

Great Ming 201

Chapter 201: Do Good

“Bandits are coming!”

A scout dashed back to Bai Family Fortress like the wind.

This scout was named Shi Jian, a member of the Gaojia Village Militia, and one of the two who had followed the salt smugglers Old Zhu and Old Zhang during the last battle to learn scouting.

After training in the previous battle, he now somewhat resembled a proper scout.

Cheng Xu leaned out from the fortress wall. “Give us the details.”

Shi Jian hurriedly reported. “Captain Dian Deng Zi from Bu Zhan Ni’s Second Team is leading about two thousand? Three thousand? Well, somewhere around that number. They’ve already reached a place very close to us.”

Cheng Xu felt both amused and exasperated. This scout was still quite green; his report was a complete mess. Fortunately, Cheng Xu could roughly guess the enemy’s position.

He looked up towards the hillside. On the mountaintop within his field of vision, he faintly spotted several figures.

Bai Yuan stepped beside him and pointed to the same spot. “They should be right there.”

“Mhm!” Cheng Xu nodded.

Bai Yuan chuckled. “The exact same route Bu Zhan Ni took last time. Once they descend into missile range, I’ll blast them to pieces with magical missiles.”

Cheng Xu couldn’t help but recall the scene of the last battle fought here, a slight smile tugging at his lips, though it was hidden by the cloth mask.

He stared intently at the hillside for a long time—the slope, behind the trees, behind rocks. Nowhere was the grandmother to be seen. Not at all! Completely absent!

She hadn't come this time, hahaha! Victory was assured.

“Huh? Some people are coming down.” Bai Yuan said. “Look, only three bandits are descending.”

Cheng Xu focused his gaze and saw it was true. Only three bandits were descending the mountain. The leader was even wearing a scholar's long robe, stumbling unsteadily, clearly unused to mountain paths. He had to lean on the other two men supporting him just to stagger-slide down the path.

Bai Yuan and Cheng Xu instinctively exchanged a glance, both puzzled. “What's this about?”

Under such circumstances, they couldn't just attack. The magical missiles, catapults, and Giant Crossbow Vehicle remained silent and idle, launching no projectiles. Everyone simply watched as the three bandits slowly made their way down. At one point, the robed man leading them nearly stumbled, forcing the two flanking him to quickly steady him.

Only after regaining his footing did he continue, finally reaching the base of Bai Family Fortress.

Cheng Xu and Bai Yuan were speechless. “Is this guy putting on a show?”

The scholar stopped before the fortress gate, tilted his head back, and called out loudly, “I am but a man of little talent, yet I venture to ask, which wealthy lord of Chengcheng County owns this fortress?”

Bai Yuan stuck his head out. “My surname is Bai. My given name is Yuan.”

The scholar cupped his hands respectfully. “Ah, so you are Lord Bai of Bai Family Fortress. I am Dian Deng Zi. Greetings.”

Everyone froze instantly. Dian Deng Zi? Wasn't that the bandit chief?

Zhao Sheng (using only his bandit name) felt somewhat embarrassed about publicly announcing it; he didn't dare use his real name. Awkwardly, he continued, "My sincere apologies for disturbing Lord Bai. It's just... I have three thousand brothers behind me. We've walked a very long way to get here. Everyone is starving and truly about to collapse. Seeing Bai Family Fortress in the distance, it looked like the fortress of a very wealthy and powerful lord. So I took the liberty to come ask for some food to save my three thousand brothers. I implore you, great lord, to show mercy and assist us."

Cheng Xu snorted out a laugh. "He's threatening us. First saying there are three thousand brothers behind him, then demanding grain. If we refuse, those three thousand brothers will come storming at us, right?"

Bai Yuan thought about it carefully; that was precisely the implication.

But...

This man calling himself Dian Deng Zi spoke with a remarkably sincere tone, not like some vicious character making ruthless threats.

"Instructor He, do you suggest ignoring him?"

"Of course not! We should deal with this. Decisively." Cheng Xu touched the knife at his waist. "He only brought two men. His audacity is astounding. If I charge out now, capturing him will be easy. Once we seize their leader, the remaining bandits won't be a concern. Let's see if he still dares threaten us for grain."

"Unwise." Bai Yuan shook his head. "I suspect this man isn't the real bandit chief at all. Perhaps the chieftain captured a scholar to act as messenger. If we attack this scholar, the bandits will have a perfect excuse to assault Bai Family Fortress."

Cheng Xu: "Huh? That makes sense! But... do bandits really need an excuse to attack someone?"

The logic tangled there, hard to unravel.

Just then, Dian Deng Zi outside the fortress spoke again. “Lord Bai, I beg you not to misunderstand my words. I mean absolutely no threat. I have come only with sincere sincerity seeking help. My three thousand brothers, they are all from kind-hearted families who refuse to rob common folks. From Qingjian County to this place, the provisions we carried were long exhausted. We’ve eaten tree bark and grass root for many days. We truly cannot last much longer. Starvation turns people into monsters. One day, driven by hunger, they will draw their blades against other innocent civilians. When that day comes, even I won’t be able to save them... I beseech Lord Bai to extend a helping hand, save them if you can. They haven’t committed grave wrongs yet; they can still be saved.”

His words were exceedingly earnest, his eyes brimming with tears.

Cheng Xu couldn’t help but frown slightly.

After listening, however, Bai Yuan waved his hand decisively and announced loudly, “Open the fortress gates. Give him ten stones of food.”

Cheng Xu: “Huh?! Mr. Bai, he’s most likely deceiving us! You’re actually going to believe him?”

“This man here does not strike me as a villain,” Bai Yuan stated. “Better to trust and be wronged than distrust and risk greater tragedy. If the Deity were here, He would also offer kindness first. If they prove truly wicked, only then would arms be raised.”

Cheng Xu clicked his tongue. He’d seen plenty of villains, dealt with all sorts of shady characters on both sides of the law even before the three-year drought. He wouldn’t trust a single word spoken by ruthless men.

Yet, since Bai Yuan chose to believe them, Cheng Xu offered no further protest. Bai Yuan’s earlier remark – “If the Deity were here” – had reminded Cheng Xu of the Deity’s unwavering style of benevolence before judgment.

So what if it was a little grain?

The Deity always saved people first, and debated right or wrong later.

Following the Deity's way couldn't possibly be wrong!

The gates of Bai Family Fortress swung open. Ten stones of food were carried out and placed before Dian Deng Zi.

Dian Deng Zi was stunned beyond words. He never expected them to part with the grain so readily. With only two men, he couldn't even carry ten stones back up.

He frantically turned and waved vigorously towards the hillside. "Ten men! Come down! Only ten! No more! Come carry this grain back up!"

Ten able-bodied men who still had some strength came down from the slope. Hoisting the ten stones of food onto their shoulders, they chanted "Hey yo, hey yo" as they carried it uphill.

Ten stones of food wasn't much for three thousand mouths.

Even if rationed carefully, it wouldn't last many meals.

But in this year of famine, it represented a truly vast fortune.

Dian Deng Zi performed a long, deep bow towards Bai Family Fortress. "Lord Bai, you will surely be rewarded for this kindness."

Chapter 202: When Did I Ever Eat Mushrooms

In the clip-clop sound of hooves, a fast horse charged into Gaojia Fortress.

On the horse was a house servant of Bai Family Fortress, who dismounted and handed an urgent military report to Thirty-Two.

Thirty-Two unfolded it and looked; it turned out to be a military report sent by Bai Yuan.

Inside, it detailed the matter of Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng coming to Bai Family Fortress to beg for grain, and said that he had, on his own initiative, given ten stones of the Deity-granted food to the bandits; about this, he wanted to ask for the Deity's instruction on whether he had acted appropriately.

Thirty-Two dared not delay and hurried with the military report to the watchtower.

Soon, Gao Yiye stopped her painting and stood with Thirty-Two on the watchtower's third-floor balcony.

Li Daoxuan was just by the box, eating preserved egg and lean pork congee; seeing the two looking very serious, he put his face against the box, and immediately Gao Yiye below saw him.

"The Deity has arrived!" Gao Yiye turned and said to Thirty-Two: "Quickly report it."

Thirty-Two read the military report carefully.

After listening, Li Daoxuan fell into silence.

He opened the computer, input Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng, and searched for information.

Soon, Zhao Sheng's information came out, but historical records had very little information; with just a few sentences, they summed up his life story. It didn't say whether Zhao Sheng was a good person or a bad person, only that he was framed for rebellion and forced to revolt.

Moreover, even if the historical records said he was a good person, would you dare believe he was really good?

Judging a person through history, you could still get betrayed and die countless times.

Li Daoxuan considered for three seconds, then clicked the X; that historical material was not worth looking at.

Better to return to the box.

“Thirty-Two, go call a few drivers, and transport some more food to Bai Family Fortress.”

Thirty-Two, hearing this, couldn't help but be a bit surprised: “Your actions are unusual this time; are you going to help the bandits?”

“It's not helping the bandits, but helping refugees.”

Li Daoxuan sighed inwardly: If Zhao Sheng had not lied, and the three thousand people behind him were all good-hearted people unwilling to rob other common folk, then these three thousand must be saved.

If he deceived Bai Yuan and deceived me too, just to get some food to fill the bandits' stomachs so that they could gain strength and go robbing more common folk, then sooner or later I would reward him with a falling-from-the-sky palm technique.

Ordinary people fear being deceived because, after being deceived, they pay a huge price that is either economic or to their lives; deceived once, they can become badly scarred or even lose their lives.

But Li Daoxuan was different; not to mention ten stones of food, even one hundred stones of food was like him just grabbing a pinch of flour, costing him mere pennies.

Economically, he would basically suffer no losses!

And regarding his life, it was even more impossible for him to suffer harm!

So he was not afraid of being deceived.

Paying a small, almost insignificant cost to see clearly one person, or rather to see clearly three thousand people, was worth trying.

“Transport two more carts of food to Bai Family Fortress,” Li Daoxuan instructed. “Additionally, write a letter to Bai Yuan, telling him to try to have more contact and chat more with Zhao Sheng. If those three

thousand people are truly good common folk who were forced into rebellion, then bring them down the mountain and send them to Gaojia Village; I will settle them.”

Thirty-Two quickly performed a deep bow: “The Deity is merciful.”

Li Daoxuan: “Instruct Bai Yuan that a wary mind towards others is necessary; when contacting Zhao Sheng, he must not relax vigilance. If the other party suddenly turns hostile and attacks, he must ensure he has sufficient time to react and not fall into the bandits’ trap.”

Thirty-Two: “Understood!”

Thirty-Two hurriedly went off to compose a book.

Li Daoxuan looked down at Gaojia Village, pondering to himself.

If Zhao Sheng’s troops were fully absorbed, it amounted to over three thousand people, while Gaojia Village itself only had a bit over a thousand people. If three thousand outsiders suddenly flooded in all at the same time, it could easily cause indigestion from taking on too much too quickly, destroying the hard-earned spirit of Gaojia Village.

It appeared necessary to provide these people with another settlement.

They didn’t need to farm and could all work as laborers, so farmland needn’t be assigned to them, allowing their settlement to be located on barren land without issue.

Li Daoxuan immediately recalled that “valley where the god and the monster fought”.

Recently, every night, he had displayed “Army Combat Techniques” to the militia for one hour, and he had finished the entire series. Cheng Xu had already mastered it, so next, Cheng Xu would gradually teach it to others.

Then this valley could be put to use.

With simple planning, filling the valley with plastic houses could easily accommodate three thousand people.

Then came the issue of the laborers' daily commute distance to work.

The small valley was a full six li away from Gaojia Village, too far for everyone to cover on foot comfortably.

But the public sun chariot couldn't handle transporting three thousand people back and forth!

It seemed necessary to deploy a more advanced, awesome form of transportation.

Actually, Li Daoxuan had already been scheming about this transport long ago, but back when the population was small and everyone lived together, he hadn't brought it out.

Now, with more people and dispersal to another section to live, this great item would certainly come in handy between the two sections.

He opened a website and searched for "electric small train", immediately stumbling upon a heap of chaotic equipment.

Li Daoxuan chose a model featuring "freely connectable tracks" and using "AA batteries".

He specifically checked that tracks could be bought separately, so of course, he swiftly placed multiple orders for extra tracks. One small train with a fifteen-meter track section, when transported to the late Ming era, spanned six li, exactly connecting Gaojia Village to the small valley.

After placing the orders, he still needed modifications.

The next day, the small train arrived. Li Daoxuan promptly grabbed it and headed for Cai Xinzi's toy shop.

“Old Cai, I’m here again for toy modifications.”

Cai Xinzi was sitting behind the store counter once more, sipping a bottle of Nutrition Express. Spotting Li Daoxuan, she beamed and stood up: “Haven’t seen you in ages! What’ve you been doing lately?”

Li Daoxuan handed her two small train engines: “I’m playing with these and need modifications.”

Cai Xinzi stiffened at the word “modifications”, flustered: “What strange tinkering are you up to now?”

“This time it’s simple, I swear.” Li Daoxuan chuckled: “I need to add a resistor to the power system to cap its speed under ten centimeters per second.”

Cai Xinzi said: “No biggie. The engine’s decently sized, easy to work on, way better than that tiny solar car you brought before.”

Li Daoxuan: “Also, we must tweak the switch, relocating that roof toggle into the engine. Make the switch slicker, needing a feather touch to flip. Plus, add a brake latch so once power cuts, it snaps onto the wheels instantly, allowing quick deceleration to a full stop.”

Cai Xinzi squinted: “Why’s this mod so easy? No sweat whatsoever. Didn’t eat any mushrooms?”

Li Daoxuan spread his hands: “When have I ever eaten mushrooms?”

Chapter 203: The Track Small Train

Early in the morning, several large delivery trucks slowly made their way toward Bai Family Fortress.

Li Daoxuan began preparing the “Refugee Valley” to settle Dian Deng Zi and his group.

First, he dug a pit in the center of the valley and buried a plastic box filled with water, creating a pond in the valley.

Next, he placed two small plastic castles at both exits, perfectly blocking the valley entrances and securing the interior.

Then, he arranged numerous plastic houses throughout the valley, filling it completely. To ensure the little people's well-being, space couldn't feel oppressive, so several garden spots were left in the streets, adorned with plastic trees and flowers, making the valley brim with spring vitality.

The highlight came next: laying the small tracks.

Purchased from an online shopping site, the tracks came in short sections only about twenty centimeters long, flexible enough for free assembly. They included straight paths, curves, and even slopes—limited only by imagination.

As a child, Li Daoxuan had desperately wanted this toy but couldn't afford it.

By the time he could buy what he once craved, he'd grown up. Playing with it no longer brought the same childish excitement.

Such is life!

When you desire something, pursue it with all your might. Never wait for its price to drop or save it for "someday." You can't be sure the longing will endure until then.

Click-clack—Li Daoxuan snapped sections of track together, extending them from the Refugee Valley's entrance all the way to Gaojia Village.

At first, no one was around to witness his work.

But as the track neared the village, onlookers multiplied. Labor offenders and short-term workers at the outskirts gaped at the surreal sight before them.

Vibrantly colored tracks descended from the sky onto the ground, connecting to existing sections with tiny snaps.

They kept falling, assembling—falling, assembling—as the rainbow tracks advanced toward Gaojia Village.

Anyone with sense knew this was the Deity's new divine marvel. Workers halted tasks to stare.

The track forged onward!

Villagers along its path cleared the way as it snaked over small stretches of ground.

Passing through an opening between wheat fields, it finally reached Gaojia Village's entrance.

Eyebrows furrowing, villagers stared at the peculiar railway, minds buzzing with confusion.

Suddenly, a strange vehicle swooped from the sky onto the track.

It dwarfed the public sun chariot—even surpassing the huge Solar Vehicle No. 3 for cargo.

And it wasn't a solitary car; an engine hauled over a dozen carriages along its length, only for another engine to cap the train.

Villagers stood dumbstruck. A train with two locomotives? What could it mean?

Gao Yiye dashed out of the main fortress, grinning as she called, "By the Deity's command, this small train requires two drivers working shifts! Pay matches the sun chariot drivers'. Any takers?"

"Me! Me! Me!"

A crowd surged from the Short-term Workers Village, scrambling for the job.

Seeing applicants swarm, Clerk Tan Liwen stepped in to screen them. Slow or inattentive applicants got weeded out until two quick-witted ones remained.

Tentatively, they boarded the locomotive.

As Li Daoxuan guided her, Gao Yiye taught both how to start and pause the engine, stressed watching tracks for people or animals, and explained key safety rules.

Afterwards, the new drivers geared up for a trial run.

Li Daoxuan hovered near the box, ready to intervene if needed.

One driver flipped the switch. The small train whistled like a steam locomotive—pleasantly melodious—before creating a steady clunking sound.

Electrified, it crawled along at eight centimeters per second.

To Li Daoxuan, that seemed sluggish.

But at the scale of late Ming China, it translated to sixteen meters per second—57.5 kilometers per hour. Not slow at all. In a whoosh, the small train barreled toward Refugee Valley.

Both drivers screamed in fear initially.

Their fright eased within two minutes. They realized the little train held the track tightly: no veering, perfectly steady—smoother than any sun chariot ride.

Soon, Refugee Valley loomed ahead.

Gao Yiye beamed. “The station’s just ahead! Prepare to stop when you see its building.”

Promptly signaling them, the drivers cut power. With a creak, the train halted squarely before the platform.

“Great!” Gao Yiye announced. “Passengers will board and disembark now. Lock this engine’s door—keep snoopers out—then rush to the other engine.”

Baffled at first, the drivers grasped the plan: using the rear engine would reverse their journey. No wonder the train needed two fronts!

They raced to the opposite engine with Gao Yiye.

Following the same routine, they ignited the locomotive. The whistle sounded again, accompanied by rhythmic clunks as the train propelled forward.

The drivers laughed, “This small train is actually easy to pilot!”

Sternly, Gao Yiye admonished, “The Deity warns: a crash would endanger everyone across all carriages. You must operate vigilantly—never undervalue its risks. Stay alert every second. Stop at once for anything blocking the rails yet unseen. Understand?”

Both answered swiftly, “Yes! But... who’ll ride this train? That valley remains empty today.”

Gao Yiye smiled faintly. “Well... perhaps soon it won’t.”

Chapter 204: A Gentleman Upholds Justice Above All Else

The two small train drivers began to practice repeatedly.

Li Daoxuan required them to practice until they were highly proficient. They needed to be fully aware of the exact distance at which braking could stop the train. They must diligently observe the road conditions ahead. The slightest sign of disturbance must lead to an immediate stop.

At the same time, common sense education had to be carried out in the villages. No one should linger on the tracks. Those caught damaging the tracks would be thrown directly into the Labor Offenders Village. If it caused a serious accident resulting in death, it would be life for life, with no room for discussion.

And just as Li Daoxuan was preparing the Refugee Valley and the small train simultaneously...

Bai Family Fortress.

Bai Yuan gazed seriously towards Huanglong Mountain in the north. After the ten stones of food were sent up, Dian Deng Zi indeed did not come down the mountain to cause trouble. Those three thousand people huddled under the trees at the summit.

They did not deliberately hide their traces. Standing on the fortress wall of Bai Family Fortress, one could faintly see the bandits on the mountaintop foraging for wild vegetables, digging grass roots, peeling tree bark, and such activities.

Several columns of cooking smoke rose skyward. They were consuming the grain Bai Yuan had sent them by mixing it with items like wild vegetables and grass roots.

Cheng Xu remarked, "Those people don't seem to intend attacking Bai Family Fortress."

Bai Yuan nodded. "It seems there isn't at the moment, but that ten stones of food divided among three thousand people won't last many meals. Once it's all eaten, what they might do next is anyone's guess."

Just as the two were saying this, the roar of Solar Vehicle No. 3 sounded out. The two turned to look and saw a large truck loaded with substantial grain arriving.

After the driver stopped the vehicle, he dashed into Bai Family Fortress, pulled out a letter, and handed it to Bai Yuan, saying, "Lord Bai, this is a letter from Thirty-Two for you, and it's said to contain the Deity's instruction."

Bai Yuan felt his spirits rushing with pride. He quickly brushed the dust off his clothes and straightened his attire. Only then did he respectfully take the letter with both hands—he took the art of 'courtesy' very seriously.

He opened the letter and read it attentively.

After finishing, his brow relaxed slightly. “The Deity has issued a decree, telling us to attempt contact with the bandits on the mountain. If we feel they can still be saved, we should lure them down the mountain; the Deity will arrange for them.”

Cheng Xu also felt his spirits rushing with pride upon hearing this. But after that surge, he immediately grew apprehensive. “Making contact with bandits? That is... an extremely perilous affair. If we send underlings to do it, most of them lack insight; they speak poorly and handle matters clumsily—even good intentions could lead to bad results. If I venture there personally and enter the bandit camp, it would be risking one’s life with slim odds of survival.”

Thinking of this, he glanced up at the bandits on the mountaintop. Instantly, he spotted a grandmother floating up from the summit, soaring into the sky and circling around...

Bai Yuan turned and noticed that Instructor He beside him, though face-covered, revealed distinct fear in his eyes. He couldn’t help but laugh. “Instructor He, you remain at Bai Family Fortress and command on my behalf. I’ll ascend the mountain to have my meeting with the bandits.”

Cheng Xu started inwardly; this Bai Yuan was actually...

Bai Yuan spoke with grave seriousness. “Several months ago, upon my arrival at Gaojia Village for the first time, I received the Deity’s blessing and soundly defeated the Supreme Bright King. Afterwards, the Deity entrusted me with an honorable and challenging task: to save more suffering people, liberating them from life’s hardships and troop-inflicted harm. These bandits before us have shown no evil deeds. If they are truly decent folks, they are the kind that the Deity spoke of who deserve rescue.”

Cheng Xu: “!”

Bai Yun declared proudly. “I have always considered myself a gentleman. A gentleman upholds justice above all else, reveres the worthy while embracing the multitudes, and commends the good while pitying the incapable. Now, with an opportunity to save three thousand people right before me, how could a gentleman shrink back out of fear?”

Cheng Xu sighed deeply in his heart: You are braver than I am.

Bai Yuan waved his hand. "Two men, accompany me to the mountain."

Two loyal servants immediately approached. They followed Bai Yuan out of Bai Family Fortress toward Huanglong Mountain.

After walking about ten steps off, Cheng Xu suddenly leaned over the fortress wall and shouted after Bai Yuan: "Mr. Bai, I've heard a saying: 'A gentleman does not stand under a dangerous wall.' I wonder what your view is on that?"

Bai Yuan's face froze. Sweat poured profusely down his brow. He somewhat wanted to turn back. But retreating now would be painfully awkward. So he stiffened his neck, gritted his teeth, and pressed forward. "Hmph! A gentleman has three fears: fear of heaven's mandate, fear of great persons, and fear of sages' words. None of those fears is for bandits. You wait here; I'll be back shortly... uh... Instructor He, if you spot trouble, come rescue me immediately with the men."

Everyone: "..."

Bai Yuan eventually ascended the mountain. He walked cautiously, step by step, toward the bandit camp.

He took only two subordinates with him, mirroring when Dian Deng Zi arrived at Bai Family Fortress earlier—that too involved three individuals.

The bandit soldiers on the mountaintop swiftly notified Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng.

Zhao Sheng had just consumed a bowl of porridge, easing his hunger a little, when he was lamenting his journey's wanderings and hardships. Hearing his underling's report, he hastily leaned over the mountain edge to behold a white-robed Bai Yuan approaching with two others from below.

In his heart, he grew alarmed: “Isn’t that Lord Bai from Bai Family Fortress? He dares to ascend here with merely two people? Does he not fear us?”

His underling voiced some agitation: “What is his purpose in coming?”

Dian Deng Zi replied: “Since only three individuals have arrived, they must be here for talks. Why be anxious? I shall converse with him.”

He tidied his long shirt too. After all this traveling, the garment was tattered and grimy. But Dian Deng Zi earnestly smoothed its folds and descended the mountain path to welcome the newcomers.

When the two sides met on the trail, Dian Deng Zi immediately bowed deeply. “Honored Lord Bai, in your presence, this humble dwelling feels honored.”

Upon finishing, he sensed mild awkwardness—“this humble dwelling feels honored” was a phrase used when receiving guests at home, but he currently had no residence! Applying it in this wild mountain location seemed... not quite fitting?

Bai Yuan paid it no mind. If others displayed courtesy, he outdid them. He returned a grand salute to Dian Deng Zi. “This unworthy one came uninvited and disturbs you.”

He mused inside: Look, I demonstrate such decorum even toward a bandit; that must regain me points lost—hahaha—in the ‘courtesy’ aspect of the six arts.

He stated aloud: “I climbed up this time to chat... with a good... man.” He eyed Dian Deng Zi’s scholarly, frail frame; the term “good man” emerged hesitantly, punctuated by a subtle pause.

Dian Deng Zi naturally caught the pause’s implication. He couldn’t help but smile bitterly. “What good man am I? I am just a poor scholar burning midnight oil, inexplicably forced onto a rebellious path. Lord Bai, you can simply address me by Dian Deng Zi.”

Bai Yuan inquired: “Oh? It seems my companion bears deep grievances.”

Worse still: that query made Dian Deng Zi weep bitterly. Wronged! Profoundly wronged! Yet, this misery had no proper confidant. Now, with Bai Yuan—a cultured, polite soul—finally present, he couldn't contain his sorrows pouring out.

Chapter 205: I'll Go Down the Mountain to See

Dian Deng Zi and Bai Yuan slipped aside to a secluded spot where no one else could hear them.

Only then did Dian Deng Zi weep and recount his story. He described in detail how he'd studied by lamplight at Shiyou Temple in Qingjian County and was falsely accused of writing military strategy books to rebel against the government.

After hearing it, Bai Yuan fell momentarily speechless.

Oh, the Ming Dynasty... truly...

A locality's governance depended entirely on the magistrate's competence. If it were someone like Magistrate Liang Shixian, it might be tolerable. But encountering former Chengcheng County Magistrate Zhang Yaocai, or the current Qingjian County Magistrate who pushed civilians to rebellion—such officials spelled utter disaster for ordinary people.

"Brother..." Bai Yuan said, "You're not an evil man. There's no need to take such risks for treasonous schemes leading to death. Heed my advice—turn back now while there's still time."

Dian Deng Zi glanced at his three thousand followers in the distance and whispered, "I alone might not matter, but these three thousand villagers... They rescued me from the claws of evil bailiffs, killed officials, and rebelled. They cannot return to Qingjian County now. How could I abandon them?"

Bai Yuan smiled. "What's so difficult about settling them? So long as you wish to reform, I have a way to ensure your safety."

"Truly?" Dian Deng Zi brightened with joy.

Bai Yuan declared, "A gentleman never falters before others or misspeaks before them! I never lie."

Trusting him seventy to eighty percent upon seeing his sincerity, Dian Deng Zi nodded. "That's excellent. I'll discuss it with my villagers and see their thoughts."

He returned to his Qingjian County compatriots, gathered several village spokesmen, and quietly consulted them: "Everyone, listen..."

After hearing him out, the village chiefs exchanged uneasy looks. One glanced warily at Bai Yuan far away and murmured, "We don't know this man well. Who can say whether he's good or bad? If he's a government agent sent to lure us off the mountain, their soldiers might ambush us on the plains. We'd die without a burial place!"

Another village chief chimed in, "These gentry types? Nine out of ten are local tyrants who oppress villages. Trusting him might doom us."

"Yes. The wealthy are all scoundrels."

"But we have no food left," the Old Village Chief from Jiejia Valley whispered. "The ten stoness of food he gave will barely last our three thousand people a few meals. After eating it... what do we do then? Rob the rich? We can't necessarily win! Rob the poor? Could any of you bear it?"

The group fell silent at this.

Dian Deng Zi urged, "Survival requires we try trusting him. Brothers, stay on the mountain. I'll go down with him and listen to his plan for settling us. If he fails to present a proper scheme... he must be a liar. We can still storm Bai Family Fortress later."

The discussion concluded.

Dian Deng Zi returned to Bai Yuan. "Lord Bai, you said you have a plan for us. Might I witness it personally?"

"Of course," Bai Yuan thought silently: So long as you descend this mountain, victory is certain. Witnessing the Deity's power will sway you.

Thus the tables turned. Bai Yuan descended safely, while Dian Deng Zi—accompanied by two fierce bandits—followed Bai Yuan cautiously downhill.

As the saying goes, courtesy demands reciprocity. You took one risk; I take one too.

Though nervous, Dian Deng Zi had to chance it. Uneasily tailing Bai Yuan, he had only just reached the Bai Family Fortress gate when he heard Bai Yuan loudly command the family guards inside:

“Dispatch another ten stones of food! Place them at the foot of Huanglong Mountain’s slope, so Dian Deng Zi’s people can collect them.”

A squad of guards carried out the food grains. They set down the stone-weighted sacks at Huanglong Mountain’s base, slapped their hands clean, and turned back.

Seeing Bai Yuan’s sincerity eased Dian Deng Zi’s worries considerably.

Entering the fortress, Bai Yuan beamed at Cheng Xu. “Instructor He, I’ve successfully completed the Deity’s mission by bringing Dian Deng Zi down the mountain. I now plan to take him to Gaojia Village. Guarding Huanglong Mountain will require your oversight meanwhile.”

Impressed, Cheng Xu thought this man had truly entered the enemy camp and emerged unharmed—even abducting the bandit chief back. Such audacity! “The bandit army will likely stay put until Dian Deng Zi returns. You may proceed in peace.”

Bai Yuan invited Dian Deng Zi and his two men into the carriage. He himself took the driver’s seat, flicked the reins sharply—“Yah!”

Dian Deng Zi looked astonished. “Lord Bai! You drive personally? I assumed someone of your wealth would keep coachmen.”

Bai Yuan laughed heartily, “Of a gentleman’s Six Arts, ‘Charioteering’ is one I take dead seriously. How could I yield it to others? Hahaha! Hold tight!”

...

As sunset painted the sky, Li Daoxuan sat updating videos. He'd edited the latest performance footage: the camera swooping down from the heavens, zooming into the theater, locking onto the Zhang Family Troupe as they enacted Daoist legends with ancient techniques. He plugged a plastic stage through Little Yellow Bike before clicking upload.

Delivery arrived: fried salt-and-pepper bullfrog. He slid on a plastic glove, grabbed a chunk, and chewed blissfully.

Suddenly, a carriage rolled in—Bai Yuan at the reins.

Bai Yuan made progress! Excellent! I knew he'd deliver, mused Li Daoxuan. I'd offer him some frog, but tossing this into the diorama might give him heart failure.

Calling Yiye over, he said, "Bring Thirty-Two and Tan Liwen here."

The carriage halted at the entrance.

"Here we are!" Bai Yuan announced cheerfully. "Step out, sir."

The cart's curtain parted. Dian Deng Zi and his two men jumped down.

Their eyes widened before the enormous fortress. Its walls towered three zhang—outstripping many county walls—signifying the wealthy lord within.

Around the fortress spread wheat fields, approaching harvest. Plump wheat ears shimmered with promise.

"Wheat fields!"

“Insanely healthy wheat fields!”

Both bandits brightened immediately; skilled farmers recognized prime crops. Even in bountiful years, they’d never seen stalks this robust, let alone during this great disaster.

Their eyes turned greedy with envy.

Scanning the area, they saw villagers returning from labor. Many carried no tools—clearly not farmers—which puzzled them.

Just then, Gao Yiye, Thirty-Two, and Tan Liwen strode forward smiling. Bai Yuan hastened introductions: “This is Dian Deng Zi, Captain of Bu Zhan Ni’s Second Team. Here is Saint Lady Gao Yiye, Steward Thirty-Two, and Clerk Tan of Gaojia Village.”

Chapter 206: The Little Train Sets Off

After exchanging formal greetings, they proceeded to business.

Dian Deng Zi clasped his fists and said, “Lord Bai has brought me here, claiming that three thousand folks from Qingjian County could find shelter. That is why I’ve come to see for myself.”

Gao Yiye smiled. “The Deity has already arranged everything. Please follow me.”

She took the lead, followed by Dian Deng Zi, his two subordinates, Bai Yuan, Thirty-Two (the steward), Tan Liwen, and others. Soon, the group arrived at the Gaojia Village Train Station.

It was a small, colorful plastic house, recently placed there. Of course, the ticket booth inside was empty, with no one selling tickets.

An empty track lay before the station. The small train was not at the platform.

Seeing this strange colorful house and the odd colorful track, Dian Deng Zi was bewildered. “Miss, why have you brought me here? What do you intend?”

Gao Yiye replied, "Not to worry. Just wait a moment."

Bai Yuan hadn't seen the small train during his last visit to Gaojia Village, but he guessed it must be a divine artifact bestowed by the Deity. He suppressed his questions and waited patiently.

Soon, a distant "choo-choo" sound echoed—an artificial whistle enforced by Li Daoxuan's rule, requiring the train to signal before entering the station to prevent anyone from foolishly playing on the tracks.

After the "choo-choo," came a rhythmic "clunking sound." A massive, multicolored big train, pulling over a dozen carriages, rolled into the station.

Even Bai Yuan, who had some expectation, gaped in awe, his jaw dropping open. As for Dian Deng Zi and his two men, they were utterly dumbstruck.

All three of them stared like awestruck idiots, mouths agape as if drooling.

As the train stopped before them, two engineers jumped from the engine, locked the train door, and bowed to Gao Yiye and Thirty-Two. "Saint Lady, Steward Thirty-Two, are you waiting for the train?"

Gao Yiye smiled. "We have guests in the village. The Deity has arranged for them to take the train to Refugee Valley. Prepare quickly."

The two engineers hurried to the engine at the other end of the train, climbed in, and readied for departure.

Gao Yiye then addressed the still-stunned trio: "Gentlemen, please board the train."

Only then did Dian Deng Zi snap back to reality. "You want us... to get on... this?"

Gao Yiye laughed. "Yes! Seeing such a cute train, wouldn't you like to try riding it?"

Dian Deng Zi wiped cold sweat from his brow. "You call this mighty and terrifying giant train... 'cute'? Miss... is that really the right word?"

Gao Yiye chuckled heartily. "The Deity himself called it that! He said this is the 'cute small train.' Since the Deity put it that way, I dare not change the description."

Just as they were talking, a sudden "thud" sounded beside them. Bai Yuan had dropped to the ground in a dramatically disappointed kneeling posture—'orz'!

Thirty-Two stared in surprise. "Mr. Bai, why did you suddenly kneel?"

Bai Yuan remained prone, wearing a pained expression. "Seeing this giant train before me... I realize my skill in charioteering is worthless. That 'Driving' art among the Six Arts of Gentlemen... scratch it out! Forget it!"

Everyone: "....."

Bai Yuan abruptly leapt up and charged toward the engine, shouting as he ran, "Engineers! Let me learn how to drive this!"

He dashed lightning-fast, scrambled onto the engine, and squeezed in beside the two engineers.

Everyone: "....."

Whatever. Reasoning with this nonsensical fellow was pointless.

The group boarded the train and sat in the carriages.

The plastic seats inside the carriages were roughly made, but Dian Deng Zi and his men paid no attention to such details. All three pressed their faces against the windows, gazing outside in wide-eyed astonishment.

The train gave a loud “Choo!” and started moving with a clunking sound, pulling out of Gaojia Village Train Station toward Refugee Valley Train Station.

Soon, the train passed through a vast wheat field. Plump wheat ears streaked past the window, while the wind at sixty kilometers per hour blowing against their faces refreshed their minds.

Dian Deng Zi and his two companions immediately felt their hearts calm down as they traveled in this train.

“Amazing, this giant train!”

“It really is amazing!”

“What kind of divine place is this?”

After a short while, the train whistled “Choo!” once more—they had arrived at Refugee Valley.

The train came to a halt. Gao Yiye stepped off first. Dian Deng Zi hadn’t had his fill of the ride yet and wished to sit a while longer. But since the hostess had alighted, they reluctantly followed.

Gao Yiye pointed toward a nearby small mountain. “Look here. This is where you’ll live.”

Dian Deng Zi hurried to the mountain pass and peered inside. Just then— Wow! The entire valley was filled with colorful buildings. A big pond lay at its center, surrounded by flowers and trees. At both ends of the valley stood two large gray castles, shielding the residential buildings at the heart of the valley.

“What a splendid place! Aside from having no farmland, it lacks absolutely nothing else!”

Gao Yiye smiled. “As outsiders arranging farmland for you is difficult. But no matter—the Deity will find you work. Rest assured you’ll live comfortably.”

Dian Deng Zi was captivated by the valley, yet a small doubt lingered. “But... all three thousand of us will pour in at once. The grain we need...”

He hesitated several seconds before finally sighing aloud. “...will this village have enough to share with us?”

Indeed: this was a famine year. It wasn't about money—it was about survival: without grain?

Even with prettiest homes?

The grandest trains?

The safest valleys?

The most plentiful jobs?

And mountains of copper coins?

...they could all only end one way.

Worry yourself none.

Gao Yiye smiled once again. “See that building in the valley? The one that looks like a granary?”

Hearing this, Dian Deng Zi rushed in with his men. They spotted a huge haystack-shaped building right away. He opened its plastic door and looked inside...

...the whole warehouse was stacked full to the brim with grain!

“This... all of this?”

Dian Deng Zi felt his mind had just exploded. This single warehouse held enough food to feed his three thousand villagers.

For a long time to come.

Gao Yiye smiled quietly. “Mr. Zhao... now you are at peace?”

“Hah?” Dian Deng Zi jolted badly. “But I never told you my surname!”

To spare his kinship trouble he had given his name as merely Dian Deng Zi—only his home villagers knew his true name. Yet now this girl called him “Mr. Zhao” outright.

He froze with terror.

Gao Yiye said: “Zhao Sheng, sir, the Deity is a Deity from the heavens—why would knowing your true name be strange?”

Chapter 207: Ye Bu Shou

Right as Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng was “observing” things in Gaojia Village.

Huanglong Mountain.

Dian Deng Zi’s men hauled another ten stones of food up the slope, filling the Villagers with sheer delight. “Lord Bai from Bai Family Fortress is a good man indeed!”

“Earlier I thought the rich were all bad. Seems I was wrong.”

“Alright, tomorrow’s meals are settled too.”

The Villagers from Qingjian County cheered joyfully.

Just as the merriment peaked, a hunter scrambled back, shouting desperately: "Trouble! A group of men's climbing the west slope—Seventh Team's Ye Bu Shou!"

His cry jolted the people of Qingjian County silent.

Captain of Bu Zhan Ni's Seventh Team—Ye Bu Shou.

They said he was fierce beyond measure. A veteran of Yansui's Great Ming border army's elite scouts, he deserted ranks to become an outlaw when the border army endlessly delayed pay. Though only leading the Seventh Team, he was brutally vicious—out-matching the ferocity of the first six teams combined.

"But that's odd—Ye Bu Shou went a different way. Why here? To Huanglong Mountain?"

"Could he be crowding our turf?"

"Oh no, Mr. Zhao isn't here. He followed Lord Bai downhill to find us a lifeline. How do we deal with Ye Bu Shou now?"

Panic seized the crowd. After moments, Jiejia Valley's Village Chief Jie was pushed forward to handle matters in Zhao Sheng's absence. Age had curved his spine—fifty-two summers weighed on him, leaving the Village Chief gaunt and frail.

Approaching the west slope's edge, Village Chief Jie eyed the ridge. A war banner unfurled—Ye Bu Shou glaring boldly from the cloth—as a compact band of fifteen hundred streamed upward along the path.

"It's the Seventh Team!"

"They're fewer, but carry far fewer elderly and weak, women and children. Stronger than we three thousand."

Heart pounding, Village Chief Jie steeled himself forward: "Seventh Captain, why approach Huanglong Mountain? The Boss arranged us—Second Team—here."

Ye Bu Shou was fierce-eyed, middle-aged. Compact, muscular, a coiled panther's stance sheathed in Great Ming border army armor. Bow slung across his back—sword hanging sharp at the hip. Untamed power radiated.

“What right have you to come before me?” Ye Bu Shou scowled. “Where’s the Second Leader? Why isn’t he facing me?”

The Village Chief hastily bowed. “The Second Leader went to find food.”

A former elite scout's eyes instantly assessed: nearly three thousand packed the peak—all Seventh Team's forces. A worried frown creased his brow: “The Second Leader hunted food—without you? How?”

Village Chief Jie flinched briefly: “Well...”

He'd never dare say Dian Deng Zi fraternized with local gentry—such words courted peril.

Huffing coldly, Ye Bu Shou shrugged: “Fine. I'll wait here for his return.”

Village Chief Jie's pulse raced. Dispatching this threat was urgent: “Seventh Captain, whatever brought you—might I help? Truly no need for delay.”

“What dealings could I have with you?” Ye Bu Shou sneered.

Village Chief Jie remained silent.

Slowly, Ye Bu Shou swept his gaze across Qingjian County's people. Sharp eyes locked onto ten stones of food just hauled up. “Ah—your Second Team prospers! Ten stones lying idle! Looted from some rich landlord's cellar?”

Village Chief Jie coughed uneasily: “That...we...raided a great tyrant... Mmm...a heartless wealthy man.”

Ye Bu Shou chuckled dryly: “Lucky you scored such fine harvest. I’ve struck several manor forts yet found meager grain! Ah! My men are famished! We all rose starving—surely brethren share? A few stones from your stock?”

Beads of sweat dotted Village Chief Jie’s brow: “This...this humble elder dares no such choice... Let the Second Leader return first... Then...perhaps we...”

Temptation flared—a swift raid could end this. Yet Ye Bu Shou reconsidered: Dian Deng Zi was learned—a rare scholar among illiterate rebels—greatly prized by Bu Zhan Ni. Seize Second Team’s goods and face Bu Zhan Ni’s wrath? Too weak now! If Teams One to Six joined forces against him...death beckoned.

Better wait for Dian Deng Zi. Rejected food? Turn righteous—accuse Second Leader of forsaking brotherhood before the Boss himself. Just claims secured...then strike.

Biting back rage, he motioned sharply: “Then I await your Second Leader.”

He withdrew Seventh Team to a nearby grove and settled in.

Heart thrashing wildly, Village Chief Jie slipped back to his Villagers. Whispering urgently to a hunter: “Slip unseen through thickets—get to Bai Family Fortress! Find Zhao Sheng... Warn him!”

...

Bai Yuan steered the wagon homeward, Dian Deng Zi’s party trailing behind from Gaojia Village.

Elated through the journey, Bai Yuan beamed: “Ha! Mastering that giant train proved simple! Flick the switch—it followed tracks on its own! Grasped it in moments! Hah! I reclaim the “Grand Charioteer” title—restored!”

Similarly, joy radiated from Dian Deng Zi. Turned rebel against his will, burdened daily with despair for his three thousand souls—certain doom had shrouded him. Utter darkness. Till this light dawned! Hope pierced—a path revealed! Strike boldly...all may survive!

Both overjoyed men arrived at Bai Family Fortress—before feet could steady—a guard raced toward them frantically: “Lord! Terrible news! Fresh bandits swarm Huanglong Mountain!”

The words struck Bai Yuan and Dian Deng Zi like thunder.

Rushing inside, they scaled the fortress wall. Cheng Xu had waited long. Spotting Bai Yuan, he breathed: “Not long past—a new bandit force scaled the peaks...joined Dian Deng Zi’s men...fifteen-hundred strong. No hostility shown since ascent.”

Dian Deng Zi paled slightly: “Fifteen hundred... Can’t be Ye Bu Shou? Only Seventh Team runs that lean.”

“Ye Bu Shou?” Cheng Xu’s eyes narrowed at the sound—a name bearing military scouts’ ring.

Before he pondered deeper, a bow-wielding hunter scrambled to the fortress gate below. Ducking glances upward, he cried: “I’m Dian Deng Zi’s man! Let me in! Urgent word for the Captain!”

Chapter 208: I Am Your Opponent

The hunter was let into Bai Family Fortress. Upon seeing Zhao Sheng, he immediately ran over to him.

He was indeed a bit worried that Zhao Sheng had met with some misfortune at the foot of the mountain. Upon seeing him standing whole and unharmed in Bai Family Fortress, he breathed a sigh of relief and said: “Sir, big trouble, big trouble.”

Zhao Sheng: “What happened?”

The hunter said: “Ye Bu Shou from the Seventh Team suddenly led his troops up Huanglong Mountain from the western slope. Village Chief Jie ran to talk to him and asked him what he was here for, but he refused to say. He also eyed the provisions Lord Bai sent us for ourselves and demanded that we share them with him.”

Bai Yuan’s brow furrowed deeply.

Cheng Xu snorted.

Zhao Sheng lowered his head and thought for a moment: “The Seventh Team shouldn’t have come to Huanglong Mountain. For them to suddenly come to follow us, they must have met with setbacks on other paths. It’s just as well that he came. I just followed Lord Bai and found an excellent place where we can settle down and live our lives. We might as well call Ye Bu Shou along.”

Having said that, he intended to leave the fortress and return to the mountain.

Cheng Xu moved closer to Bai Yuan: “Has this person gone to Gaojia Village to see for himself?”

Bai Yuan nodded: “He has seen it. He is willing to stay, and the Deity has arranged everything suitable for him.”

Cheng Xu said: “I don’t think he may live long enough to reach Gaojia Village.”

Bai Yuan was startled: “Why?”

Cheng Xu said: “That Ye Bu Shou from the Seventh Team, from his name alone, is a ruthless character.”

Bai Yuan furrowed his brow: “What do you mean...”

Cheng Xu nodded lightly: “Ye Bu Shou is the title of elite scouts in the border army. Those who work as scouts are all clever, decisive in battle, and ruthless. Dian Deng Zi, a frail scholar, went up to the mountain to invite that Ye Bu Shou down to live a stable life. How do you think that will turn out?”

Bai Yuan said: “What if that Ye Bu Shou also hopes for a stable life? Soldiers also have those who wish to return to civilian life.”

Cheng Xu spoke softly: “If that person really had such a temperament, why would he, upon arriving at the mountain, immediately ask people of Qingjian County for grain? Clearly, he is a troublemaker. The reason he didn’t turn hostile and seize the grain was probably that he feared Bu Zhan Ni! Anyway, he didn’t regard Dian Deng Zi as important.”

Bai Yuan thought carefully: Wasn't that right? If Ye Bu Shou had a shred of friendliness towards Dian Deng Zi, he wouldn't have come to crowd his path. Much less would he immediately demand grain. It was clear that he had sized up, right from the start, that among Bu Zhan Ni's subordinates in the Seventh Teams, the path led by Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng was the weakest. So he came to squeeze his weaker companion and even thought about taking over Dian Deng Zi.

Given that, Dian Deng Zi went back to the mountain to persuade Ye Bu Shou to turn to goodness. That was fraught with peril.

Bai Yuan said: "Instructor He, you seem quite experienced in this aspect. What do you think we should do?"

Cheng Xu looked up towards the mountaintop.

There, the Seventh Team had 1,500 bandits, and their leader was likely an elite border army scout. If he himself led the militia and the servants of Bai Family Fortress to engage them, their chance of victory was less than 20%. With an 80% chance of seeing grandmother.

But Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng was also on their side. Even though his 3,000 followers were a mob, so many people, together with his militia and Bai Family Fortress servants, charging forward—in such a calculation, the chance of victory was 100%.

Cheng Xu chuckled.

His gaze swept over the mountaintop.

He couldn't see grandmother's figure at all.

In battles he was sure to lose, Cheng Xu was cowardly like an old dog.

In battles he was sure to win, Cheng Xu was brave like a War God.

Cheng Xu said seriously: "I will accompany Zhao Sheng up the mountain. You, lead the militia and the Bai Family Fortress servants and sneak up after us under the cover of night. When you hear the sounds of fighting on the mountain, charge up immediately to provide backup."

Bai Yuan said: "Good!"

The two concluded their discussion.

Cheng Xu walked to Zhao Sheng's side: "I'll accompany you up the mountain to ensure your safety."

Zhao Sheng turned to look.

This masked instructor wore cotton armor with a sword at his waist, looking formidable.

He couldn't help but feel greatly relieved and said: "I am grateful to you, brave warrior."

At this moment, it was already late. The sun was about to set. The mountain slopes were dim. Visibility was not good enough to see far.

Zhao Sheng, Cheng Xu, two underlings, and a hunter—the five formed a small team—rapidly climbed up along the mountain slope.

Meanwhile, Bai Yuan waved and led the local gentry, stealthily slipping out of the Bai Family Fortress. Crouching down and using the field ridges as cover, he made his way all the way to the foot of Huanglong Mountain. Extremely familiar with the terrain, he soon entered a mountain ravine and climbed upward via a hidden path.

On top of the mountain slope, Ye Bu Shou had grown rather impatient. He'd sent men to question the Second Team several times, each time being told the Second Leader hadn't yet returned, so his frustration mounted.

Suddenly, word came from an underling: "Dian Deng Zi has returned!"

Ye Bu Shou rushed with pride, instructed his subordinates behind him briefly, took a team of confidants, and walked toward the Second Team.

"Hey, Second Leader, where'd you go to find grain?" Ye Bu Shou began sarcastically as soon as they met: "You barely brought anyone, just four or five men wandering around downhill. Weren't you afraid of being caught by officials or the local gentry and hauled off to the authorities?"

Dian Deng Zi, entirely naive, clueless about the bandits' dangers, failed to pick up the sarcasm. He replied with slight cheer: "I found a perfect spot downhill—a wealthy village eager to lend us a hand, giving us refuge and providing food. Seventh Leader, you've come just in time. Join me to that village, and we can all enjoy some peaceful days."

"Oh?"

Ye Bu Shou revealed a peculiar expression: "So you found a wealthy village, did you? If they can give us piles of grain, then that village must be loaded with supplies. Why grovel under their roof? Why not just plunder such prime real estate?"

Startled in his mind, Dian Deng Zi said: "They're friendly toward us; how could we start by robbing them?"

Ye Bu Shou: "Hahaha! What kind of world is this? Second Leader, don't pretend ignorance."

Dian Deng Zi's expression fell; he realized he'd been overly naive.

Ye Bu Shou: "Where's this village?"

Dian Deng Zi shook his head: "I cannot tell you."

Ye Bu Shou: "Looks like the Second Leader intends to betray big brother Bu Zhan Ni."

Dian Deng Zi: "I have no plans to betray anyone. I simply crave a stable life."

Ye Bu Shou: "Shut up. That is betrayal."

He suddenly raised his voice, shouting loudly: "Everyone just heard it! Captain of the Second Team, Dian Deng Zi, harbors disloyalty toward big brother Bu Zhan Ni. I, Ye Bu Shou, Captain of the Seventh Team, now act on heaven's behalf to help big brother weed out this troublemaker."

Dian Deng Zi: "I'm not... I didn't..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Ye Bu Shou drew his waist knife with a swish and slashed directly at Dian Deng Zi's face.

The strike was fierce and swift—even a skilled fighter would struggle to dodge it, not to mention the frail scholar Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng.

As death seemed imminent, Cheng Xu, standing half a step behind him, suddenly reached out. With one hand, he yanked Dian Deng Zi sideways; with the other, he swiftly drew his waist knife. Clang! It blocked Ye Bu Shou's fast blow.

Cheng Xu chuckled: "Your opponent is me!"

...

Lately, some readers had voiced concerns that the book's viewpoint focused too much on the little people, not the Deity, making it dull.

The eunuch acknowledged their argument was sound—after all, readers naturally craved more of the main character—but he suggested people reconsider their perspective.

This novel was actually an “ensemble cast” work. An ensemble cast spotlighted many characters, and all were part of the “protagonist faction.” In essence, readers could treat every minor character as integral to the protagonist.

Li Daoxuan and these minor figures collectively formed the “Gaojia Village” system—a system that truly served as the central protagonist.

Viewed this way, it became clear the book’s focus rarely drifted from the protagonist.

Chapter 209: He Had To Be Silenced

Their blades met with a humming sound, and Ye Bu Shou’s waist knife was deflected hard backwards.

Shocked, he thought: How does Dian Deng Zi, that feeble scholar, have such a tough subordinate?

Cheng Xu chuckled and shoved Dian Deng Zi backwards, pushing him far away, leaving only himself and Ye Bu Shou face to face. “A border army Ye Bu Shou, aren’t you? Decent skill, but in the end, just a soldier.”

Ye Bu Shou spat, “Fuck!”

He roared furiously, his knife slashing out again, while bellowing at the top of his lungs, “Fight!”

His squad of subordinates behind him surged forward instantly. Further back, from the distant woods, his one thousand and five hundred troops also charged out with loud yells.

He had been fully prepared to eliminate Dian Deng Zi.

Dian Deng Zi was utterly flabbergasted. He hadn’t expected that despite also being a rebel, also a subordinate of Bu Zhan Ni, Ye Bu Shou would attack without the slightest hesitation. It made Dian Deng Zi seem rather foolish.

Thankfully, though Dian Deng Zi himself was naive, the villagers from Qingjian County under his command were anything but. It was these very villagers who had actively rescued the naive Dian Deng Zi during the battle at Jiejia Valley.

Once again, without needing any instructions from Dian Deng Zi, Village Chief Jie roared, "Villagers, fight! These louts have had bad intentions all along; they just want to steal our ten stones of food!"

The thin, bony old man had a surprisingly loud voice. His single furious shout spurred three thousand Qingjian County villagers into a simultaneous charge.

Qingjian County was no naive place!

During the vast peasant uprisings of the late Ming dynasty, this small county produced three renowned great rebels: Zuo Guazi – who had once attacked Bai Family Fortress (he started his uprising in Yichuan but was originally from Qingjian County, his real name Prince Shun of Qingjian), the second was Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng, and the third was the famous Old Nan Feng Ma Shouying, who later became the leader of the Gezuo Five Camps.

Qingjian was full of heroes; its villagers were bold and ready for a fight.

The charge of the three thousand Qingjian County villagers truly possessed a soaring momentum.

As the saying goes, when rogue fighters face rogue fighters, they shed blood in the jianghu, fearless of death. They draw their machetes and fight tooth and nail.

The able-bodied men in the front ranks of both sides immediately clashed violently. In the back ranks, the elderly and weak, women and children began shouting strategically...

Amidst the chaotic melee, Ye Bu Shou slashed his knife again with a whistle, aiming straight for Cheng Xu.

Cheng Xu parried and deflected with his own waist knife, causing Ye Bu Shou's blade to scrape with a "clang" across the armor plates at his waist. The deflection staggered Ye Bu Shou, nearly making him fall. Simultaneously, Cheng Xu's knife cut towards Ye Bu Shou's flank.

This move genuinely startled Ye Bu Shou. Fortunately, years as a scout emphasized agility and adaptability. Frantically, he threw himself flat to the ground, rolling rapidly across the dirt, just barely escaping from under Cheng Xu's knife.

He leaped to his feet several meters away, his face drastically changed, "You... you're no ordinary jianghu practitioner."

Ordinary jianghu practitioners rarely used "armor" to deflect attacks in their exchanges, as they might wear it only once in a lifetime.

Yet this masked man before him intentionally dragged and deflected his blade against the armor! Using this maneuver to nearly make him stumble, while reducing his own dodging movement, seizing a faster opportunity for a counterattack.

"Damn it, which army are you from?" Ye Bu Shou roared, "Yansui border army? Guyuan Town Army? Or elite troops from some garrison?"

Cheng Xu chuckled: I'm a ranked military officer, you idiot keeps thinking I'm just a soldier. Where exactly do I look like a 'just a soldier' to your Grandpa?

He wasn't in a hurry to attack yet. He was waiting for Bai Yuan to arrive with reinforcements. Since the other guy liked to talk, fine, they could talk. Perfect timing to stall. Cheng Xu declared smugly, "My surname is He, given name Jiu! Meeting me is your bad luck! Get ready to see your grandmother!"

This bravado wouldn't have been so bad, but the moment these words left his mouth, Ye Bu Shou paused, stunned, "Chengcheng's War God, Cheng Xu? Didn't the Imperial Guards kill you?"

Cheng Xu: "!!!"

What the hell? How did I give myself away with just one sentence? I'm wearing such a big mask! I even gave a fake name! How did he figure it out with one sentence?

Cheng Xu panicked. A deep, gut-wrenching panic. His name leaking out? That was disastrous! In the blink of an eye, Imperial Guards could surround Gaojia Village. And if the Deity was away visiting other deities for a few days when that happened... he was done for!

He had to be silenced. Couldn't let him escape.

Cheng Xu had no more patience for talk. He leaped forward in a large stride, swinging his waist knife in a fierce assault aimed at Ye Bu Shou's face. Ye Bu Shou, startled, hastily raised his own knife to block. Clang, clang, clang! Their blades met several times in rapid succession.

Cheng Xu gained the upper hand instantly.

But Ye Bu Shou was also wearing a set of border army cotton armor, making him frustratingly hard to take down. Several times Cheng Xu seized an opening and landed a solid blow, only to have the armor absorb the impact. Attacks targeting uncovered areas met no success either.

Right then, loud shouts erupted from the hillside. Bai Yuan had finally arrived! He led a contingent of Bai family retainers, Gaojia Village Militia, and Bai Family Fortress militia – over two hundred men, all robust and capable, especially the Gaojia Village Militia who were now all armored.

The moment they crested the rise, they saw a fiercely chaotic battle ahead. The two bandit armies wore identical rough burlap clothing with no distinguishing markings, all tangled together. Who could tell them apart?

The hand crossbows raised by the Gaojia Village Militia lowered reluctantly. Firing into such a melee would risk hitting their own people.

Bai Yuan was anxious, "We can't tell friend from foe! Which side do we help?"

While he was still perplexed, Zheng Daniu charged forward.

He saw two men fighting. Zheng Daniu reached out with both hands, grabbed the collars of both, lifted them into the air, and boomed, "Which side are you on?"

The one on his left answered, "Second Team!"

The one on his right answered, "Seventh Team!"

Zheng Daniu flung the one in his right hand. Thump! The "Seventh Team" man slammed onto the ground, skull cracking onto a rock. His eyes rolled back, and he knew nothing more.

The man in the left hand sucked in a sharp breath of cold air: Thank goodness I was Second Team...

Bai Yuan and the others broke out in a cold sweat: "That... actually worked?"

Cheng Xu suddenly yelled across the battlefield, "Everyone near that thicket down there, they're all 'Seventh Team'. Charge straight towards the thicket! The Qingjian County people won't attack you! Anyone blocking you is Ye Bu Shou's men!"

He could shout orders even while fighting Ye Bu Shou, indicating he held considerable advantage. In contrast, Ye Bu Shou was fully occupied with frantic defense, unable to spare breath for speech.

Hmm... Cheng Xu couldn't let Ye Bu Shou talk anyway, fearing he'd blurt out his identity. He pressed his assault relentlessly, each stroke faster than the last, forcing Ye Bu Shou to dodge, weave, and leap frantically, thoroughly overwhelmed.

Chapter 210: Ghost Fist Technique

Hearing Cheng Xu's words, Bai Yuan's spirits rose instantly. He looked ahead and spotted a large group still standing under the trees opposite by moonlight—the Seventh Team's reserve force, all elderly and weak, women and children, not yet committed to battle.

Understanding flashed across Bai Yuan's mind—striking at what the enemy must defend! The enemy would rush back to protect their families. And those blocking the Seventh Team's path? They were surely the Seventh Team members. No doubt.

He pointed toward the group of vulnerable civilians: "Feign an attack there!"

The Gaojia Village Militia roared in unison and charged at the Seventh Team reserve.

This charge genuinely startled the Seventh Team. Those were their families. Their weak spot.

The Seventh Team fighters abandoned their engagement with Second Team enemies and wheeled around to intercept the Gaojia Village Militia.

Chaos erupted instantly. Breaking formation mid-battle—especially with reckless scattering—was suicidal discipline only bandits would tolerate.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu, leaders among Gaojia Village's ranks, spearheaded the assault. Towering figures clad in heavy armor, they plowed forward unstoppably.

A Seventh Team youth sprinted from the flank to block them. Gao Chuwu swept his spear sideways, sending the man flying.

One of Ye Bu Shou's fierce bandits, witnessing this, raised a pot lid shield to parry. Zheng Daniu thrust his spear—the iron tip caught the lid with a clang, failing to penetrate—but the sheer force slammed the shield brutally into the bandit's chest, knocking him flat.

Another Seventh Team bandit lunged from Zheng Daniu's blind spot, stabbing with his bamboo spear. The sharpened bamboo tip scraped uselessly against Zheng Daniu's iron armor.

Unfazed, Zheng Daniu crashed straight into the spear. Snap! The bamboo spear broke against him, the wielder instead hurtling backward onto the ground with a thud.

A Second Team peasant from Qingjian County sprang out, swinging a stone lock hammer down onto the bandit's skull. Settled instantly.

Now the battle entered surreal territory.

Seventh Team bandits desperately scrambled back to protect their families. The Gaojia Village Militia became center stage, a magnet drawing all chaos. Yet Second Team fighters chased and hacked at the Seventh Team from behind.

No tactics. Just anarchy.

Realizing chaos converged upon his position, Bai Yuan—disliking being the focal point—still steeled himself. He'd known the stakes when he ordered the feint. Seeing reckless enemy surges, he bellowed, "Tighten ranks! Spears up! Raise spears!"

After rigorous drills, the militia reacted fast—a compact shield wall formed instantly, iron spearheads gleaming menacingly.

Their professional spearheads proved deadlier than the bandits' crude bamboo spikes. Facing this coordinated thicket of blades, the chaotic bandit swarms found no purchase. Bamboo tips occasionally slipped through, only to clang harmlessly against armored chests.

The Seventh Team couldn't breach it.

So the Second Team seized the chaos to unleash carnage upon the Seventh Team from behind.

A three-way melee raged.

The disorder demanded a true commander. Someone needed to take control—on either side.

But Bai Yuan hadn't seen such chaos before; inexperienced. Dian Deng Zi stood dumbstruck. Helpless.

The duel continued—their leaders still locked blade-to-blade.

Amid the fray, Cheng Xu and Ye Bu Shou exchanged another blow. Clang! Ye Bu Shou's sword deflected. Cheng Xu's waist knife struck the cotton armor with a thunk—still unable to penetrate deeper.

Ye Bu Shou grinned, exhaling—a moment to snatch breath and taunt. But before words formed...

Cheng Xu abruptly released his waist knife, letting it fall. Simultaneously, he lunged forward—a swift motion—seizing Ye Bu Shou’s head. A sharp, precise twist.

Crack! Ye Bu Shou’s neck broke. His body crumpled lifeless.

“Heh! Glad I stole that Ghost Fist Technique!”

Cheng Xu had realized his waist knife couldn’t pierce the armor. So he abandoned it, unleashing modern Army Combat Techniques he’d secretly learned from cliff inscriptions. This neck snap—clean, lethal, instant. Armor? Worthless when your neck is exposed.

Killing the man who knew his true identity brought immense relief. Vision instantly cleared—no ghostly grandmothers haunting him. Safe. Imperial Guards wouldn’t come knocking.

He retrieved his knife, hewed Ye Bu Shou’s head off, and lifted it high, roaring, “Ye Bu Shou is dead!” Pandemonium erupted among the Seventh Team ranks.

Now leadership didn’t matter. Everyone screamed—purely panic—fleeing downhill immediately.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu surged forward to pursue. Cheng Xu snapped, “Halt! Don’t chase! Fighting bandits at night on a pitch-dark mountain is madness? You’ll kill yourselves stumbling into ravines before they kill you!”

Both giants froze mid-step.

Meanwhile, Second Team fighters moved to follow. But seeing the Bai Family Fortress forces stand still, they paused too.

Scrambling wildly, the Seventh Team retreated down the west slope and vanished into darkness within moments.

Finally over.

Cheng Xu chuckled, inspecting militia casualties. Tally showed only two twisted ankles and some scratches—no deaths, no serious injuries.

Li Daoxuan's fanatical "armor first" doctrine may violate The Great Ming Code, but it worked brilliantly. Things that didn't work wouldn't need prohibition.

Cheng Xu smirked twice, then turned to Dian Deng Zi's group. Fewer dead—just several—but many lay injured.

Life of rebellion meant expecting wounds and death. Qingjian County folk were notoriously tough. Bleeding but silent, they endured wounds stoically. Survive or die—they trusted fate.

Bai Yuan approached: "Bring the wounded. We descend immediately. Healing salves await at Bai Family Fortress."

Dian Deng Zi beamed, ordering the retreat instantly.

Over three thousand people—wives, children, injured on stretchers—retreated from Huanglong Mountain overnight. Reaching Bai Family Fortress, Dian Deng Zi wisely confined his people outside the walls on bare plains.

Bai Yuan quickly distributed the Deity's "immortal realm healing ointment" to Qingjian County's wounded, and ordered steamed buns made from fine white flour passed out as sustenance.

Since killing officials and freeing Zhao Sheng, rising up in revolt, these Villagers of Qingjian County finally received compassion—reveling in peace and safety. The sheer gratitude moved them to weep openly beyond Bai Family Fortress.