Gaojia Fortress.

They didn’t know that in a fight at Gaojia Village, the Deity would step in to protect his own, causing them to panic massively right away. Many immediately hid back into their plastic houses and shivered inside.

Cheng Xu was startled too. In fact, he hadn’t seen the Deity intervene either.

Though when he was almost killed by the Imperial Guards, the Deity seemed to have acted, but at the time, mud and stones were flying about, and he was laughing wildly, never quite figuring out how he was saved.

But in any case, he had to emerge.

Cheng Xu leaped to the front instantly and intercepted Old Zhang: “Bandits have come? How far are they? About how many men?”

Old Zhang said, “The bandit army is climbing up from the eastern slope, still four or five Li away from Zhengjia Village via mountain paths. The numbers aren’t clear; I ran ahead to report so the village could prepare.”

Cheng Xu silently calculated: four or five Li uphill was a tough climb. From Zhengjia Village to Gaojia Village was another six Li of cement road, so the bandits wouldn’t arrive soon, giving them over an hour to get ready.

He waved his arm at once and said, “The civilian militia, gear up, then assemble at the village entrance and wait for my next command.”

The militia’s over a hundred members immediately ran home to arm themselves.

The earliest forty-six to join had cotton armor already. They donned the armor, grabbed a crossbow, a quiver of arrows, and picked up a spear with a wooden shaft and iron spearhead— soon, they were fully equipped.

Those who joined later had no armor—they just had armor plates sewn onto key parts of their cotton coats for protection. But they did have crossbows, arrows, and spears with wooden shafts and iron spearheads.

While they armed themselves, Cheng Xu shouted, “Hurry, public sun chariot! Take me to Zhengjia Village.”

The two new pilots scrambled over, ready to start the sun chariot.

Cheng Xu was about to board when he saw Xing Honglang running down the slope, followed by her thirty or forty salt smuggler subordinates: “Instructor He, wait for me. I’ll come with you to check out the bandit army too.”

Cheng Xu said, “This is Gaojia Fortress’s business.”

Xing Honglang chuckled, “My men say they spotted Erchun.”

She lifted her injured arm: “The wound on my arm here was bestowed by Erchun.”

At that, Cheng Xu said nothing more, sprang onto the sun chariot, and waved to Xing Honglang.

Xing Honglang glanced at the strange vehicle and told her followers, “All aboard, follow me together.”

The salt smugglers chorused in response, “Yes, boss.”

After that, she also darted onto the public sun chariot, and a large group of salt smugglers squeezed in together.

“What’s this weird chariot? It holds so many people.”

“Incredible, all of us got on, and it actually accommodated us.”

“Oh, it’s moving.”

“Seriously, this thing still moves with so many people on it.”

The salt smugglers were amazed, like rustics dazzled by unfamiliar splendor.

The sun chariot started moving, rolled onto the cement road, and soon reached the edge of Zhengjia Village.

Xing Honglang and Cheng Xu jumped off and told the chariot pilots, “You two hurry back to Gaojia Village. The militia should be ready in gear; bring them over here.”

After speaking, the two ran toward the top of the eastern slope.

At the summit, Old Zhu and two militia rookies had been monitoring the eastern slope all along. As soon as the leaders arrived, they immediately asked softly, “How’s the situation?”

Old Zhu pointed downhill: “Boss, look over there.”

Both leaders looked toward the eastern slope. Without looking, they hadn’t realized; looking now, they got quite a shock. A large bandit army on the eastern slope had formed into a long, snaking line on the narrow mountain trail as they climbed upward.

Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang spoke almost simultaneously: “Eight thousand!”

After speaking, the two exchanged glances, each seeing the worry in the other's eyes.

Too many!

Cheng Xu couldn't help muttering, "How can there be so many? Months ago, Bai Shui Wang Er rebelled with only a few hundred men. When the Supreme Bright King emerged and started causing trouble, it was only a little over a thousand. Now, less than half a year later, bandit armies numbering in the thousands are constantly popping up. It's utterly baffling."

Xing Honglang couldn't help but frown either. "The other day, I ran into Erchun. He only had three hundred men. My men and I charged them and scattered them easily. How are their numbers so large again now in the blink of an eye? It seems Fan Shanyue and Sui Fengxiong have joined forces with him."

Hearing their discussion, Li Daoxuan also couldn't help but sigh lightly: Where exactly is 'this'? As the situation spirals further out of control, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands will emerge. In the end, Li Zicheng even commanded a million troops.

This was still the early days of the peasant uprising. Their numbers are still in the mere thousands. Don't panic now—you'll have plenty more to panic about later.

Xing Honglang whispered, "Instructor He, what do you think?"

Cheng Xu glanced downward and saw mixed within the bandit ranks the occasional grandmother, leaning on her walking stick, slowly making her way up the slope.

They've even brought grandmothers. What exactly are you asking me to think?

His heart pounding wildly with panic, he couldn't help but curse under his breath: "Stone and mud! The militia isn't properly trained yet. Just a little over a hundred men. Even adding your thirty or forty, it won't make a difference. We need to withdraw."

Xing Honglang also thought they should withdraw. Just as they prepared to turn back, the rumbling sound of the public sun chariots echoed. Two public sun chariots arrived at Zhengjia Village, one after the other.

The lead chariot was driven by Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu, transporting half of the militia.

The chariot behind was driven by two new drivers, transporting the other half of the militia.

The whole militia group had arrived!

Once this group arrived, they looked around, spotted Instructor He prone on top of the eastern slope looking down, and hurried over.

As soon as Gao Chuwu saw Xing Honglang, he lowered his head and said pitifully, "I..."

Xing Honglang cut him off: "Spare me the talk, I don't have time to listen."

Zheng Daniu, however, moved to Cheng Xu's side, peeked down the slope with half his face exposed, and after one glance, gave two low chuckles: "Isn't this a great chance to throw rocks at them? Even though I'm dumb, I know we have the terrain advantage."

Cheng Xu shot him a scornful look: "The bandit army is large and powerful; we shouldn't confront them head-on. We should avoid provoking them and withdraw, smoothly, now. We can still make it back to Gaojia Village to organize all the villagers to retreat toward the county town. If we start throwing rocks, it'll only slow our own withdrawal down. If we keep throwing, they'll reach the mountaintop by then, and we won't have time to get the villagers to run with us."

Zheng Daniu argued, "We can't run! If we run, the village's wheat field is finished. We have to hold them off."

Cheng Xu retorted, "Didn't you hear me? The bandit army is large and powerful; we cannot engage them directly."

Zheng Daniu countered, "We have the Deity's blessing. How could we possibly be unable to engage them?"

Cheng Xu asked sharply, "The Deity even manages battles?"

Zheng Daniu insisted, "Yes! The Deity gave us catapults, large cannons..."

Hearing this, Cheng Xu's eyes lit up. He looked down the slope again, and just like that, the grandmother who had been climbing... vanished, turning into light.

Do you believe in light?

A grand soundtrack swelled. Cheng Xu, War God of Chengcheng, revived at full health and full state. He waved his hand commandingly: "Everyone, prepare large stones! Upon my order, smash them to smithereens!"

Chapter 160: Rolling Logs and Chopsticks

Li Daoxuan's field of vision was actually wide enough to see all of the bandit army.

Zhengjia Village was the first village he had gained sight of, lying merely five to six li away in a straight-line distance from Gaojia Village. Since then, his vision had continually expanded, now covering over ten li around and encompassing several villages.

Therefore, the vast forested areas east of Zhengjia Village in Heyang County were all within his view.

The sight of eight thousand bandit soldiers climbing the mountain together had a touch of absurdity, like a giant swarm of little ants climbing a miniature mountain in a potted plant.

Looking closely, although the bandit force numbered eight thousand, the able-bodied men fit for fighting numbered less than half. Only the leading three or four thousand possessed any combat capability; half the force behind them consisted entirely of the elderly and weak, women and children.

This was a major characteristic of the Peasant Wars of the Late Ming Dynasty. Rebel forces were large, yet they could hardly be considered a proper “army”. Wherever they went, they forcibly conscripted all the local common people into their ranks. Among these conscripted civilians, the elderly and weak, women and children made up a significant proportion.

In battle, they were useless.

They consumed vast amounts of grain, becoming a burden to the bandit army.

This was why the bandit armies sounded formidable, boasting figures of tens or even hundreds of thousands, but their actual combat strength was low. Even with constant, desperate looting, they remained hungry and cold.

To sustain such a massive force, they could only keep moving, perpetually looting, producing nothing, and destroying everything...

Cheng Xu, glowing with confidence, addressed his men: “Don’t be afraid. Though the bandit force is large, most are just a rabble. We only need to defeat those in front; the rear will collapse on its own. Everyone, go find large stones! Bring them all to the cliff edge!”

Xing Honglang rolled her eyes beside him, thinking: That wasn’t what you said earlier! You were clearly planning to retreat. What suddenly got you fired up? What on earth gave you such confidence? It seemed to be that big, dumb-looking oaf saying, ‘The Deity will help,’ and then Instructor He instantly became pumped full of blood. How bizarre.

The militia, over a hundred strong, scattered to find good-sized, manageable stones.

Xing Honglang already had thoughts of retreat herself. But seeing the militia preparing for battle, pulling back now would seem cowardly, showing a lack of loyalty in jianghu. She glanced at her own people – the thirty or forty salt smugglers – and saw they shared similar thoughts. They all seemed hesitant, wanting to retreat but unwilling to abandon loyalty.

“Move stones!” Xing Honglang eventually decided to stay.

The hundred-plus men quickly dispersed, searching everywhere for large stones.

Xing Honglang soon found a head-sized stone and moved to carry it towards the cliff edge. But just as she was about to lift it, she realized her right upper arm couldn't exert force; if she strained it, the wound would reopen.

She frowned slightly!

At that moment, a man even more burly than her came from the side, picked up the stone effortlessly, and carried it over to the cliff edge for her.

Gao Chuwu had arrived.

Xing Honglang shot him a glance: "Hmph! This dame never needs help from anyone."

Gao Chuwu, still guilty over the previous incident, didn't reply. He just turned and went to fetch the next stone.

Soon, the group had gathered a pile of stones.

But...

It clearly wasn't enough!

Stones of the right size weren't exactly lying around everywhere. Ones too small were useless – you needed a rock big enough to kill by hitting. Yet, it couldn't be so large it was unmovable. These constraints on size meant that with ample time for careful preparation, it wouldn't be difficult. But finding many stones of just the right size in a short period? That was tough.

Cheng Xu glanced at the stones piled by the cliff – fewer than three hundred. A combined shout from the hundred-plus men, hurling them down, and they'd be gone in two volleys. This wouldn't achieve much.

Xing Honglang said, "Now, there's no time to cut trees and make rolling logs either."

Cheng Xu frowned: "What do we do then?"

Li Daoxuan saw their predicament and chuckled. He reached out and brought over a large box filled with disposable chopsticks he'd collected from his long habit of ordering food delivery.

Such a large box of chopsticks, he casually picked one out from it.

He snapped it in two with a twist, crack, broke off a tiny segment just millimeters long. Another twist, crack, another small piece came off. For stubborn sections, he brought out large shears to snip. In no time, he held a full handful of short wooden sticks.

The shorter ones were about 3-4 millimeters long, the longer ones 6-8 millimeters. The breaking was done haphazardly, without any attempt to make them neat. Reaching out, he dumped this entire pile of short sticks into the chest.

Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang were troubled when suddenly, the clouds parted. Dozens of wooden posts, buoyed by an unseen force, slowly descended from the sky, piling up right before them.

Xing Honglang jumped in fright. Her thirty-odd salt smugglers staggered backward in terror.

But Gaojia Village's militia wasn't scared. They first bowed deeply toward the sky in unison, then chuckled under their breath: "The Deity surely favors us after all, heh heh heh."

"Just fretting about finding enough rolling logs and boulders... and suddenly we've got so many logs!"

"These posts are the perfect size!"

"So easy to handle!"

Cheng Xu's spirit came rushing with pride too. Whatever they lacked, the Deity provided? How could they possibly lose this battle? Ha ha ha! He casually picked up a post about arm's length, placed it by the cliff edge, and laughed triumphantly: "Push this one down the mountain, let it roll... how many foolish bandits would it crush along the way? Ha ha ha!"

Just as the thought crossed his mind, a boom sounded beside him. Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu were hauling an enormous log several times a man's height. They heaved it to the cliffside, then the two giants grinned foolishly together: "Pushing this one down? Guaranteed to make 'em cry for their parents no doubt!"

Cheng Xu: "....."

The waves behind drive on those before. Cheng Xu thought: Maybe I'd better stick to commanding... Competing with these two blockheads in strength is just asking for humiliation.

Only then did Xing Honglang regain her wits. Stunned, she pointed at the giant pile of logs that had suddenly appeared: "These things... how did they fly down from the sky?"

Cheng Xu turned around: "The Deity bestowed them."

Xing Honglang looked up at the sky: "The Deity is..."

Cheng Xu: "A divine being, of course!"

Xing Honglang: "!!!"

She'd visited Gaojia Village several times now, often hearing about the Deity. But she'd always assumed this "Deity" was some sort of cult leader — with Gao Yiye being his woman, his so-called "Saint Lady," typically just there for the cult leader's... personal entertainment.

Only now did she realize things weren't quite as she'd imagined.

The Deity truly was a deity!

The Saint Lady truly was a saint lady!

Xing Honglang froze, utterly at a loss about how to handle this situation.

Her salt smugglers, however, didn't overthink like her. Having witnessed a divine manifestation, their reaction was simple: bow. With a loud shuffling sound, they prostrated themselves flat on the ground.

Cheng Xu chuckled: "Stop groveling. Get up working! Haul all the wood the Deity gave us to the cliff edge. The bandits are getting closer."