

Great Ming 161

Chapter 161: Not in Accordance with Military Strategy, But in Accordance with Humanity

The words “The bandits are getting closer” snapped the salt smugglers out of their shock. Indeed, now was not the time to lie on the ground prostrating in worship; it was crucial to hurry and attend to the important task.

The group quickly got up; each selected rolling logs that matched their own strength, and by carrying them in their arms, hugging them, or rolling them on the ground, they moved them to the edge of the cliff.

As they looked at the almost endless supply of rolling logs, everyone’s spirits soared.

Cheng Xu said, “Everyone, stay steady, don’t rush to throw the rolling logs and stones. The bandit army has only come halfway up the slope; wait until their back half has climbed up before we strike.”

Xing Honglang suddenly interrupted him, saying, “Instructor He, it’s better to strike earlier. Half of them being up is enough.”

Cheng Xu was greatly puzzled. “Your idea isn’t in accordance with military strategy.”

Xing Honglang sighed. “It isn’t in accordance with military strategy, but it is in accordance with humanity. The back half of the bandit army is all...”

Cheng Xu suddenly realized: that’s right, only the front half of the bandit army consisted of combat-ready troops; the back half was entirely filled with elderly and weak, women and children...

As a military commander, his mind had only focused on how to inflict the greatest harm on the enemy, but he hadn’t considered this before. With Xing Honglang’s reminder, he finally thought about that scene: rolling logs and stones crushing over the elderly and weak, women and children...

It left a sour taste in his heart!

Xing Honglang said, “We who roam the Green Woods are heroes who raise our blades only against the strong, never against the weak.”

Cheng Xu let out a snort, thinking to himself: I serve in the army; what I learned is that benevolence has no place in leading troops.

However, recalling that image again, it truly felt unpleasant in his heart.

He turned his head and glanced down the mountain. Among the back half of the bandit army, the elderly and weak, women and children, there were probably many like grandmothers—old and frail, withered, with clouded eyes, but whenever they looked at you, they showed an unmasked affection.

Cheng Xu waved his hand and commanded, “Strike now! No need for the back half to climb the mountain.”

“Great! We can finally throw them, hahaha.” Ground Rabbit sprang out suddenly and kicked down the wooden post he had prepared for so long with one foot.

This wooden post of his was not small at all; it was half-height in length and belonged to the thickest section, thicker than his own waist. He couldn’t carry it at all; he had pushed it to the edge of the cliff entirely by rolling it slowly and had been long waiting for Cheng Xu’s order.

At that moment, on the mountainside, Erchun was struggling upward with a large group of subordinates; as he climbed, he asked his men, “Once we get over this slope, we’ll be in Chengcheng County?”

His subordinate nodded. “Yes, after crossing over, it’s Zhengjia Village in Chengcheng County. Then passing through Gaojia Village and Wangjia Village, we can travel straight to Chengcheng County City.”

Erchun cursed, “Excellent! That damned Xing Honglang cut me and then fled to Chengcheng County. Now I’ve come to Chengcheng; I’ll capture her alive and make her realize my might.”

His subordinate quickly flattered, “Third Leader, your might is something that woman probably couldn’t handle.”

“Hahahaha!”

A group of worthless thieves all burst into loud laughter.

They had just laughed twice when suddenly they sensed something was wrong; a rumbling sound came from the mountainside. Looking up, they saw a massive log, half-height tall and thick as a man, rolling down from the mountain; its rolling momentum was utterly terrifying.

Erchun shouted, “Fuck!”

As he cursed, he tumbled and dove into the grassy area beside the path.

He reacted quickly, but his subordinate was slower and couldn't dodge in time; dim-wittedly, he stared as the huge log crashed down directly upon him. With a loud thud, the subordinate spun through the air, and the blood he sprayed painted spiraling rings in mid-air.

The huge log knocked over one person and kept rolling downward; the bandit army on the mountainside couldn't avoid it in time and was violently plowed over by the huge log, scattering chaotically as a gruesome sight.

“Fuck! What's going on?”

“Who threw that log?”

“It's coming again, it's coming again!”

The bandits shouted wildly.

Suddenly, numerous heads appeared on the slope; some lifted stones to hurl down, some kicked down giant logs. The rumbling sound thundered on endlessly as large quantities of rolling logs and stones surged down like a massive landslide.

The bandit army was instantly terrified to stupor!

The smart ones hastened to find large stones nearby and huddled behind them. The moderately clever covered their heads with both hands and lay flat on the ground. The foolish ones, however, scattered across the slope like headless flies.

The rolling logs and stones arrived and plowed over these chaotic equipment-clad bandits, crushing them relentlessly—wails pleading for mothers and fathers filled the scene.

“It’s the militia!”

“I don’t know which militia this is.”

“Damn!”

“Ah!”

Cries and curses tangled together.

Erchun hid behind a stone, trembling violently. Sui Fengxiong and Fan Shanyue also found crevices in the rocks and hid motionlessly, only perking up their ears to listen to the commotion outside.

The rumbling persisted for a long while and then ceased.

The three bandit chiefs cautiously peeked their heads out from behind the rocks to survey the scene. Utter chaos met their eyes: corpses sprawled haphazardly all over the slope...

After blinking a full thirteen times, Fan Shanyue finally snapped to reality and bellowed, “Retreat! Retreat to the foot of the mountain now!”

In truth, no order from him was needed—the bandit army had already planned to flee. Even if he had yelled to charge, they still would have withdrawn. Large groups of bandits scrambled downhill recklessly; some slid rapidly on pot lids. A hasty descent was disastrous: many slipped on the mountain path and tumbled down. Though not killed by rolling logs, they were dead from the falls.

In no time, all the He Yang bandits had retreated to the foot of the mountain.

The militiamen and salt smugglers on the slope erupted in cheers: “We beat them back!”

Xing Honglang let out a sigh of relief. “We held them off! With just us hundred folk, we actually repelled an eight-thousand-strong bandit army. Ha!”

She turned her head and glanced back at the massive pile of wooden posts behind her, thinking, “If not for the Deity granting so many rolling logs, even with the terrain advantage, we couldn’t have defended this spot. Truly, by the blessing of the Deity.”

With that thought, she tilted her head upward. Drifting in the air, about sixty to seventy zhang high, lingered a low cloud. Undoubtedly, the Deity must be watching from within that cloud.

Had she first come to Gaojia Village and heard tales of a divine presence there, she would have been scared witless—revering spirits only to keep a distance—and never dared return. Yet now, she felt not a shred of inclination to retreat; instead, having a deity aiding her was deeply comforting.

Cheng Xu chuckled softly a few times, pondering, “I’ll pen a memorial once back, claiming I commanded over a hundred local gentry militia to repel twenty thousand bandits and safeguard Chengcheng...”

“Wait!”

“I’m no longer an official of the court! Why draft a ghost of a memorial?”

Cheng Xu thumped heavily onto the ground, orz!

Deprived of his official title, he still felt a fair bit of sorrow inside.

Ground Rabbit ambled over from the side: “Instructor He, we just won clear and sound—why aren’t you happy at all?”

Cheng Xu rolled over from his orz state, sat up on the dirt, and gazed heavenward, sighing softly: “I seem to no longer be myself.”

Li Daoxuan smiled: “What’s wrong with becoming a new self then?”

Chapter 162: Flying to Survey the Terrain

“The bandit army hasn’t left,” Cheng Xu pointed downhill at the bandit army. “Look, those worthless thieves are reorganizing the scattered troops at the foot of the mountain.”

Everyone crouched at the cliff edge and peered down. Indeed, it was true.

The big bosses Fan Shanyue, Sui Fengxiong, and Erchun were leading sixty or seventy minor bosses to regroup the fleeing scattered troops. Once gathered, they tilted their heads to gaze up the cliff, whispering from afar as if discussing something.

Cheng Xu’s expression darkened. Thankfully, he was masked, so no one could see it.

Xing Honglang beside him murmured, “Trouble. They haven’t given up yet.”

Cheng Xu nodded. “They saw our clothes and know we’re not officials. So... even after suffering losses, they’re not afraid of us.”

When bandits encounter government troops, they scatter like startled birds, fleeing at the slightest touch. But bandits never fear militias.

This principle is clear: rogue fighters run wildly when police show up, yet facing rival gangs, they whip out machetes to battle to the death—ready to tear your flesh off, fully embodying the jianghu spirit.

That's just how differently the orthodox and unofficial get treated.

Ground Rabbit shouted, "So the villains dare come back? We'll smash 'em all over again!"

"Not so simple," Cheng Xu glared at him. "Those fools learned their lesson with the rolling logs and stones last time. They won't climb straight at us again blindly. They'll scheme a new tactic... What could it be? Hmm, I bet they'll distract us frontally while sending hundreds through the small mountain path to flank us."

"I need to understand the surrounding terrain!"

Cheng Xu grabbed Zheng Daniu. "Daniu, Zhengjia Village is your hometown, right?"

Zheng Daniu nodded. "Yeah!"

Cheng Xu beamed. "Grab a twig. Draw the nearby terrain on the ground for me."

Zheng Daniu blinked. "Terrain? It's mountains. So many trees. So many peaks."

Cheng Xu sighed. "I meant map everything within several li—where hills, trees, gullies are."

Zheng Daniu grinned goofily. "Who'd remember stuff like that?"

Everyone: "..."

Damn this idiot!

Cheng Xu kicked Zheng Daniu's waist. He'd meant to topple him but only recoiled himself, landing flat on his rear with a thud.

Sitting hurt and humiliated. Such frustration!

Why were men like Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, and Ground Rabbit his subordinates? What sin had he committed in a past life?

As he pondered, something large nudged his back gently yet emphatically—clearly pulling its force.

Cheng Xu whirled around. Seeing nothing, realization struck. “Deity!”

He tentatively stretched his hands forward. Skilled fingers grazed what felt like skin—the Deity’s invisible giant hand!

Cheng Xu instantly grasped it. Lunging forward, he hugged something like the Deity’s finger and scrambled upward till he perched at Li Daoxuan’s fingertip. Li Daoxuan silently admired Cheng Xu’s shrewdness—truly adept at comprehending divine will.

His hand lifted gently, bearing Cheng Xu skyward.

Few militiamen had witnessed “Li Da leaping off walls, caught by Deity to fly.” Salt smugglers stared like wooden puppets as Cheng Xu ascended.

Higher and higher Cheng Xu soared... Until he hung suspended fifty zhang high.

Trembling, Cheng Xu gulped loudly enough to hear. Peeking down, people appeared Lilliputian-sized. Tsk, so this was Deity’s view of us.

Focus, fool! The Deity sent you up to survey terrain, not daydream of godhood. You’re mortal—stay humble!

Cheng Xu snapped alert and scanned the topography.

The aerial vista proved breathtaking!

At summit level, trees impeded sightlines, but from midair, every detail lay bare as fields. Simply magnificent!

Ordinary men might only gawk, but a troop leader gleaned vital intelligence.

Memorizing every ridge and ravine, Cheng Xu finally called upward, "Gratitude, Deity. I've secured the terrain now."

Li Daoxuan's hand descended slowly.

Watching Cheng Xu glide down soundlessly, spectators marveled as he hopped off the invisible hand to land poised. Triumphant, he crowed, "Haha! This instructor... ahem... grasps the whole layout! Heh heh. No guessing required about bandit moves. Miss Xing, I need your help."

Xing Honglang replied, "Speak."

"Take your people around that small mountain ahead," Cheng Xu directed. "Half a li onward lies a tree-hidden gully. I suspect they'll sneak through there. Ambush them; rain rolling logs and stones once they climb up."

Xing Honglang grinned savagely. "Heh, roger that! Leave it to me."

She turned to order log transport when piled logs near her levitated and floated toward her destination... Xing Honglang instantly understood.

"Deity knows we mere mortals lack strength to haul these. So the divine hand delivers."

Salt smugglers cheered: "Deity bless us!" These rookies mastered the Gaojia Village mantra astonishingly fast.

“Now we don’t even need directions,” Xing Honglang waved. “Follow where the logs land—that’s Instructor He’s chosen spot. Move out!”

Racing the hovering logs, salt smugglers rounded the small mountain, traveled another li, and discovered the deep gully—its forest surprisingly lush despite years-long drought, hinting at underground water reserves.

Xing Honglang’s band settled atop one gully slope, surrounded by heaped logs. Silently, she willed: Come, vermin! Bring Erchun to me... Time to repay this wounded arm.

Chapter 163: Son of a Bitch

The bandit army at the foot of the mountain indeed refused to retreat.

Cheng Xu coldly watched them, and Li Daoxuan equally watched them with a cold stare.

At the very front of the bandit army, a group of five hundred men spread out to curse, shouting in unison toward the mountaintop: “Are you the militia from Zhengjia Village? Fuck your mothers! Zhengjia Village produced a hero like Zheng Yanfu, who killed officials and rebelled. Yet instead of following his example, you’re helping the authorities bully your uprising fellow villagers. You’re all official lapdogs. You’re unfit to be humans—just a pile of dog shit. Screw you!”

Zheng Daniu grew furious. He opened his throat wide and bellowed toward the mountainside, “Zheng Yanfu is a... Mmmph...”

A militia comrade covered his mouth and dragged him back, whispering, “Big Brother Wang Er is set on protecting Zheng Yanfu’s reputation. Let’s respect Big Brother Wang Er a little and not spill Zheng Yanfu’s story.”

Zheng Daniu said, “I don’t care! I’m gonna spill Zheng Yanfu’s story anyway. Damn it, I even thought of him as a friend as a kid, but he launched a night raid on Gaojia Village trying to slaughter us all.”

After speaking, he shoved the militia men aside, lay at the cliff edge, and yelled, “Zheng Yanfu is a son of a bitch! You follow him? Well, I’ll fuck your mothers!”

Gao Chuwu, his good friend, naturally backed him up. He too lay at the cliff edge and joined Zheng Daniu in shouting, "I'll fuck your mothers!"

The militia men all followed, everyone cursing angrily.

Cheng Xu also got angry. "Fuck! All of you, shut up. By cussing like that, you're revealing our numbers. Earlier, they couldn't tell how many of us were here."

Everyone: "..."

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but chuckle silently. Right, even I hadn't thought of that point—or hadn't even considered that approach. He probably had plenty of experience, since he'd often led over a hundred soldiers everywhere to suppress bandits.

This militia truly lacked discipline and was still far from being regular troops. Cheng Xu would have plenty to teach them.

Just as Li Daoxuan thought of this, he saw the bandit army below beginning stealthy maneuvers.

The cursers at the front kept spewing insults toward the mountaintop, while a large group of bandits at the rear quietly slipped out of formation. Led by the Second Leader Sui Fengxiong and the Third Leader Erchun, they retreated silently backwards into the woods. Under the cover of the trees, they circled to a cliff face, then buried themselves and slipped into a ravine.

Li Daoxuan didn't have the skill to count how many people with one glance, so he had a camera snap a photo and handed it to a computer for scanning and identification. Soon, the computer reported: Four hundred people.

The bandit army dared not send too large a group because bigger numbers withdrawing might alert the militia atop the mountain. By splitting off only four hundred, they kept the militia believing their numbers stayed unchanged—all still piled at the front engaged in the cursing battle.

Sui Fengxiong and Erchun were both fierce bandits known for their height, build, and skill in fighting, as were all four hundred underlings—no elderly and weak, women and children.

At the very front was a guide, an herbalist forcibly brought from a village just east of here. He knew the mountain terrain nearby extremely well and led these four hundred fierce bandits into the ravine. Stealthily, they wound their way uphill.

Li Daoxuan saw that the direction these four hundred were heading was precisely where Cheng Xu had sent Xing Honglang to ambush. He couldn't help silently praising: Cheng Xu does have some merit. Right after sizing up the terrain, he predicted the bandit army's movements. A capable warrior like him—why was he just a lowly ninth-rank inspector? Shouldn't they give him more room to grow? Instead, they sent Imperial Guards to kill him?

Alas! The Ming court! The Ming court!

Meanwhile...

Quangou Village!

Fang Wushang, the newly appointed patrol officer, stood on high ground, gazing toward Heyang County. County Magistrate Liang Shixian had claimed the bandit army would definitely pass through Quangou Village, but after waiting and waiting endlessly here, they didn't show. Where had those bandits gone off to?

A deputy inspector suddenly dashed over, shouting loudly, "General Fang, big trouble! Fan Shanyue of Heyang hasn't come this way. Instead, he's headed toward Gaojia Village."

Fang Wushang instantly panicked. "Fuck! That fool Liang Shixian. I thought he was so impressive, swearing up and down that the bandits would come to Quangou Village. Turns out he was blustering. Depart at once, for Gaojia Village!"

The deputy officer said, "It's over ten miles of mountain path. We can't make it in time!"

Fang Wushang fumed, "We'll make it even if we can't. Move! Fast, fast, fast!"

...

Xing Honglang and her group waited quietly for a while before any noise came from the ravine.

Sui Fengxiong and Erchun crouched low, guiding four hundred fierce bandits as they sneakily crept along the bottom of the gully.

As they moved, the two kept muttering awkwardly under their breath.

“Damn it,” said Erchun. “I spotted Xing Honglang just now. That bunch throwing stones from the hillside—those are her underlings.”

Sui Fengxiong replied, “Really?”

Erchun said, “I was in the very front, really close to the top of that slope. I looked up and saw that Xing woman staring down straight at me.”

Sui Fengxiong cursed softly, “That bitch of a woman actually teamed up with the militia to fight us. Absolutely outrageous—a traitor to the outlaw world.”

Erchun said, “Once we sneak up to the top and attack from behind, they won’t be able to hurl rolling logs and stones anymore. Our big brother can lead the main force up the front for a pincer attack. We’ll take that woman alive. I’ll make her regret ever being born.”

“Good!” Sui Fengxiong said. “I’ll help you capture that woman alive, Second Brother.”

Just as they finished speaking, a loud, coarse woman’s voice rang out overhead, “Erchun, Momma sees ya!”

Sui Fengxiong and Erchun started and hastily looked up.

Atop the cliff on one side of the ravine, Xing Honglang's head popped out. In the next split second, a salt smuggler also poked his head over and threw a rolling log down below.

"Fuck!" Sui Fengxiong and Erchun were terrified and scrambled to both sides.

A rumble erupted as rolling logs and stones rained down from the ravine's edge, pummeling the four hundred fierce bandits below.

Despite being fierce, bandits were still human.

Humans couldn't withstand such insane attacks with rolling logs and stones. In the blink of an eye, cries of agony filled the valley. The four hundred fierce bandits got battered, scattering and fleeing in utter defeat.

Many bandits grew fearful and started retreating the way they came.

But Erchun did justify the "chun" ("fool") in his name. Xing Honglang's appearance had scrambled his mind. Amazingly, he didn't retreat—instead, he shrieked like mad and charged forward.

Maybe luck shielded him. The rolling logs and stones didn't hit directly, letting him rush all the way out of the ravine. Along a slope, he sped like the wind toward Xing Honglang...

Two salt smugglers immediately lunged to intercept. Xing Honglang waved thickly and shouted loudly, "Back off, everyone! Momma will take revenge herself."

Chapter 164: Time for 50 Arguments

A subordinate became anxious: "Boss, your arm is still injured."

Xing Honglang laughed heartily: "Erchun's arm isn't injured?"

Everyone: "Well..."

Xing Honglang: "No one come over to hinder my revenge."

After speaking, she drew her waist knife with her uninjured left hand.

Erchun also roared and drew his waist knife with his left hand.

It turned out that during their last encounter in the scattered troops, they had exchanged several blows, each wounding the other's right arm, so now both could only wield knives left-handed.

Erchun roared: "Xing Honglang, today it's either your death or mine."

Xing Honglang also roared: "Worthless thief without any chivalry; the name of forest heroes has been tarnished by fools like you."

"Argh!" Erchun stepped forward and swung his waist knife.

Xing Honglang raised her waist knife to meet it.

In the blink of an eye, the two were locked in fierce combat; their waist knives swung wildly, striking sparks. The salt smugglers nearby wanted to help but dared not disobey Xing Honglang's order, so they turned around and continued heaving rolling logs and stones, pelting them chaotically at the bandit army in the ravine.

The battle cries from that side immediately carried over to where Cheng Xu stood.

Gao Chuwu grew nervous; he glanced toward Xing Honglang's direction before turning back, almost blurting out, "I want to go help her."

But after daily lessons in discipline and rules from Gao Yiye, he was no longer the impetuous oaf; his mind was filled with "I must obey orders," so he clamped his mouth shut.

Cheng Xu sensed Gao Chuwu's agitation; he raised an eyebrow and looked down at Fan Shanyue...

As expected, Fan Shanyue began to act, dispatching large groups of bandit troops to climb the mountain.

Cheng Xu lowered his voice: “Gao Chuwu, I’ll give you the time of one incense stick. Run over to help Xing Honglang, then come straight back without delay. Can you do it?”

Gao Chuwu: “How long is one incense stick?”

Everyone: “...”

Cheng Xu: “The time it takes for you and Zheng Daniu to argue for 50 exchanges. Go now.”

Gao Chuwu understood immediately; arguing for 50 exchanges was easy—he could pretend to bicker with Daniu and time it perfectly.

He suddenly spoke up: “Daniu, you’re too dumb; you don’t get this.”

People nearby stared in confusion.

Gao Chuwu mimicked Zheng Daniu’s voice: “You’re the idiot; I’m very smart.”

Everyone: “...”

This counted as one argument exchange; while speaking these words, Gao Chuwu had already leaped several zhang away.

Everyone: “!!!”

Gao Chuwu: “Daniu, you got it wrong; this mechanism here is correct.”

After uttering that sentence, he dashed out another two or three zhang.

“This one of mine is clearly right... That one of yours is wrong...”

After speaking these words, Gao Chuwu had already vanished behind the small hill ahead.

Everyone collectively drew a sharp breath: “That guy!”

Cheng Xu shouted loudly, “Stop looking at that idiot. Attention! Fan Shanyue is ascending the mountain. Everyone, prepare the rolling logs and stones!”

The militia responded, “Yes, sir!”

The group spun around to see Fan Shanyue’s men fanning out, beginning their climb up the hill. Those leading the way were fierce bandits courting death. As they scrambled upwards, they constantly darted behind large stones to take cover. Only after seeing no rocks thrown from the mountaintop would they dash madly further up the slope before ducking behind the next large stone.

Cheng Xu laughed heartily, “Forget if they hide or not. We have plenty of rolling logs. Smash them!”

Ground Rabbit was once again the first to strike, shoving a colossal log down the mountainside. It rumbled and tumbled its way down...

...

Xing Honglang and Erchun had exchanged over ten moves in the blink of an eye.

Real combat wasn’t like a martial arts novel, where trading one to two hundred moves was laughable exaggeration. In a life-or-death struggle, victory or defeat was often decided in two or three moves. However, both were fighting with their left hands, making their movements less fluid than usual and resulting in a somewhat protracted clash.

Erchun roared insanely with each slash of his blade.

Xing Honglang, in contrast, remained quite calm, silent and collected as she struck.

More than ten moves later, Xing Honglang finally spotted a flaw in Erchun's defense. Her left-hand blade flashed, a thud sounded, and it cut deeply into Erchun's flank.

Erchun howled in agony and tumbled backwards.

Delighted, Xing Honglang stepped forward, raising her blade to cleave his neck.

Just as she was about to finish Erchun with that stroke, a furious roar erupted beside her. A bear-shaped man charged like a bull. Two salt smugglers leapt forward to block him but were sent flying with two thumps.

In the next instant, the man was upon Xing Honglang, swinging a thick wooden staff straight down at her head.

"Sui Fengxiong!" Xing Honglang gasped in shock. She quickly retracted her blade to block. Clang! She managed to block the blow, but fighting left-handed meant insufficient strength, while Sui Fengxiong wielded his staff with both arms. The force disparity was simply too vast.

Xing Honglang felt a jolt of numbness shoot through her wrist. Her waist knife flew from her grip.

Sui Fengxiong roared, "Oorah!" and swept his staff horizontally, aiming for Xing Honglang's waist.

This is bad! Xing Honglang thought desperately. This strike... I can't dodge in time...

Just glimpsing its power, she knew she was likely in for a serious injury.

Li Daoxuan also reached his hand out, ready to intervene.

At that very moment, an angry shout rang out from behind: “Daniu, you idiot! You knocked the water bucket over again!”

Xing Honglang: “???”

Sui Fengxiong: “???”

What was this nonsensical line supposed to mean?

Before either could react, a giant of a man, as large and powerful as Sui Fengxiong, charged forth. With a whoosh, he barreled into the combat zone and collided thump into Sui Fengxiong.

Two giants colliding produced a massive, dull thud.

Sui Fengxiong stumbled backward – thump, thump, thump, thump, thump – five heavy steps before managing to steady himself. He glared and saw standing before him a man clad in iron armor, even more brawny than a bear.

Sui Fengxiong exclaimed, “Who are you?”

Gao Chuwu retorted, “I’m not the idiot. You’re the one who knocked the water bucket over!”

Sui Fengxiong: “???”

Xing Honglang: “???”

Sui Fengxiong: “Are you fucking insane?”

Gao Chuwu yelled back, "Daniu, hold your end steady!"

Sui Fengxiong: "???"

Gao Chuwu took a huge step forward. Whoosh! His fist shot towards Sui Fengxiong. The sheer momentum behind the punch was terrifying; the air pressure alone could make an ordinary person cower. Crucially, as he threw the punch, he muttered, "Chuwu, you've got an earthworm between your toes!"

Sui Fengxiong's eyes saw a ferocious fist hurtling at him, but his ears heard utterly incongruous and baffling dialogue. The sheer cognitive dissonance created a tearing sensation in his mind, momentarily paralyzing his thoughts. Mental contamination +999! His brain stalled for a split second, leaving him incapable of properly reacting.

Gao Chuwu's fist landed smack in the center of Sui Fengxiong's face.

The single punch exploded Sui Fengxiong's face, snapping his neck. As darkness claimed him, tumbling toward the abyss, he faintly heard the attacker add in an utterly bizarre tone, "Daniu, I've lifted my end. Put some muscle into yours!"

Sui Fengxiong's world plunged into blackness. He was off to register with Yama Wang.

Xing Honglang decisively swung her blade, lopping off Erchun's head.

She turned around, ready to thank Gao Chuwu.

But Gao Chuwu beat her to it. Gazing deeply into her eyes, his face etched with exaggerated concern, he said, "Daniu, you're so clever."

Xing Honglang's rage meter instantly filled: "What the hell are you babbling about, you bastard?!"

Chapter 165: Officials Arrived

Gao Chuwu didn't answer Xing Honglang's question, afraid it might break his quarreling rhythm. Once interrupted, he'd lose count of their exchanged barbs. He simply turned and charged toward the mouth of the ravine—the sole manageable slope for attackers.

Erchun and Sui Fengxiong had scaled the slope moments before, inspiring fierce bandits who followed with renewed hope. Ducking rolling logs from both sides, they hurled themselves toward that slope.

Suddenly a roar came: "Chuwu, slow down!"

Bandits looked up to see a man more imposing than a bear atop the slope. Clad in two-panel armor, he stood with arms outstretched, his overwhelming presence suffocating.

One fierce bandit lunged upward. Clang! His blade struck Gao Chuwu's two-panel armor.

Gao Chuwu countered with a punch that flung the attacker backward. The bandit crashed onto the slope and tumbled down.

Instantly, the bandits recognized it: his martial skills were marginal, but raw strength was terrifying.

"Attack his legs! Two-panel armor can't guard there!"

Another bandit scrambled up, rusted sword slashing at Gao Chuwu's calf.

Gao Chuwu was overwhelmed—strike imminent—when Xing Honglang flashed forward beside him. Her left hand swung a blade, Ding! Blocking the rusty strike.

Gao Chuwu kicked the bandit's gut, sending him spinning through the air.

Xing Honglang yelled, "Are you an idiot? Why fight with fists when you have a spear?"

Gao Chuwu jolted awake. He had an iron spear—stored forgotten on his back. He snatched it off his shoulder, sweeping horizontally at the advancing bandits: "Daniu! Catch! Wine jars incoming!"

His spear technique had no refinement—just crude sweeps and thrusts learned from Cheng Xu—yet each wild swing carried terrifying force. Bandits scrambled backward on the slope. A misplaced step sent them pinwheeling downhill, knocking others behind them off their feet.

More surged uphill. Gao Chuwu's spear slashed left, right, sweeping wide. Within several meters radius, no one could keep standing.

Stalled on the slope, bandits became targets for the salt smugglers lining the ravine cliffs. Rolling logs crushed downward; screams echoed through the gully.

Their morale shattered.

Someone yelled, "Retreat!"

Surviving bandits turned and fled.

The salt smugglers cheered: "Victory again!"

Xing Honglang grinned, glancing at the fleeing bandit army and Erchun's corpse. Good. Revenge achieved. This fight wasn't wasted. Heh heh heh.

Gao Chuwu burst into laughter: "Chuwu! Your head was as slow as a pig's!"

Xing Honglang: "???"

Gao Chuwu: "Fifty bickers finished. Time to leave."

With whirlwind stride, he vanished instantly.

Veins bulged on Xing Honglang's fists: "Next time we meet, I'm thrashing him without a word."

At Cheng Xu's position, salt smugglers rolled logs down slopes for sport.

Fan Shanyue employed some strategy this time. He kept his main force back. Only a few hundred fierce bandits ventured uphill—darting between boulders like children playing hide-and-seek. Slow but steady advance.

This method of advancing was slow, and very few men were participating in the assault.

But it didn't matter. There weren't many people on the mountaintop; he had already discerned that during the earlier bickering.

If just two or three hundred fighters charged up, tangled with the defenders on the peak, and prevented them from hurling down the massive logs, his main force could swiftly scale the mountain. Victory would be his.

Besides, there were also Sui Fengxiong and Erchun's units circling around the ravines to attack from the rear. Their success would create the same strategic advantage.

There was absolutely no need to panic. Take it slow!

With eight thousand men in his army, how could he possibly lose?

Watching the bandit army inch their way torturously up the hill, Cheng Xu snickered inwardly. Just these two or three hundred pathetic souls, cowering behind rocks—they actually thought they could reach the summit? Wait till they enter the range of my men's hand crossbows, and they'll immediately be met with a volley...

As he was planning this flawless tactic, Gao Chuwu came lumbering back. "Instructor He, I'm back! The fifty phrases of bickering are done!"

Cheng Xu: "Oh. Rejoin the ranks."

Gao Chuwu: "On my way back, running, I saw officials coming up the southern mountain path, way off in the distance."

Cheng Xu made a surprised sound ("Huh?"), then instantly realized: the newly appointed Patrol Officer Fang Wushang had arrived. This new patrol seemed quite diligent. He must have rushed rashly here upon receiving news that the bandit army had entered Chengcheng County through this pass.

The man had guts, even bolder than he was.

His eyes flickered over the armor worn by the militia. "My men are wearing plate, he thought. That's the capital crime of treason. Can't let Fang Wushang see this. Might as well let him fight this battle."

Commander Cheng Xu waved his hand and shouted: "All forces, cease! Retreat immediately!"

His men were momentarily stunned.

Ground Rabbit protested: "This rabbit was just enjoying the fighting! If we retreat now..."

Cheng Xu lashed out with a kick, sending Ground Rabbit tumbling. "After I speak, your only permissible response is 'Yes, Commander!' Stop spouting useless crap."

The others swiftly echoed: "Yes, Commander!"

Ground Rabbit had once again been made an example of. He lay sprawled pathetically, not daring to get up.

"Retreat! Retreat! Oh right, tell Xing Honglang's forces to withdraw with us!"

Soon, Cheng Xu's troops met up with Xing Honglang's band. Xing Honglang had clearly seen the officials arrive too; the retreat didn't surprise her in the least. She just chuckled. "Let's not go too far. Fall back and enjoy the show. If the officials can't hold, we might still need to step in."

Cheng Xu nodded and pointed towards a small slope west of Zhengjia Village. "Fall back behind this slope! Hide and watch!"

The group quickly withdrew to the western slope. It was strewn with jagged rocks and withered, twisted trees. Hidden among them, they were hard to spot.

Their withdrawal instantly boosted the confidence of the He Yang bandits struggling up the slope. "The logs and stones have stopped thundering down from the peak!"

"Hahaha! They must be out of rolling logs!"

"Charge! Charge! Rush them!"

The He Yang bandits broke into desperate sprints towards the mountaintop.

Meanwhile...

The newly appointed Patrol Officer Fang Wushang was also roaring: "Charge! Do you hear the fighting ahead?! The militia are already engaged with the bandits! We must hurry!"

His force of over a hundred officials instantly picked up their pace, racing frantically towards the sounds of battle.

It was at that precise moment that the first wave of fierce bandits crested the ridge!

Free from the threat of rolling logs and stones, the leading group of bandits quickly reached the plateau summit. They immediately caught sight of... Zhengjia Village and its promising wheat field spread below them.

“Huh? There’s a wheat field right here?”

“A wheat field!”

The fierce bandits surged forward, charging headlong towards the field.

Chapter 166: Fierce Fang Wushang

The fastest fierce bandit was about to leap into the wheat field when suddenly, duang—he smashed headfirst into something extremely solid. The sensation felt little different from crashing against a brick wall.

The collision was too abrupt. Unable to slow his momentum, the fierce bandit lacked the strength to endure it. Instantly, his head was bleeding, and he toppled backward.

“Duang! Duang! Duang!”

Three more fierce bandits who couldn’t stop in time slammed into the invisible barrier.

All three collapsed.

“Halt! Don’t charge toward the wheat field!”

The other fierce bandits finally sensed something was wrong.

A massive, transparent wall separated them from the golden wheat field.

“What’s going on?”

“What evil sorcery is this?”

The bandit troops stared, dumbfounded.

The wheat field remained visible... yet untouchable.

Just then, a furious roar echoed from the southern mountain path: "Bandits dare to invade my Chengcheng?"

With rhythmic hoofbeats, Patrol Officer Fang Wushang arrived.

Hot-tempered and impatient, he spotted the bandits and spurred his horse forward before his foot soldiers could catch up.

The horse raced far ahead, leaving his troops far behind. Now, he was a lone commander charging solo onto the battlefield—facing two hundred fierce bandits alone.

Not a trace of fear in him. "Hyah!" he shouted, reins clutched in his left hand and a spear in his right. He charged straight at the fierce bandits.

Cheng Xu gasped. "How can a patrol officer be so fiercely brave?"

Beside him, Xing Honglang rolled her eyes. "Did you think everyone's like that cowardly former Patrol Officer Cheng Xu? Officers who flee bandits? Truly bizarre."

Cheng Xu coughed. "Well... Cheng Xu had his merits. He knew when to advance and retreat. He understood his enemy... He routed Wang Er, Bu Zhan Ni, and Zuo Guazi! Who else in Chengcheng matches him?"

Xing Honglang snorted. "That's just talk! Before learning of the Deity's power, I'd assumed those were Cheng Xu's exploits. But now? Surely the Deity defeated those three foes with magic. Cheng Xu must've been a weakling—every rumor says so."

Cheng Xu sighed. "...Enough. Let's shift topics." He pointed ahead. "Watch Fang Wushang now."

Astride a galloping horse and spear leveled, Fang Wushang charged headlong toward the bandits.

Like rogue fighters encountering police, the fierce bandits panicked. Instead of fighting, they scattered toward the hillside—a move that unwittingly saved Fang Wushang. Otherwise, he'd have collided head-on with them and likely reported to Yama Wang.

Fang Wushang wheeled his horse toward the eastern slope near Zhengjia Village, without entering the village itself. His spear flashed once. Thwack! One fierce bandit dropped dead, pierced through. Just as he withdrew his spear, his horse had already bolted forward another few yards. Soon, he struck again. Thwack! Another fell with a lethal wound.

Xing Honglang watched, awestruck. "He's merely a patrol officer... yet matches any forest hero I've seen. Quite a ruthless man."

Cheng Xu snorted. "It's nothing exceptional. Give me a horse and spear—I'd match him blow for blow, hmph! Those who rise from nothing must truly rely on their skills."

Xing Honglang raised her eyebrows. "Oh? You can do that?"

Cheng Xu realized his blunder and immediately shut his mouth.

In truth, most Ming Dynasty military officers held positions through hereditary privilege. From the rank of captain upward, posts were hereditary. One didn't have to be exceptional; having a competent father was enough.

Hereditary officers often treasured their lives, avoiding actual combat, thus their martial skills remained rudimentary.

Conversely, those who climbed the ranks through battlefield achievements likely earned their titles by decapitating foes in combat, becoming highly skilled in archery and horse riding.

Simply put.

If Yuan Chonghuan were to duel Cheng Xu, Yuan would likely lose nine times out of ten.

But if the two were to command large armies in battle, Cheng would likely lose to Yuan nine times out of ten.

By this time, Fang Wushang had already plunged into carnage. With just his steed and spear, he wheeled among the bandit troops. Those two hundred fierce bandits found none who could withstand a single thrust, and in the blink of an eye, seven or eight were run through.

Had the fierce bandits carried long spears, they might have barely countered a cavalry charge. But as the “climbing assault force,” each bore only a sword for mobility.

Hoping to oppose a mounted spearman with mere swords? That was simply wishful thinking.

Unable to form ranks, they were disoriented and outmaneuvered as Fang Wushang galloped circles around them.

Soon, Fang Wushang’s subordinates arrived. The deputy inspector led one hundred regular soldiers charging in. The two hundred fierce bandits turned: “Officials are coming!”

A single officer had already battered them. Now a large contingent of officials appeared – disaster struck.

Morale crumbled instantly.

The officials swept through unscathed. The fierce bandits fell dead or wounded, and in panic, tumbled back down the slope they had just scaled.

Fang Wushang galloped to the slope’s edge. Peering down, he saw the main force of the He Yang bandits climbing. He chuckled darkly. “Men! Quickly find rolling logs and stones. We’ll smash them to pulp.”

The deputy inspector pointed to a large pile nearby. "General Fang, many wooden posts are stacked here. Someone has prepared them for us."

Fang Wushang turned, baffled. "Eh?"

But understanding dawned. "The militia local gentry of Gaojia Village must have planned to hold this ground against the bandit army, preparing rolling logs and stones to rain down. But those militia fellows are cowards. Seeing the bandits near the crest, they fled, abandoning this mess to us."

His men grasped the truth. "So that's it."

Li Daoxuan inwardly applauded. Brilliant deduction! With wits like yours, even Sherlock Holmes would kneel in admiration.

Fang Wushang brightened. "Heaven aids us indeed! These rolling logs and stones left by the militia shall be ours gratefully. Men! Heave them downward!"

The soldiers promptly hoisted the rolling logs and stones, hurling them chaotically down the mountainside.

This spelled a world of misfortune for Fan Shanyue. Victory seemed within reach only moments ago. How could he expect the militia at the summit to transform into officials? Down came the logs again! His main force couldn't nimbly duck behind rocks; there simply wasn't space.

The logs tumbled, once again turning the mountain path into a scene of rearing horses, fallen men, and harrowing screams.

Fan Shanyue looked up, meeting the gaze of Fang Wushang looking down from the slope's edge.

Fang Wushang roared, "Fool of a bandit! Remember your grandfather's name: Fang Wushang, Patrol Officer of Chengcheng! As long as I guard Chengcheng County, not one step of its soil shall your kind tread!"

Fan Shanyue yelled back, “Damned, you’re not Cheng Xu! I’m not afraid of you at all!”

Fang Wushang: “?”

Rage!

Fury ignited in Fang Wushang. This scoundrel implies I’m inferior to that soft persimmon Cheng Xu who falsifies military merit? That fool fabricated reports of Wang Er’s death, exaggerated bandit numbers, deceived his superiors, obscured truths – not a shred of honesty in his memorials.

Every word of his merit is exaggerated!

That piece of trash, how dare his name be spoken alongside mine?

Fang Wushang uttered a guttural roar, raising his spear to charge downhill.

His deputy inspector desperately wrapped his arms around the general’s waist, shouting, “General, calm your wrath! Calm your wrath! Don’t demean yourself by grappling with bandit scum!”

Chapter 167: Cannot Pursue

Fang Wushang was furious and really wanted to charge down the slope to fight Fan Shanyue.

But at this moment, Fan Shanyue was already thinking of retreat.

He would dare to charge against the militia on the mountain, but he didn’t dare charge against officials.

While he was hesitating, someone came to report from behind: “Boss, great misfortune! Second Leader and Third Leader were ambushed by Xing Honglang and killed. They’re both dead.”

Fan Shanyue was greatly shocked, tears streaming down. “Second Brother, Third Brother.”

“Aaahhhh!” Fan Shanyue raised his head to the sky and let out a cry of anguish. After the cry, he lowered his head and loudly ordered: “Retreat!”

The bandit army began retreating again, sliding and scrambling down the mountain slope.

Seeing the bandits retreat, Fang Wushang was immediately overjoyed. “Pursue!”

The deputy inspector grabbed him urgently, crying out, “Cannot pursue, cannot pursue.”

Fang Wushang raged, “Grabbing me just now to stop me from charging down the slope was somewhat understandable! But now the bandits have retreated, so why are you still stopping me?”

The deputy inspector said, “Once we go down this slope, it’s the territory of Heyang County.”

Fang Wushang’s movement froze.

He was the Patrol Officer of Chengcheng, not the Patrol Officer of Heyang. If he led troops into Heyang County’s territory, it was overstepping his authority. If someone spoke up for him in the court, it would be seen as daringly fighting bandits—charging past the county boundary without realizing it would be a great merit, worthy of heavy reward.

But if someone in the court wanted to trap him, it would be considered abandoning his jurisdiction and leading troops across boundaries, engaging in suspicious actions, possibly rebellion—a serious crime punishable by beheading.

Fang Wushang was not afraid of bandits, but he feared the scholar-official’s pen, sharp as a blade.

His movement frozen, he let out a long sigh. “Enough. We won’t pursue.”

The deputy inspector also sighed in relief. This new leader was reckless; keeping him in check was truly difficult. Compared to him, the previous leader Cheng Xu was much more resourceful; he didn’t need any persuasion—he’d been the one teaching this approach.

The deputy inspector missed his former superior a little. General Cheng, ah, I hope your spirit in the heavens is doing well now?

“Achoo!” Cheng Xu sneezed.

“Clear the battlefield!” Fang Wushang tossed out the order and sat down to the side, leaving matters for others, his eyes watching the bandit army slowly leave at the foot of the mountain, a bitter taste in his heart.

As a soldier, seeing bandits within easy reach yet unable to pursue just because it was the border between two counties was incredibly frustrating.

The soldiers busied themselves, cutting off the bandits’ ears to take back for claiming credit, then haphazardly burying their corpses.

They were working enthusiastically when a soldier reported.

“Report, General! We discovered a large number of bandit corpses in the ravine beside us.”

“In the ravine beside us?”

Fang Wushang was greatly puzzled and quickly led people over. At one glance, he saw the bodies of Sui Fengxiong and Erchun slumped at the ravine entrance, and upon looking further into the ravine, dozens more bandits lay scattered haphazardly inside.

“Hmmm! Could this be the work of the Gaojia Village Militia?”

“It should be,” the deputy inspector stepped forward and said in a low voice. “The Gaojia Village Militia is no simple force. Wang Er once raided Gaojia Village at night, resulting in severe injury to Wang Er himself and the deaths of Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao... but this matter is only known to us. Officially, the credit all went to General Cheng Xu.”

Fang Wushang's eyebrows jumped. "So that's how it is! Seems I underestimated the Gaojia Village Militia before."

Just as they were speaking, shouts arose from the slope west of Zhengjia Village. A large group of people emerged—the Gaojia Village Militia had arrived.

Cheng Xu, Xing Honglang, and the salt smugglers had already withdrawn. The militia members had also taken off their armor, handing it over to the salt smugglers to take back to Gaojia Village. Many wore only an undershirt. Led by Ground Rabbit, they walked toward Fang Wushang.

Ground Rabbit was quite surprised to receive the order to temporarily lead the group.

He had thought that based on seniority, it should have been Gao Chuwu or Zheng Daniu leading, but after thinking carefully, those two simpletons couldn't possibly understand how to act out a play, so him stepping forward was easily understandable.

Hehehe, I, Mr. Rabbit, am a clever person and will surely shoulder the heavy responsibility my master entrusted to me.

Ground Rabbit sauntered up to Fang Wushang and pretended to bow respectfully: "General Fang, you repelled the bandits? That's truly impressive. Thank you so much."

Fang Wushang looked, hadn't that been that stupid and clumsy fool he tripped over? Was he really the militia leader? Wasn't this a mistake?

"Hmph!" Fang Wushang snorted coldly: "Your militia fought quite well too. Were these rolling logs and stones prepared by you? And those bandits killed by hitting in the ravine, that was your doing?"

Ground Rabbit laughed heartily, looking up at the sky: "Hahaha, correct, these were all my accomplishments. Hahaha, I fought off the mass of bandits and am already unmatched under heaven."

Fang Wushang said: "Then why weren't you guarding by the slope when I arrived?"

Ground Rabbit replied: "I retreated to advance, to find better opportunities."

Fang Wushang was furious: "Why not just admit you were running away?"

"Running away? How could I run away?" Ground Rabbit swiftly drew out his rusty sword: "I led the team to ambush outside the village, waiting for the bandits to come. Then I unleashed my ultimate skill 'Celestial Rabbit Sword' and killed them all cleanly."

Fang Wushang said: "Alright, you can get lost now."

Ground Rabbit: "..."

Fang Wushang shook his head: "I had thought the Gaojia Village Militia had some skill, but I really overestimated them. Speaking with such exaggeration, they're just like Cheng Xu, cut from the same cloth."

He couldn't be bothered to deal with Ground Rabbit anymore and sat down on the slope, continuing to watch the retreating bandit army.

Ground Rabbit chuckled slyly to himself; the mission was complete! Instructor He had told him to go out for a spin, spew nonsense, and prevent the officials from getting suspicious. Now the task was done, so he could just pat his rear and vanish.

"Then we're off," Ground Rabbit said: "We still need to go back and practice martial arts. So busy, so busy."

He winked at the people behind him, and the group hurriedly made their escape.

They had only slipped away a couple of steps when the deputy inspector yelled out loudly: "Stop! Why are you running? Come lend a hand, help bury the bodies."

Ground Rabbit replied: "I only take care of killing, not burying."

The deputy inspector was torn between annoyance and amusement; someone so dismissive was rare. Most common folk cower in fear when seeing officials, but this guy calling himself 'Mr. Rabbit' truly wasn't intimidated: "Cut the nonsense and come help! If the bodies aren't buried and a plague breaks out, your Gaojia Village will be the first hit."

This startled Ground Rabbit terribly. Alright, after handling the killing, he'd manage the burying too. Otherwise, if rabbit plague erupted, this Mr. Rabbit might not be able to bear it.

So, the soldiers and civilians worked together, digging pits and interring the bodies, with the group laboring enthusiastically.

Li Daoxuan saw this and knew it was unnecessary to keep watching any longer. In this battle, he hadn't interfered much at all, merely providing a few rolling logs and helping Cheng Xu fly up to survey the terrain. He hadn't provided any of his own insane toy weapons again, yet the little people still fought excellently.

It seemed his approach was right; letting them stand on their own and grow stronger was the proper thing for this poop-scooper—ahem—caretaker—to do.

Alright, time to head out and get a set of comic books from my old man.

Oh, before stepping out, I'll grab the fish tank; it would be useful later.

Chapter 168: How Can This Be Bad?

As the sky darkened, Li Daoxuan returned from his parents' house.

He had intended to grab the comic books and leave immediately, but his parents, hearing he was coming, had prepared a lavish feast—far superior to his usual takeout, easily thirty-two times better, nearly matching the grandeur of a New Year's Eve dinner. He stayed for dinner. It was certainly enjoyable, but it ran late. By the time he returned home carrying a large bundle of Yang Family Generals comic books, the sun had already begun to sink below the western hills.

He quickly pulled out the comic books, carefully turned the pages, placed them in the scanner, scanned them, then used the printer to shrink and print tiny pages...

Of course, his so-called “tiny page” was still enormous to the little people and couldn’t be given to them directly. It needed to be reworked using the little people’s printing technology.

The scanner and printer whirred and clattered away.

Li Daoxuan casually shifted his perspective to observe the little people’s situation.

The mess in Zhengjia Village had been cleaned up. The He Yang bandits wouldn’t dare attack again anytime soon. Fang Wushang had withdrawn his troops to report the victory in a memorial. He likely wouldn’t pen a nonsense memorial like Cheng Xu had.

The militia returned to the village, each one beaming with joy.

Xing Honglang was also in excellent spirits. Forest heroes relish vengeance. Having killed Erchun today to avenge her people was a great joy. She had her subordinates bring over a jar of Wu Liang Ye they were selling as goods, and the salt smugglers shared it among themselves to drink.

The result was everyone collapsed, plastered; not a single one remained standing. The modern liquor was far too potent for them; it worked better than knock-out drugs.

It was at this moment that Gao Chuwu came knocking. He had wanted to speak with Xing Honglang but found the plastic mansion filled with drunks sprawled out every which way.

Gao Chuwu could only pick up the salt smugglers one by one and carefully tuck them into bed. The chill of early spring made it easy to fall sick. He didn’t dare move Xing Honglang, however. She was a girl; he didn’t dare touch her recklessly. So he left her alone in the middle of the great hall.

Meanwhile, Cheng Xu, victorious in battle, returned without much joy. He sat alone on the high watchtower corner, lifted his cloth mask, and drank a small jar of wine by himself. Perhaps he still felt some attachment to his former official rank as a ninth-grade military officer of the court.

Watching the varied states of his little people, Li Daoxuan couldn’t help but chuckle quietly to himself.

The sound of the printer behind him ceased. The first volume of Yang Family Generals was printed.

Li Daoxuan shifted his gaze to the watchtower.

Gao Yiye was weaving cloth under the lamp. Cotton threads crisscrossed and connected on her weaving machine, forming cotton cloth that slid out.

“Yiye!” Li Daoxuan called softly.

Gao Yiye let out an “Ah,” quickly stopped weaving, and jumped up. “Deity!”

Li Daoxuan smiled. “Find Thirty-Two. I wish to discuss something with him.”

Gao Yiye hurried into action. She dashed down the watchtower with pattering steps, reached the “discussion hall” of the Hakka roundhouse, and beside it was the “main well,” where Thirty-Two resided.

After knocking on his door and summoning him to the central courtyard, both stood ready to respectfully receive the Deity’s instructions.

Only then did Li Daoxuan pick up a sheet of paper and lower it down.

Thirty-Two peered closely. Descending from the heavens was a stiff sheet of paper larger than a person, emblazoned with a strange picture depicting a military man, though he couldn’t tell who it was.

Li Daoxuan offered no explanation. He lowered a second page, a third, a fourth...

After looking over several pages in succession, Thirty-Two finally understood. “Yang Family Generals! In pictures! Only pictures!”

Li Daoxuan responded, “After daybreak tomorrow, find the woodcarver. Have him carve printing blocks to reproduce this.”

Thirty-Two was momentarily puzzled, not quite grasping the Deity's intent. But after thinking it over carefully, he understood. "The Deity wishes to tell stories to the illiterate with a book made entirely of pictures."

"Correct," Li Daoxuan affirmed. "Many people are too old now to attend Mr. Wang's lessons. Yet they still need knowledge and education. A book filled only with pictures can educate them through entertainment, conveying essential lessons."

Thirty-Two said, "The Deity is benevolent, caring even for the affairs of these common citizens."

This was more than simply caring for them.

Li Daoxuan didn't voice the deeper reason...

The common citizens of that time severely lacked concepts like "nation" or "people." Many didn't even understand what patriotism meant. This wasn't unique to the Ming Dynasty; even into modern times, Mr. Lu Xun wrote the essay ("Diary of a Madman" / criticizing the numb common citizens) lamenting such numb fools.

Why were they numb?

Simply put, they lacked sufficient patriotic education!

When the Manchus' iron cavalry fiercely invaded, how many were truly willing to sacrifice their lives for the nation? If not for the majority being numb and indifferent, how could the Manchus have ever seated themselves firmly on the Han people's throne?

This Yang Family Generals comic book could serve as an excellent textbook for patriotic education, letting people see the stories of the loyal Yang family, shedding blood and sacrificing lives to protect the nation.

Thirty-Two bowed deeply towards the sky. “Thy servant respectfully complies with the Decree of the Deity.”

Watching the Deity in the sky gradually fade away, likely returning to the heavenly realm, Gao Yiye giggled softly. “This picture book is so fun! I was just completely absorbed in it.”

Thirty-Two thought, Oh? Has the Saint Lady never heard the story of the Yang Family Generals before? Right, Gaojia Village is remote. Few outsiders visit. The villagers’ experiences were limited. At best, they heard fragmented tales from the village elders. Hardly anyone has seen such a complete, bound story volume.

“It seems this book will be very popular,” he said. “Once it’s printed, we cannot give it to the villagers for free.” An idea sparked. “The Deity has bestowed too much food freely. Many villagers are slacking off now, not working. We should set a price and sell this book once printed. Use it to draw back some of the excess money from the villagers’ hands. We can pay the woodcarver with this money, giving him more motivation. When the villagers’ money is spent, they’ll also feel more inclined to work.”

Gao Yiye exclaimed, “Wow, Third Steward Thirty-Two, you are so bad!”

Thirty-Two replied, “How can this be bad? Freely distributing resources is intrinsically an irregular practice. The Deity gives grain freely because of the great drought – the villagers themselves cannot produce any grain. If we get accustomed to enjoying things for free, and deem anything we must pay for as ‘bad,’ then something has gone astray.”

Gao Yiye thought it over. “Ah! You’re right.”

Thirty-Two continued, “If the villagers were starving, I would absolutely never think of such less conventional methods. But right now, the villagers living within this fortress are getting rather lazy.”

“When the Deity gave them grain initially, He granted far too much at once. Many villagers still store ten gigantic grains of rice in their homes, enough to last years. Where is the incentive for them to work? Sooner or later, they’ll be looked down upon by the newcomers of Short-term Workers Village.”

Gao Yiye marveled, “Third Steward really talks sense.”

Chapter 169: The Deity Wants a Gunpowder Maker

Xing Honglang woke early.

Sleeping on the hard, cold plastic floor was anything but comfortable—it was a wonder she didn't wake even earlier.

She sat up and found a quilt draped over her. It felt odd. Which subordinate had covered their mistress with a blanket but failed to move her back to bed? Did they have shit for brains? Utterly clueless about caring for others.

Knocking her head throbbing from a hangover, she scrambled to her feet and yelled casually, "Old Zhu, Old Zhang! Who the hell's awake? Fetch your mistress some water!"

No one answered!

All the salt smugglers were sound asleep in their beds.

Xing Honglang circled the room. Seeing every subordinate sleeping like hogs, she resigned herself to getting water. Pouring a cup single-handedly, she drank it down before stumbling out of the plastic mansion.

Outside, daylight already flooded the area.

Just as usual, the villagers of Gaojia Village had begun their industrious labors: some engaged in road construction, others sawing wood. Meanwhile, the hundred or so militiamen drilled formations beside the main fortress.

Passing through clusters of plastic houses, she noticed "inns," "taverns," "markets," and "brothels" all standing empty. Unable to hold back, she muttered aloud, "Such a fine place with plenty of people, yet not a single merchant? Absolutely ridiculous."

"Does Miss Xing feel it too is amiss?" Thirty-Two emerged from a plastic structure resembling a "bookshop" ahead and smiled at her. "Miss Xing has seen the world—traveling widely, trading everywhere. In matters of commerce, you must have extensive knowledge and experience."

Xing Honglang replied, “Mhm!”

Thirty-Two asked humbly, “In Miss Xing’s opinion, does our Gaojia Village now meet the conditions to establish a market?”

Xing Honglang snapped, “Isn’t that obvious? Gaojia Village must have surpassed a thousand residents! Look around—colorful houses surround the main fortress everywhere. This is no longer a village; it’s a town! Have you ever seen a town without merchants?”

Thirty-Two tilted his head thoughtfully before smiling. “Quite right. A town devoid of merchants does seem bizarre. Hence, I’m pondering how to stimulate Gaojia Village’s commerce.”

Xing Honglang chuckled knowingly. “I know exactly why it’s lacking.”

Thirty-Two pressed, “I am all ears.”

Xing Honglang explained, “Your village provides wages too comprehensively—distributing grain, salt, oil, sugar... practically everything. What need have people for commerce? They consume their rations and sell any surplus even to me!”

The logic was undeniable. Thirty-Two flushed awkwardly. “That was during Gaojia Village’s infancy, when the Deity distributed necessities due to the absence of commerce. I see—time to adjust: carpenters receive only grain, no salt; blacksmiths only salt, no grain... compensated with increased quantities.”

Xing Honglang snorted approvingly. “Scholars’ minds work swiftly.”

Thanking her, Thirty-Two returned to the main fortress to draft a detailed “wage adjustment plan.” Revitalizing commerce was imperative.

Stumbling onward, Xing Honglang exited the “commercial street” and stopped at the hillside’s edge just as Gao Yiye hurried up the path. Her dignified attire contrasted with her lively pace.

Reaching Xing Honglang, Gao Yiye looked up cheerfully. "Sister Xing! The Deity seeks you. He has something to discuss."

Xing Honglang raised her head, offering a respectful salute skyward. Yesterday's spectacle of cascading rolling logs and Cheng Xu soaring had opened her eyes, granting stark clarity about the Deity's power. "What decree does the Deity bring?"

Gao Yiye whispered, "The Deity desires a 'gunpowder maker' brought to Gaojia Village."

"Oh?" Xing Honglang's brow furrowed slightly. "That won't be easy. The court watches gunpowder makers closely."

Gao Yiye smiled. "The Deity said if it were trivial, he wouldn't entrust it to you. He recognizes your exceptional talents, Miss Xing—specializing precisely in the 'difficult' business."

Xing Honglang grinned, basking briefly in the praise from a celestial entity.

Gao Yiye continued, "The Deity observed that with Heyang County now restless, returning to Shanxi for trade is impossible near-term. Your plan is surely Xi'an Prefecture next, correct?"

Xing Honglang nodded. "Indeed. Once my arm heals, Xi'an is my destination."

Gao Yiye said, "While in Xi'an, consider visiting the Official Workshops. Test the waters with a gunpowder maker. If..."

Xing Honglang caught on instantly. "If willing to flee, I escort him beyond imperial grasp to Gaojia Village?"

Gao Yiye cautioned, "It carries great risk. The Deity insists—attempt only if feasible without danger. Protect yourself above all. The slightest peril demands abandoning the mission."

Xing Honglang laughed heartily. “Raised by my father smuggling salt since infancy—always flirting with execution. Dodging authorities? My specialty! If I deem him unrecoverable, I won’t act. If I act? He’ll reach Gaojia Village, no government catching me!”

Gao Yiye beamed. “The Deity is pleased! He vowed not to forget your service should you succeed.”

Xing Honglang waved it off. “Unnecessary! When the Deity manifested, annihilated Erchun avenging me, I incurred a celestial debt. Fetching a gunpowder maker repays that vow.”

Gao Yiye giggled. “Equating Erchun and a gunpowder maker? Improper! The Deity views Erchun as worthless filth—the gunpowder maker, infinitely vital.”

Xing Honglang roared, “True! That Erchun was utterly worthless! Hahaha!”

As they laughed, distant cheers erupted.

Xing Honglang glanced curiously. “What commotion?”

Gao Yiye explained, “The cement road to Wangjia Village opens today. They celebrate its completion.”

“Oh?” Xing Honglang murmured. “That peculiar grey hard road.”

Gao Yiye nodded. “Yes. It lets the public sun chariots travel smoothly and faster. The Deity intends to pave it connecting all surrounding villages, but manpower is tight. This second stretch to Wangjia is just finished.”

Xing Honglang clicked her tongue admiringly. “Cover the world in such roads? Trade would soar! Pity—only a deity could bestow such treasures.”

Chapter 170: Master Ma of the Quanzhen Sect

Xing Honglang’s words actually gave Li Daoxuan a reminder.

Paving cement roads across the entire land was imperative, but that was a massive undertaking, requiring an astronomical amount of cement. It was impossible for Li Daoxuan to supply it all to the little people.

Now that the second cement road was completed, and the workers had gained much experience using cement during this construction process, it was about time for him to teach the ancient form of the cement formula to the villagers.

He opened his computer and logged into the frequently visited military history forum. Anonymously, he posted: Brothers, does anyone have the earliest cement formula? Could you share it? I'm writing a historical time-travel novel and want to teach ancients how to make cement.

Reply 1: For historical time-travel novels, focus on romancing ancient girls. Forget technology; we're sick of that.

Reply 2: First floor talks nonsense. Absolutely no romance! Not even female characters. All male cast. Hard sci-fi is what sells.

Reply 3: First floor weak-kneed at women, second floor terrified of women. Ignore both. Writing to please readers is a dead end. Follow your own rhythm. Ancient cement formula as follows: XXXXX

... followed by a pile of detailed technical materials.

Li Daoxuan thanked the third-floor user, copied the data, converted it to traditional characters with one click, printed a shrunken version, and placed it directly before Gao Yiye.

Gao Yiye was chatting with Xing Honglang at that very moment.

Suddenly, a huge sheet of paper descended from the sky. Even the reduced printout was many times larger than her entire body.

Gao Yiye could read some characters, but not many. A single glance made her dizzy.

Xing Honglang could also read some characters, but not many. Looking at it also made her dizzy.

The two women stared at the densely packed characters on the enormous paper before them, equally dizzy. “Deity, what is this...?”

Li Daoxuan: “Give this to the plasterers. Tell them to study it and mix cement according to these instructions. If they succeed, they will be heavily rewarded.”

This time, Gao Yiye and Xing Honglang understood. “This is the method to make those grey magical mud used for paving roads?”

Both women gasped, “Wow!”

Xing Honglang moved lightning fast. In a flash, she darted over and started rolling up the corner of the huge paper. Her only left hand made the operation awkward; she struggled to roll it for a while before urgently calling Gao Yiye. “Saint Lady, hurry and help! Roll up this paper.”

Gao Yiye was puzzled. “Why?”

Xing Honglang: “This is the method to mix immortal mud! An immortal prescription! If we took this to sell, someone would snatch it up even for tens of thousands of taels of gold. How can we let people casually see it?”

Gao Yiye: “Huh? It can sell for tens of thousands of taels?”

Xing Honglang: “You villagers never leave this place. You have no idea how many wealthy people exist outside. Especially those princes and nobles—pay any price for an immortal prescription without batting an eye.”

Gao Yiye finally understood and hurried to help. The two rolled up the enormous paper. Li Daoxuan looked down from the sky; the scene was rather amusing.

Actually, Li Daoxuan didn’t mind the cement formula spreading. He even preferred it to spread widely. But after more careful thought, the late Ming Dynasty was plagued by constant natural disasters, and

the common people barely had scraps. Previously, when Liang Shixian wanted to build a cement road, Thirty-Two had dissuaded him.

Because the common people truly couldn't handle any more exploitation right now.

It was right to temporarily keep the cement from spreading. Otherwise, some wealthy noble might impulsively decide on road construction and exhaust countless laborers to death.

The large paper was rolled up into a long cylinder.

Gao Yiye wanted to carry it back to the plasterers but couldn't lift it at all. Xing Honglang added her strength. The two girls hoisted the giant paper roll onto their shoulders—one at the front end, one at the back—as if carrying a huge log.

Huffing and puffing, they grunted as they carried the enormous paper roll into the artisans' well and tossed it before the plasterers. With a clap of their hands, their task was done.

While the two were busy with this, the newly built cement road simultaneously opened for traffic. A public sun chariot, carrying citizens from Wangjia Village, set off towards Wangjia Village...

Truthfully, Wangjia Village villagers had returned many times even before the road was fully built. They had already turned over the farmland and prepared for spring plowing. Still, with the cement road operational, everyone crowded onto the vehicle—packed to the brim—just to enjoy the ceremonial feeling of riding to farm.

What great joy! Life felt like it had reached its peak!

...

City God Temple, Chengcheng County, Side Hall.

Third Lady sat dignifiedly, eyes observing her nose, nose observing her heart—like a lofty master enlightened.

Before her, a large group of impoverished good citizens knelt prostrated.

More and more good citizens saved by Dao Xuan Deity's "divine medicine" were recovering. Each life saved turned an entire family into devout followers of Dao Xuan Deity. Consequently, the good citizens of Chengcheng County were embracing this "newly arrived" deity at a furious pace.

Outside the side hall door, however, stood a middle-aged Daoist priest. His expression was odd, eyes slanting as he silently observed the scene within.

The Daoist priest waited outside for a long time. Only after all the devout followers had finished chanting their scriptures and respectfully withdrew, leaving only Third Lady and her maid in the side hall, did the middle-aged Daoist finally push the door open, clasped his hands, and bowed his head in greeting: "This unworthy path follower is Ma Tianzheng, disciple of Great Master Wang of the Quanzhen Dragon Gate sect."

His self-introduction genuinely startled Third Lady. The Quanzhen Dragon Gate sect was an immensely famous Daoist school. The true full name of "Master Wang" was Wang Changyue. Over a hundred years old this year, he was the revitalizing ancestor of the Quanzhen Dragon Gate sect. For a cultivator like Third Lady, his fame had long been like thunder in her ears.

Third Lady dared not slight him and hurriedly returned the greeting. "Senior Brother, what guidance do you offer?"

Ma Tianzheng wore that strange expression: "This path follower has traveled under Heaven preaching. Passing through Chengcheng County Town, I heard an adept here speaks of a deity called Dao Xuan Deity—claiming he is a true god of our Daoist faith. I... I find myself somewhat perplexed..."

Third Lady: "Oh?"

Ma Tianzheng's tone was complex: "Prior, I have never heard the honored title 'Dao Xuan Deity.' I assumed it was due to my insufficient learning, so I deliberately consulted many ancient texts. Yet, I still found no record of Dao Xuan Deity... Regarding this matter, I request Senior Sister's instruction."

So that's it!

Third Lady smiled. "Frankly, before witnessing the Deity manifesting with my own eyes, I too had never heard the great name of Dao Xuan Deity. Yet, at the very moment I saw it, what needed questioning wasn't the existence of Dao Xuan Deity, but whether the ancient texts had been mistaken."

Ma Tianzheng's eyes narrowed. He thought inwardly: Manifested? Truly? I... I have lived over forty years, seeking immortals and inquiring of the Dao daily, yet I have never witnessed a deity's manifestation!

He believed deities existed. Yet, from childhood until now, past forty years of age, he had never seen a deity manifest.

Could it be... Have I been deceived?

In the quiet of the deepest night, Ma Tianzheng couldn't help but entertain such thoughts. Then he would slap his own face fiercely, sober himself up, and reaffirm his Daoist resolve. He was certain that travelling across the rivers and seas, seeking immortals and seeking the Dao, he truly would encounter one eventually.

Third Lady: "Leave the city. Head northeast for over thirty li, and you'll find a village called Gaojia Village. Senior Brother, go and see it with your own eyes. How about that?"

...

During the late Ming period, the Quanzhen Dragon Gate sect experienced a revival; the power of Quanzhen sect greatly surged. Several Quanzhen Daoist priests from the late Ming left many stories handed down through generations.

Among them was Wang Changyue. This person lived from 1522 to 1680—a terrifyingly long lifespan. His lifespan alone was enough to attract swathes of devout followers.